Identity Reconstruction in African-American Fictional Texts: Ellison's Invisible Man as a Case Study

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine the works of Ralph Ellison, a well- published, and a scrupulously faithful African-American writer whose fiction touches the values of ethnic American diversity, while it unites them through the bond of shared imaginative experiences. In many ways, his Novel: *Invisible Man (1952),* which is the cornerstone of this essay, reinforces the theme of identity in a segregated white society. In the narrative texts of the novel, Ellison, like many black writers, attempts to understand who he really is i.e. he legitimately quests his identity. He employs a complex and a disturbing metaphor of invisibility that leads him and his narrator to embrace a labyrinth world where they can find their way through only after a variety of starts and stops which is to be emphasized latter within this paper as the self-growing consciousness or increasing understanding of one's self. By so doing, Ellison imaginatively recapitulates his own life. Then, too in this paper I will investigate Ellison's artistic strategy and his astonishing technique in creating a symbiosis between the theme of identity and the pattern of the novel. Ellison's works, which include essays, criticism, fiction and poetry, have credited him an astounding position among other figures of the nineteenth century classic-modernist novelists such as William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Melville, Hawthorne, Joyce, and Kafka, to name just a few.

Key Words: African-American Fiction, journey, Identity (re)construction, existential bildungsroman, and invisibility.

Titre: Reconstruction d'identité dans afro-américains textes de fiction: The Invisible Man Ellison comme étude de cas

Résumé: Dans cet article, j'examine les œuvres de Ralph Ellison, un bien-publié, et un scrupuleusement fidèle écrivain afro-américain dont la fiction touche les valeurs de la diversité ethnique américaine, alors qu'il les unit par les liens de partage d'expériences imaginatives. À bien des égards, son roman: *The Invisible Man* (1952), qui est la pierre angulaire de cet essai, renforce le thème de l'identité dans une société distincte blanc. Dans les textes narratifs du roman, Ellison, comme beaucoup d'écrivains noirs, des tentatives pour comprendre qui il est réellement dire qu'il légitimement quête son identité. Il emploie une métaphore complexe et inquiétante de l'invisibilité qui conduit lui et son narrateur à embrasser un monde labyrinthe où ils peuvent trouver leur chemin à travers qu'après une série de démarrages et d'arrêts qui doit être souligné ce dernier dans le présent document que l'auto-croissance conscience ou compréhension croissante de soi-même. Ce faisant, Ellison imagination récapitule sa propre vie. Puis, aussi dans cet article je vais étudier la stratégie artistique Ellison et sa technique étonnante pour créer une symbiose entre le thème de l'identité et de la structure du roman. Travaux Ellison, qui incluent des essais, de la critique, de la fiction et de la poésie, ont crédité lui d'une position étonnante parmi d'autres figures de la dix neuvième siècle classique-moderne romanciers tels que William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Melville, Hawthorne, Joyce et Kafka, pour n'en nommer que quelques-uns.

Mots-clés: afro-américaine Fiction ethnique, identité (re) construction, roman d'apprentissage existentielle, et l'invisibilité.

I. Invisible Man from Disillusionment to Identity Reconstruction

Invisible Man is a novel which tells a journey about a young black man from "innocence to self awareness" [1]and permits the readers to see a relatively wiser man developing his personal experience from adulthood to

[1] Shelby Steele Ralph Ellison's Blues. *Journal of Black Studies*, 7(2), 1976, pp. 151-168. *JSTOR*. Bizzell Lib., Oklahoma University. Feb. 15, 2010<http://www.jstor.org>.

maturity. Therefore, the novel is said to embody the element of a Bildungsroman, the genre which is employed mainly by all the writers whose works are brought under study within this research. Nevertheless, Ellison employs this genre of *Bildungsroman* in a relatively different way. Ellison—conforming to the Joycean type of the ambitious artist figure Stephan Dedalus in the *Portrait of the Artist as a young Man* (1916)[1]—recounts the story of his protagonist as he develops his personal experiences from adulthood to maturity. The writer delivers his invisible man to himself to face his destiny in the middle of unexpected happenings and adventures along his trip from the South to the North. Despite the fact of the multifaceted elements that can be depicted within Ellison's artistic work, such as the picaresque, the flashbacks, the hallucination, the stream of consciousness, the dreams, and illusions, Invisible *Man* may also be approached or investigated as an existential one.[2] To make it more explicit, the novel disserts overtly outstanding questions concerning individual existence, identity formation, and the meaning of life for a young black man particularly subjected to racism and inevitably prone to cultural stereotypes and the hypocrisy of the white world. Obviously, the narrator becomes conscious of his real state, a man utterly bereft of his identity. In an ultimate existential scene in a factory hospital, the narrator twice

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[1] See, Marcellus Blount A Certain Eloquence: Ralph Ellison and the Afro-American Artist. *American Literary History*, (1989), 1(3), pp.685-6). Blount believes that Invisible Man's "newfound authority as a storyteller" delivers him from "his present dilemma by reliving his past, giving it new form" (Ibid, p. 686).

[2] The idea of existence that Ellison denotes here in his novel may conjure up with Sartre's notion of existence and a number of other existentialists. All seem to share the idea that man's inability to reduce human existence to absolutes is ontological. Heidegger's major philosophical work bears the title of Time and Being, Sartre basic ideas are centered in Being and Nothingness. Whereas, Thomas Aquinas, it will be remembered, centered his entire ontology on three main principles, one of which was that "a thing cannot 'be' and 'not be' at one and the same time." (See Davis Dunbar McElroy, Existentialism and Modern Literature, An Essay In Existential Criticism, The Citadel Press, New York, 1963, pp.4, 5)

asks himself, attempting to find out answers, but to no avail:

"Who am I? [...]May be I was just this blackness and bewilderment and pain, but that seemed less like a suitable answer than something I'd read somewhere."

(*Invisible Man*, 196)

I.1. Freedom as a Learning Process to Identity Formation

Significantly important, however, the narrator comes to realize once more that the only way through which he can discover his identity is to be free. Freedom and identity are, therefore, two fundamental and disassociated elements in the narrator's mind. "There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than 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." *(Invisible Man*, p. 198). The protagonist's escape, perhaps, owes much to Erich Fromm's existential point of views expressed in his *"Man for Himself."* The thesis of Fromm's views is that "because of our feeling of insignificance, powerlessness, and hopelessness, we are trying to escape...."[1] Nevertheless, the narrator—no matter how unsuccessful the attempt may be—cannot discover who really he is unless he plunges onto his self and his past. Ellison thinks that his protagonist should free himself of his present and relive his past and shape it into a new form. Blount seems to have said something about this particular point. He claims that Invisible Man's "newfound authority as a storyteller" frees him from "his present dilemma by reliving his past, giving it new form"[2]. By ordering his past experiences, Invisible Man attempts to impose some order on the chaos and flux of modern life.

It is no surprise; therefore, that Ellison sets his protagonist in motion, providing him with the opportunity of mobility from place to place and from region to region. Although *Invisible Man* would certainly encounter a great deal of turmoil and

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[1] See Erich Froom, Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics, New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1999, pp. 40-41

[2] Marcellus Blount, Op., Cit., p. 686

obstacles in his journey—particularly his journey from the south to the north—Ellison believes it is one of the subtlest ways for his hero to acquire experience, to become conscious of himself. In a very effective manner, the writer joins the narrator's disillusioning experiences and his progression from one role to another to the more general topic, the quest for understanding who really is i.e. identity. Ellison himself utterly recognizes slavery as a fundamental stage in the history of black American people. Although, Ellison may pretend that his novel is not a fully slavery-centered source, as he has suggested, "the main source of any novel is other *novels*,"[1] *Invisible Man*, Ellison states "emerges from experience [....] as shaped by history and my familiarity with literature. [...] Historically, we were trying to escape from slavery in a scene consisting of geographical space. First, to the North and then to the West, going to the Nation (meaning the Indian Nation and later the Oklahoma Territory), just as Huckleberry Finn decided to do, and as Bessie Smith states in one of her blues."[2]

Ellison successful achievement, perhaps, can shown through his great genius and rather poetic way to blend both form and content to create a unified whole. He makes the reader to instantly recognize a series of veiled replications of actual happenings from history: The white is always the boss, the master, and the black is always that inferior being whose fate and destiny is predetermined by the white. The brutal joke Ellison mentions in his novel "To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running," (Invisible Man p.32) is but a symbolic fate of his protagonist who is no more than a doll to be playing him and mused over. The seven sealed letters handed to him by Dr. Bledsoe, the college president, which are supposed to further the protagonist's chances to get a job after he has been expelled to New York, are in fact just a trick to keep him running from one white employer to another. Thus, Dr. Bledsoe profits both from his power

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[1] John F. Callahan, "Riffing and Paradigm-Building: The Anomaly of Tradition and Innovation in *Invisible Man* and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*." *Callaloo* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1987): 91–102.

[2] Steve Cannon, Ishmael Reed, and Quincy Troupe, *"The Essential Ellison,"* 126–59; and Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, "Study and Experience: An Interview with Ralph Ellison," 417–35.

and from the protagonist's naivety and ignorance—a common characteristic of blacks due to slavery heritage--orders the young black boy to take the letters as a very secret document meant to offer him help in finding a job. (*Invisible Man,* p. 125)

I.2. Invisible Man between the Motifs of Mobility and the Quest of Identity

Subsequently, the protagonist will keep journeying from one white potential employer to another. Upon reaching the next white man, the letter would be introduced, opened by the white man, read and mused over, and then the Negro would hear the same old story—"no jobs" here but perhaps "up the road." This would happen again and again, until Mr. Emerson's son finally opens the letter and uncovers the rough and cruel trickery which Bledsoe has planned. Mr. Emerson's son says, "There is no point in blinding yourself to the truth. Don't blind yourself..." (*Invisible Man*, p. 157) Keeping the same pace of analysis, the narrator realizes that those "loyal Americans" have used him and picked him clean, like the robin in his song. They have kept him in captivity and running like some colourful toy or pet for their pleasure and entertainment. "My dear Mr Emerson, The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running. Your most humble and obedient servant, A. H. Bledsoe..." (*Invisible Man*, p. 159)

It is very important to note that the narrator's running around and his journey from one white employer to another would certainly put an end to his suffering and ignorance. No sooner the secret message is divulged, than the protagonist recognizes that the values and beliefs upon which the school was based, those that Bledsoe seemingly tried to teach him, are just an illusion and a sham. The young black man very soon discovers that this view of the American dream will never work for him. More than that, Ellison deliberately makes his protagonist to realize his real identity which is but a sham.

This is obviously clear in the answer of Mr. Emerson's son to convince the young black man of the nonexistence identity, "Identity! My God! Who has any identity any more anyway? It

isn't so perfectly simple." (Invisible Man, p. 153) Mr. Emerson's son's has deliberately the young black man to forget about his identity and his past. Consequently, Invisible Man would certainly renounce the goals and ambitions that have betrayed him, and would behave in freer ways than he did previously. His encounter with a variety of people in Harlem symbolizes his newfound self and his thorough separation from his earlier ambitions. He learns to be so spontaneous to alienate from the upwardly mobile men with whom he had so recently identified himself. In an affirmative manner, Invisible Man says, "I now felt contempt such as only a disillusioned dreamer feels for those still unaware that they dream" (*Invisible Man*, p.208). His disillusionment also enhances the protagonist to be less defensive about his past. It has become, Morris Dickstein affirms, "part of a much larger process of casting off misconceptions and exploring his own identity." [1] The nameless young black man now tries to consider and learn from his abasements and humiliations, instead of running from them. Thus, Ellison does not hesitate to make his protagonist to sound the melody that someone near him in the bus whistles. The melody would agitate his memory and would certainly remind him of the following lyric from his childhood:

O well they picked poor Robin clean
O well they picked poor Robin clean
Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
Lawd, they picked all the feathers round from Robin's rump
Well they picked poor Robin clean. (*Invisible Man*, p. 158)

Ellison's aim from reconstructing the song in his protagonist's reminiscence is to help him understand his own situation. The meaning of the song is a real description or rather fulfills the protagonist's situation: He, like "poor Robin," has been "picked . . . clean." What have previously been denied as being trivial knowledge such as folk rituals and childhood songs; now he acutely affirms that they possess lessons that may be related to his present condition. He is no more that young boy to be affected by humiliations. For all past humiliations have

[1] Morris Dickstein, "Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture." *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 18, No. 4 (Spring 1999).

been transformed into precious part of his experience. Fashioned in the Dostoevsky mold, the young invisible black man's recognition of his humiliation and how he has been used helps him repossess his own experience:

I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up
within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners;
images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw they were
more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me...

(Invisible Man, p. 409)

A careful investigation of the pattern of the novel will suffice to find out the fundamental importance Ellison gives to the element of humiliation. Indeed, still in the process of learning from spontaneous happenings, the invisible man does not only make use of his humiliation to reconstruct himself. On the contrary, it helps him transcend his past and all that remains of it. The invisible man notes, "A whole series of memories started to well up, but I threw them off. There was no time for memory, for all its images were of times past." (*Invisible Man*, p.314) He is either to follow his grandfather's dying notion of "yessing" a white man to death, or adopt his Brother Tarp's breaking the chain and "no" saying to the white oppressor. Here again the narrator, though somehow different from his fellow brother Tarp, will be given strength thanks to the chain link which he will keep for the rest of the novel. It is a symbol of resistance and power he is to use in times of necessity. Tarp himself is a link to the deep and dire struggle against oppression. For by giving him the chain link, Tarp is enabling him with the symbolic power to escape his oppressors. First, though, he must discover the power within himself in order to use the link. Once again he has to move *"leaving Harlem"* without regretting. (*Invisible Man*, p. 329)

Nevertheless, still deeply sunk in naivety and strikingly immersed in illusions, the young black boy fails to understand the nature of the events and continues his research of his identity among the white people. *"I wanted to deliver my speech more*

than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability", the young black man says. (*Invisible Man*, p. 25) The most important thing to the protagonist, however, is the opportunity to speak before "*a gathering of the town's leading white citizens.*" He skeptically thinks that this act is "a triumph for [the whole black] community."

Yet, in a state of confusion he confesses his inability to make sense of that experience until college admission. His existence or rather submersion in a world of fantasy, fear and false pride prevent him from visible reality. All what concerns the ambitious youth, at the Southern smoker cum Battle Royal, is his "dignity of his [valedictory] speech" than his muscular opponent, Tatlock. He can hardly realize the distinction between his expectations and actual situation. *"I was confused: Should I try to win against the voice out there? Would not this go against my speech, and was not that this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?"* the invisible man continues his wonderings. (*Invisible Man*, p. 25) Propriety and opportunity requires him to achieve self-recognition among the world: he fights, delivers temperedly his "social equality" speech, and, equipped with a "gleaming calfskin brief case," starts his archetypal journey from darkness to light, bearing no intention to the encomium vouchsafed to him in a dream by his peevish and irascible grandfather[1] -"Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" *(Invisible Man, p. 32)*. This scene of humiliation and degrading behavior takes place after the battle royal when the Negroes are compelled to gather around a rug on which counterfeited gold coins are scattered and bills are crumpled. (*Invisible Man,* pp. 25-27)

At a final resort the nameless narrator is permitted to deliver his speech at the end of the evening. Near enough strangled and nauseated by the mixture of blood and saliva running down his

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[1] Gerald T. Gordon, Rhetorical Strategy in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"Author(s), Rocky
Mountain Review of Language and Literature, Vol. 41, No. 4 (1987), p. 201, Published by:
Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association
StableURLhttp://www.jstor.org/stable/1347289

mouth, the narrator makes haste to impress his audience by drawing on Booker's T. Washington[1] words *"Cast down your bucket where you are." (Invisible Man, p. 29)* He obviously proposes humility as the means for the Negroes' progress. Nevertheless, the narrator's naivety, immaturity, and adolescence prevent him from visible reality. He does not yet compreherend that his meticulous delivery and posture are completely ridiculous, absurd and ludicrous, addressed as they are to an uproarious and disrespectful crowd. Overwhelmed by the standard thesis that "the end justifies the means"[2], the narrator's mere possibility of a reward justifies any insults and indignities to which he may be subjected.

When the narrator unintentionally swaps the words "social equality" for "social responsibility" and then alleges that this was just a mistake, a white man replies, "Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (*Invisible Man, p. 30*). Ellison deliberately emphasizes those to indicate that his protagonist has not yet understood his actual position, and he has still a great deal of learning awaiting him. Thus, once again, the narrator's "place" is indicated by another. Once the narrator, with a great huff and heave, finishes his oration, the school superintendent gives him his prize, a scholarship to the state college for Negroes. The Board of Education gives him this grant "to encourage him in the right direction" (*Invisible Man, p. 31*), the path that others choose for him. A direction that will "help shape [his] destiny [and that of his] people." *(Invisible Man, p. 31)*He is so pleased with the given gift that he will forget his humiliation and earlier shame,

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[1] Gary B. Nash, The American Odyssey: The United States in the Twentieth Century, Lake Forest, Illinois, USA, McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1992, p.192

[2] An expression attributed toNiccolò Machiavelli's (1469–1527) manual of Renaissance statesmanship. However, some theorists would suggest that this expression forms the basic ground of Consequentialism theory and moral philosophy which holds that the "rightness or wrongness of an action depends upon the motive from which the act was done." Kant's ethics is an example of such a theory. See Richard H. Popkin, Avrum Stroll and A.V. Kelley, Philosophy Made Simple, London, Doubleday&Company, 1969)

and will ignore his grandfather's words which recur and torment his dreams. Significantly, this scholarship will act as a starting point for the second stage of the narrator's journey in search of identity. Notwithstanding, the narrator cannot begin the next portion of his search unless he faces his grandfather's piece of advice. Upon instructions from his grandfather, he dreams opening a brief case where there is a document which says, "'To Whom It May Concern . . . Keep This Nigger-Boy Running'" *(Invisible Man, p. 32).*

Thus, Invisible Man, for example, might have learned from the battle royal event to doubt and mistrust appearances, in as much as the noisy and riotous scene of which he was a part supports little relation to the celebration and rite he had anticipated. He might have begun to call in question the power elite at large because the audience he expected treated him rudely and cruelly. He might also have recognized from this episode that the white men of the society enjoy keeping the black men, in a state of darkness, confusion, and fear. Nevertheless, the briefcase and scholarship he would receive for delivering his oration conceal and eclipse all the earlier disgust and unpleasantness. Yet, still beyond maturity at this age of his life, Ellison's protagonist's belief in a reliable relation between the motif and the consequence of his acts proves that he is neither the cunning nor the skeptic he claims to be. Were he at all doubtful and keen observer of the face the world presents, he would have been somewhat contingent and uncertain about the existence of causal connections. At this point in his life, however, he is fully confident that things are what they appear and that material rewards await the virtuous. [1]

A close attention to the pattern of the novel will be enough to spot the protagonist's movement from one stage of life to another and each stage contains a definition of his identity and, perhaps, the social role imparted to him by others. This would suggest that Ellison's black youth character is still in the process of learning, progressing from innocence to maturity, a final step

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[1] Valerie Smith, the Meaning of Narration in Invisible Man, in John F. Callahan, ed., Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Bookcase, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 195

he is to reach with the same errors. Thus, once mature, he will end up in a whole of darkness with almost no identity.[1] It is no surprise that throughout the novel Ellison cautiously sets his narrator to endure many disillusioning experiences and each time he loses his illusions to face reality. After consuming some twenty years, the narrator discovers the reality of his existence made by others: that of "invisibility." He says,

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. ... I was naïve, I was looking for myself....I took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (*Invisible Man*, p.17)

Although the narrator eventually understands his own reality, in the Prologue of the book he, in a kind of despair, echoes the words of a Louis Armstrong record, "What did I do / To be so black / and blue?" *(Invisible Man, p. 14)*. This question constitutes the basis of the novel's pattern; to which the protagonist is so engrossed and is, therefore, bidding himself to answer through his experiences. From the beginning of the story, the narrator looks backward into his past and begins reporting the major occurrences in his search for identity, committing the same errors. The young man cannot perform any role he accepts to play without recalling his dying grandfather's cryptic advice. The words that the grandfather has attempted to instill them in the young man's mind keep confusing and puzzling him. Yet, the advantage point is that, in spite of him, he still recalls the final words of his grandfather when on his deathbed tells him that he has been carrying on the fight for freedom and equality through a trickster's adaptation of the minstrel mask of subservience. Thus his grandfather's mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the "yes" which accomplishes the expressive "no." The grandfather continues

I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my

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[1] John F. Callahan , Op., Cit., p. 40

born days, a spy in the enemy's country. . . . Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'era with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, . . . *(Invisible Man, p. 17)*

The young man is, therefore, puzzled and confused about his own comportment and attitude. Whenever he is exalted and extolled by the white man for any given role, he feels that he is being a deceiver or unfaithful to his grandfather. The young man's life has turned to be an exemplar of "a vicious distortion of Negro life."[1] Subsequently, the young man's confusion merely adds to his burden, for throughout his quest of identity the narrator must journey via hundreds of pages of complex and hostile living. In attempting to fathom the full meaning of his grandfather's magic words, the puzzled grandson finally find outs that life *is* a war; wherein to be a good soldier meant obeying all orders, and willingly accepting roles foisted upon him by others. A war wherein the narrator discovers that he is to work against one's people and oneself. It implies the realization that things "ain't what they used to be," and that they are not even what they appear now. It involves "having a mature perspective on oneself, on one's ideals, and on one's enemies, in whose very camp one must dwell." [2] To put it differently, the answer is to become *conscious* in a deep and profound sense: relinquished like a bluesman to a life of war.

Ellison has strikingly kept his protagonist's movements shackled with his grandfather's message "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." At every step, to draw on Morris Dickstein's analysis, the young man has given the illusion of improvement and motion only to keep running in place, to get nowhere.[3] What he actually needs, however, is to sever with received messages,

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[1] Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act* , In *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Random House, 1995, p. 87

[2] See Robert G. O'Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980, p. 29.

[3] Morris Dickstein, *Ralph Ellision, Race, and American Culture*, quoted by Ross Posnock, Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, P. 136

socially attributed roles, conformable restraints, and respectable desires so as to come into his own. On that account, instead of facing his past, he keeps escaping it looking merely for the next step and subsequently repeats the same mistakes. Naturally, the unnamed African American protagonist would desire to forget his pains, humiliation, and cynicism. As he points out before his first Brotherhood speech, "if I were successful . . . I'd be on the road to something big. No more flying apart at the seams, no more remembering forgotten pains" (*Invisible Man, p 271).* However, by forgetting "pains", the young man is strongly connected to his loss of his ironic perspective on figures of authority and thus makes himself at stake and fraught once again with danger to their mistreatment.

These episodes of recurrent pain-forgetting and their consequences are scattered every now and then within the novel progressive pattern. For example, in chapter eleven, the reader can not miss the narrator's mistreatment at the factory hospital and the pains of forgetting his own name and his mother's name. The narrator says, "I realized that I no longer knew my own name. I shut my eyes and shook my head with sorrow....I found nothing but pain." *(Invisible Man, p. 195)* In chapter sixteen, the narrator has forgotten the technical aspects of the Brotherhood he is supposed to address for instead of being more indoctrinated by the ideology of the Brotherhood, he shows his over sensations and primitive emotions. Another illustrative example may be, in the twentieth chapter when the narrator forgets about his Brother Tod Clifton. What is significantly important is that the more the narrator attempts to dismiss the image of his grandfather— who suggests that all is not as well as he wishes it to be—the more vulnerable to mistreatment he becomes. His grandfather's words still accompany him throughout his entire journey no matter how he tries to escape. The unnamed African American reflects,

I felt suddenly that my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning

triumphantly out of the dark. . . . I knew of no other way of living, nor

other forms of success available to such as me. ***(Invisible Man, p. 123).***

Despairingly, the protagonist keeps recounting his odyssey from South to North, and from rural to urban life, through experiences of dehumanization by ideologies of the right and left. Still bereft of or rather unarmed with knowledge, the young black man is featured to continue his journey through experiences of dehumanization in search of an appropriate identity.[1] "His problem is to create an individuality based on an awareness of how it relates to his past and the values of the past" Ellison would say of his protagonist in 1973. [2] This would certainly lead us to investigate the ambiguities of the protagonist's learning process, stressing his growing up and evolution through the different stages of his life within the moving pace of the novel. The following analysis will focus on the character's development from apprenticeship to journeymanship, from childhood to adulthood, from adulthood to maturity, and from visibility to invisibility—through the trickery byways of an infernally labyrinthine world— so as to seek an authentic existence.

I. 3. The Convergence of the Journey Motif and the Learning Process:
Invisible Man between Experience and Bildungsroman

Before moving further analyzing these concepts aforementioned, it is significantly important to note that Invisible Man is a story about a young African American man who, on his pilgrimage of learning, is to make the choice between two antagonistic groups of mentors. The first group includes his grandfather, Dr. Bledsoe, and the vet doctor and the second group involves Trueblood, Mr. Emerson's son and Brother Tarp. Both groups give fair warning against being too trusting. Nevertheless, the disagreement among the two groups is that the former emphasized the importance of learning to deceive other people as he is also deceived. The latter, on the other hand, offers plans of creating an independent identity far

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[1] *A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture* Edited by Josephine G. Hendin, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Oxford University, 2004, P. 7

[2] Ralph Ellison, "Ralph Ellison." *Interview with Ten Black Writers*, ed. John O'Brien. New York: Liveright, 1973, p. 75

beyond the requirement or influence of any organization or a collective set of assumptions. Yet all what the young man learns during his life span is that he can never quit learn to be deceptive enough. No matter how "Machiavellian" or cunning he may appear to be, he is always tricked or betrayed by those who control him. He is taught not to think but to obey orders. Subsequently, his endeavors to create a simultaneous identity—a hidden and an apparent one—of an institution seem doomed to failure.[1]

On the light of this explanation, it is acutely important to focus on some of the outstanding stages in the young man's life over the twenty five years of his journeying world. The different aspects, events and attitudes that have shaped, molded, or to put it differently, justified his philosophic perceptions and self-consciousness, are also worth of scrutiny. They are indeed, the pillar over which the young man would find the centre of his true identity at the end of the novel.

Accordingly, the first significant stage on his journey to comprehension takes place in a high school senior in a Southern town when the young man considers himself "a potential Booker T. Washington."*(Invisible Man, p. 19)* This is probably the first of the roles he is to play. Indeed, the young man is given the opportunity to deliver a speech in front of a meeting of the town's most prominent white citizens where he, drawing on Booker T. Washington's theory, suggests that that humility is the key to the Negro's progress.

The second stage on his quest to understanding occurs on a beautiful Southern college campus, a picturesque place filled with "wild roses", "purple wisteria", "white magnolias", and "honeysuckle."*(Invisible Man, p.32)* Although, from the geographical point of view, the space from high school to college does not suggest a high jump, it is a great psychological venture for him. It is a place where he finds life aesthetically satisfying. Here he has the opportunity to encounter men of vision. He is selected by the president of the college, Dr. Bledsoe to be the driver of Mr. Norton, one of the college's

[1] Valerie Smith, Op., Cit., p. 209

original founders. It is within this assignment that a new development occurs in the narrator's quest, a development influenced by both Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton. The reminiscences of Mr. Norton while being driven around the campus would add to the young man's sense of his identity and his existence with others. The young man says, "Now I felt that I was sharing in a great work and . . . I identified myself with the rich man reminiscing on the rear seat . . ." (*Invisible Man, p. 37*). Increasingly, the two men become closely related, sharing the same fate. *(Invisible Man, p. 38)*

Obviously, Mr. Norton's words are but attempts to direct the young man's life suggesting for him a new role to play. Thus, the young man with great eagerness to please Mr. Norton—as the narrator says himself, he *"half-consciously followed the white line"*—does not hesitate to follow the white man's instructions and directions, obeying blindly his orders. Unconsciously, in an effort to fulfil Norton's wishes, the narrator accidently stops at the cabin of Jim Trueblood, the disgrace of the Negro community who has had his daughter impregnated. Reminded, perhaps, by his own subconscious incestuous desires, Mr. Norton reacts with extreme shock and instructs the young man to drive him immediately to another place of relief. Unfortunately, the young man stops at the only available source called the "Golden Day", with the simultaneous weekly visit of a group of inmates from a nearby insane asylum. The young man's journey becomes more complicated when he carries Mr. Norton into the roadhouse where he finds complete chaos.

Nevertheless, in the midst of this anarchic situation, the narrator hears the truth about his existence, a recurrent subject in his journey. It is during this phase of his journey, a Negro brain surgeon, speaks as though he understands the narrator's life, urging him to consider some questions of his individual existence, identity formation, and the real meaning of life for a black man in a western world sunk in racism and cultural stereotypes. The Negro doctor says to Mr. Norton,

You see . . . he has eyes and ears and good distended African nose, but he fails to

understand the simple facts of life. . . . It's worse than that. Already he is—well, soul!

Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but

his humanity. He's invisible.... (*Invisible Man*, pp. 80-81)

Touching upon the "invisibility" of the narrator, the Negro doctor, in the midst of chaos, continues speaking on the behalf of the young man as if invisible. He says,

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

a man to him, but a God, a force—. . . I can tell you his destiny. (*Invisible Man*, p. 82)

No matter how ironic the Negro doctor's words may sound, they, in fact, reflect or rather develop Ellison's ideas about his protagonist's invisibility highlighted in the novel's prologue as a condition for the quality of his existence. Thus the novel commences with the protagonist's affirmation that he is invisible and that others, when looking at him, see his *"surroundings, themselves... everything and anything except [him]" (Invisible Man, p.7)*

Although, the narrator labors in vain to exact recognition of his existence from others and the world around him, he, nonetheless, gradually succeeds to be conscious of his invisibility. Subsequently, within the progressive action of the novel, protagonist learns to accept his invisibility as a basic fact and possibility of existence. He conspicuously establishes a mutual recognition of his invisibility foisted onto him by others and his existence. Thus this reciprocity or mutual recognition, drawing on W. Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), is very essential for the existence of the master and the slave. The existence of each is "recognized" or rather realized with relation to the other. When the other's recognition is objectified or denied, it becomes "invisible." Self-consciousness, which exists for itself and in itself, refuses to "see" what is merely

consciousness.[1] This would remind us of Hegel's dictum "the being- for- itself and being-for-another" when he analyzed the concept of recognition.[2] To Hegel, this oriented interplay or the dialectic of master-slave binarism determines the existence of human beings, and so it does for Ellison. More important, the young man's awareness of his invisibility has become the man's last resort to confirm his reality as he himself puts it, *"I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (Invisible Man*, p. 10). His invisibility helps him not only to discover the reality of his existence, but also permits him to feel the time and taste the music in Louis Armstrong's song "What did I do to be so black and blue?" (*Invisible Man*, p. 11)

Yet for our concerns here, it is important to note that Ellison's use of invisibility is a complex metaphor of his protagonist's unwillingness to take risks to demand his freedom from his "enslavers." To get out from invisibility, the young man should be ready to assume the consequences of his acts. It is no wonder then to observe, at the end of the novel, Invisible Man acting on an existential principle he has learned, deciding to emerge from his hole or basement to assume an authentic life. (*Invisible Man,* p.468)

Notwithstanding, in stressing much importance to what other people think of him, instead of what he thinks of himself, the narrator is submitting, to objectification; and surrendering to the fluidity of the world around him. To put it more explicit, the narrator defers to the limitations and weaknesses imparted unto him by white people; and yields to his invisibility. With the growing feeling that he is losing a grip of himself, the narrator refrains from struggling for recognition and subsequently

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[1] Robert C. Solomon, *From Hegel to Existentialism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 57 See also *Robert R. Williams* Double Transition, Dialectic, and Recognition , in Identity and Difference, *Studies in Hegel's Logic, Philosophy of Spirit, and Politics* Edited by Philip
T. Grier, State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 46

[2] *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, hrsg. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner 1952), p. 178

becomes invisible or merely an object.[1] Compelled by his loneliness in a basement would soon urge the narrator's deep resentment against society which fails to see him; and increase his great sense of alienation and dehumanization.[2] Similar to the existential characters in Kafka's major works, *The Castle*, (1922) or *The Trial,* (1925) and to that of Camus', Gabriel Marcel, Ellison's protagonist lives in a permanent oppressive and indifferent society where he learns now that the true nature of the self finds its meaning/ essence in existentialism. To put it in a more explicit sense, Invisible Man should first define his existence and then asserts his own values. Similarly, it is the Nietzschean existential "overman," or superman whose self-mastery, creativity, and other virtues that greatly support him to create morality, impose some order on the chaos and flux of modern life, and transcend the mediocrity of the common run of humankind.[3]

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[1] Kevin Brown, *Invisible Man*: An Existential Quest for Freedom. *The Middle Atlantic Writers Association Review, 12*(2), 1997. 63-68

[2] John F. Callahan, ed., Op., Cit., p. 30

[3] Lucio P. Ruotolo, *ix Existential Heroes: The Politics of Faith*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (1973), p. 27 See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, A New Translation by Graham Parkes, New York, Oxford University Press, p. xxxvi

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