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Invisibility : the Survival of the Black Character

Case Study : Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in
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Dedication

To my family, my parents, my sisters and my brother

To my nieces and nephews, especially, *Djidji, Riyad and Elhadj*

To my closest friends at work and university

I dedicate this humble work

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and heartfelt appreciation to my supervisor Mr. Aribi for his valuable guidance and advice not only throughout the course of this book, but throughout the 2 years of Master in the English Department

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Eventually, I would thank my family members who truly were my first audience and critics.

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Abstract

The main subject of this thesis is based on the idea that the survival of blacks in the American history is related to their acceptance to be invisible in society. The black protagonist of Ellison's masterpiece Invisible Man (1952) has suffered a lot from racism and humiliation. Whites have refused to see him because of his natural blackness. Hence, he has learned to embrace such invisibility imposed by whites and use it for his own survival. He has kept his head down to please the whites and has followed their orders in order to secretly escape the margin of society and reach its center which holds the source of power and decision.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	I
Acknowledgements.....	II
Abstract.....	III
Table of Contents.....	IV
General Introduction.....	1

Chapter One : Blacks’ Journey to the New World.....7

Introduction.....	8
A. Blacks in America.....	9
A. 1. Agricultural South.....	11
A. 2. Declaration of Independence.....	12
B. North Vs South.....	14
B.1. Civil War.....	16
B.2. Emancipation Proclamation.....	17
B.3. The Negro Movement.....	18
Endnotes to Chapter One.....	20

Chapter Two: About Invisible Man..... 21

Introduction.....	22
A. Ellison’s Biography.....	23
A. 1. The Novel’s Social and Political Background.....	25
A. 2. Short Summary of the Novel.....	27
B. Themes.....	30
B.1. Racism.....	31
B .2. African American Identity.....	33
Endnotes to Chapter Two.....	35

Chapter Three: The Survival of the Black Character.....36
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Introduction.....	37
A. Invisibility of the Black Character.....	38
B. Visibility of the Black Character.....	41
C. Center versus Margin.....	43
D. Invisibility: an Existential Choice to Survival	46
General Conclusion.....	52
Biography.....	55

General Introduction

General Introduction

Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952) is regarded by many scholars as one of the most influential African American novels in modern American literature. It has taken much attention because it deals with serious and critical themes related to the African American condition in America. The themes of marginalization and invisibility, for instance, have deeply been analyzed by critics to comprehend how such social conditions that include racism, discrimination and segregation do affect the existence as well as the racial identity of African Americans.

The first sentence in the book's prologue, "*I [the narrator] am an invisible man*" (Ellison 1), is a clear acknowledgment of the hero's dilemma of invisibility. The narrator draws the reader's attention that he is not a phantom or even a hunting ghost. He believes he is "*a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind*" (1). According to him, his own invisibility is something beyond his decision because it directly occurs "*because people refuse to see me When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me*" (1).

He openly declares that the others refuse to see him. By this token, the nameless protagonist of Ralph Ellison's book has experienced all kinds of humiliation and degradation throughout his life. The black young hero has violently been pushed to the limits of his existence. Indeed, he, as the rest of the black community of the 1930s America, has lived on the margin of society. Marginalization comes with segregation, separation and social discrimination. Blacks were not granted the chance to exercise any real or effective social equality in the American society and eventually become invisible to whites.

Along his existence, the narrator has discovered that he has been used as an instrument, a tool or an engine. He has presented the human bridge on which white Americans

have walked to reach their plans and fulfill their dreams. At the same time, they simply refuse to see him as a separate existing entity from theirs. This invisibility is the outcome of a long history of ignorance on the part of whites towards the blacks. Paradoxically enough, Ellison links the narrator's survival to this invisibility.

Survival cannot be achieved unless the black protagonist becomes invisible to whites. After all, one cannot judge what cannot be seen or even punish what cannot be sensed. Hence, the black character has learnt to embrace the identity others have always imposed on him, to keep his head down and to *“overcome ‘em [sic] with yeses, undermine ‘em[sic]with grins, agree ‘em [sic] to death and destruction, let ‘em[sic] swoller [sic] you [the narrator] until they vomit or bust wide open”* (5) as his grandfather had once advised him.

To simplify, by accepting to be invisible, the narrator is in fact preventing them from seeing the real him. He pushes them to believe the stereotyped identity they have already in mind about him. Consequently, he uses this invisibility to gain access to their center, in his case the brotherhood, and plot his revenge the way he likes. Furthermore, this invisibility is physical as well as psychological.

Here, a kind of split occurs with the hero's natural existence. Simply put, whites are ready to tolerate a black person's physical blackness as long as he is ready to embrace any kind or form of identity they impose on him. In Ellison's book, the narrator is a black college boy, a well-trained spokesman and even a sex engine. This has subsequently created a sort of psychological illusion in whites' minds. They train their minds and thus their eyes not to see that blackness.

Instead, all what appears in front of their physical eyes is that human instrument which comes to be black. As a result, the black character exists in two forms, one that of a human tool and that of a black entity. The latter is pressed under the status of the human tool. The first by contrast is recognized physically but never psychologically i.e. a white man

accepts to see a black man's physical existence and refuses to see him psychologically. In order to escape this existential dilemma, the hero has only one choice, he has to adjust and be invisible. He has not only adjusted to such invisibility, but also has maneuvered it to find his place in the pre-Civil Rights Movement American society.

This thesis seeks to examine the extent to which the process of marginalization and subsequent invisibility of the African American character is a key factor for its own survival. The black protagonist of Ralph Ellison's masterpiece Invisible Man (1952) is able to remodel this invisibility into the form of a safety blanket under which he can survive the harshness and cruelty imposed by whites upon Blacks in America. On the surface, it seems that such invisibility is restricting the narrator from fulfilling his potentials. Yet, a thorough analysis of the book demonstrates that it is through such invisibility that he manages not only to survive, but also to plot his revenge.

The theme of blacks' invisibility has deadly effects on the psychology of the African Americans and their progress in society. Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (1986) demonstrates that being black is always linked to filth and degradation and that blackness as a morphological trait is never accepted by whites. Fanon believes that Negroes or Niggers have not recognized their otherness while surrounded by others of their color. They rather become able to do so once they meet the white men's eyes (110). Hence, it is the whiteness of whites which stresses then suppresses the blackness of blacks and not vice versa.

Furthermore, the theme of blacks and blackness has been tackled in Randy Boyagoda in his Race, Immigration, and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdi, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner (2007). Boyagoda states that in way or the other, Black Americans' identity as American citizens has always been questioned then tested via their skin color (53). Thus, invisibility caused by blackness has always influenced African Americans and their ethnic identity in the first place. Many writers have argued that such

invisibility is believed to be imposed on them. It is the outcome of a conscious refusal on the part of white Americans to physically see the blacks. Antony S. Abbot in his Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1985) suggests that invisibility in Ellison's book takes two different forms. The first is imposed on blacks simply because the other refuses to see the 'I' as a result of racial stereotyped background. The second is intentionally committed by the person, the black protagonist of Ellison's book, which takes the form of hibernation in order to remain apart from society (45).

In the introduction of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (2001), John F. Callahan seriously links the theme of invisibility to the crisis of identity. According to him, the American society tends to create such existential dilemmas wondering who is and who is not visible (XVII).

The importance of this research paper lies in the fact that it gives a new reading of Ellison's book. The majority of critics and literary researchers tend to simplify the invisibility felt and tested by the hero as a negative outcome of racial discrimination and social degradation which is the case. However, it is more than just accepting one's faith to live on the margin of society by being unseen the rest of his life. It has become a survival technique used by generations of social minorities among them blacks in America. Thus, the current thesis seeks to study the following hypotheses:

- ◆Marginalization is imposed on the protagonist as a black man in America, but his invisibility is the consequence of his self-consciousness.
- ◆Invisibility of the black character gives him a certain amount of freedom.
- ◆It is better for a black character to be invisible in order to survive in a predominant white American society.

Despite the negative outcomes of such invisibility, the hero of Ellison's book discovers that there "*is something advantageous to be unseen*" (Ellison 1). Certainly, by being invisible, the protagonist has transcended his own existence to reach a higher status of living. He clearly "*did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility*"(4).

The present dissertation is divided into three chapters. Using a historical approach, the first chapter examines the historical (political and social) background of the African Americans' existence in the new world. Getting information about the long history of racism in America is crucial in order to understand the status of blacks in the beginning of the Twentieth Century where the story takes place. The second chapter however uses an analytic approach . It analyzes the text at the level of the writer's biography so that to link the latter's life to that of the protagonist. Besides, several themes, such as racism and the African Americans' identity, will be seriously studied in order to know their deadly effects on the narrator's personality. The third chapter, with the use of an analytical approach as well, we will assess the extent to which invisibility will cleverly and progressively be used by the protagonist as a safety blanket in order to survive.

The existing dissertation will hopefully help the reader recognize the dilemmas blacks face in order to be accepted on equal footing with whites. Their journey towards social as well as political approval in the American society has truly been one of its kind because it reflects the American society's fragile social foundations.

Chapter One

Blacks' Journey in the New World

A. Blacks in America

A.1. Agricultural South

A.2. Declaration of Independence

B. North Vs South

B.1. Civil War

B.2. Emancipation Proclamation

B.3. The Negro Movement

Chapter One

Blacks' Journey in the New World

They will end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive towards colorlessness? (Ellison 197)

A person's own self-recognition as a separate existing entity is something engraved in his own consciousness. His identity is not only his name and physical appearance. It is also the qualities, beliefs and ideas that make a particular person or a group different from the others. Thus, our recognition of ourselves needs to be compared and judged to others' existence and vice versa. We tend to measure our own existence according to how people receive us. This equation is applicable as long as a society is constructed around clear bases of social equality and equal social responsibility.

In a balanced society, all people are created equal. They live in a healthy atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding which was not the case for the African Americans. This group of black people has witnessed the longest and most painful journey to gain social acceptance and lawful acknowledgement in the white American Society. Being imported from the motherland on the Western Coast of Africa, they had lived an ugly human experience. Africans were regarded as a human machine used to cultivate the immense American South. One of the reasons the Africans were imported was their skin color. Indeed, their blackness which is a human trait was their own fall. Blackness, according to the founding fathers, was a sign of disgrace and condemnation.

In fact, the 1787 American constitution of the United States represented slaves as three fifths of a person (A. Franklin and N. Franklin). Hence, they were not worthy. Blacks were, by the force of American law, deprived from any human rights. It was only through the

Emancipation Proclamation¹ that Negroes have some of their rights. Nevertheless, emancipating African Americans was a political brave decision which lacked effective practice on a solid social ground. The Southern leaders were anything but social reformers. They simply refused to abolish slavery during the 1800s. They went further by stimulating a bloody civil war which divided the nation into two portions.

A. Blacks in America

African Americans' journey to the Eastern Coast of the new world was a journey of humiliation, disgrace and death. The first blacks had neither the choice nor the opportunity to choose their destinies. They were imported from the black continent, taken from their families and origins to the totally bright new world. Were they prisoners? No, they were a simple human product, slaves. The first slave ship was believed to reach the American Coast in 1619 with twenty African slaves aboard to the port of Jamestown, Virginia. (Tims 84) From then on, hundreds of thousands of this priceless human product were imported in very bad conditions where *"blacks were forced to lie down, chained together in rows, with no more height above them than '2 feet 7 inches' between the beams . . . this presented less than 80 centimeters"*(84). There, the journey had started.

If it was not death, it was disease or hunger; they had faced all through a furious ocean. They were harshly treated because they were believed to be humanly inferior. Morphologically, they were different from those who imported them from the jungles of Africa, they simply were blacks. For a reason or another, some of these slaves survived the journey. But, the worst was still to come. Indeed, all kinds of harshness, ignominy, discredit and shame were daily imposed on them.

To the South their boats were headed. It was the South which embraced those lost souls in its vast plantations of tea and tobacco. There, they *"were forced to work until they could not tolerate it any longer, until there was nothing left of them"* (86). It was slavery in its

worst forms where nothing of the human dignity was left for those blacks. Rich Southern landlords, who were called masters, benefited from those blacks in increasing the productivity of their crops. Using slaves was indeed a landmark in establishing their progressive businesses in agriculture. For a landowner, the more you own slaves, the richer you would become. As a result, slavery flourished in the South as did agriculture. Those blacks were given several names; blacks, Negroes, niggers and Africans, but never American citizens. Simply put, they were regarded as a property that its owner was free to sell, lend or even destroy. This was supported by law in favor of landlords.

None at the time thought of blacks as full humans; none dared to claim for their supposed civil rights simply because none of the blacks was even aware of the existence of such claims. It was normal, usual and most importantly acceptable to have slaves and to badly treat them. The Puritans were in fact following God's will by enlarging their wealth. The new *City upon a Hill* needed to progress through its agricultural economy where its human black engine was ready, available and free of charge.

But what about those blacks? How did they feel about their new homeland? They were pure blacks in a pure white society which was totally different from theirs. They did not know the used language because "*slaves did not have schools. The white people knew that learning to read and write would make the slaves want to know more. And knowledge would make them want to be free*" (B. Ciecioraka and F. Ciecioraka 23). They did not know the land, the climate, the mountains; the trees... etc, all were new. Their lives were moving steadily towards a dystopian version of existence.

In addition to the humiliation of servitude, black women were often raped by their owners and they had no control over their families. Couples could be separated, children could be taken away from their parents. Field hands-or

agricultural workers- benefited from an even less favorable environment. (Tims 85-86)

A.1. Agricultural South

The first Americans had owned vast areas of land in the South. These were fertile and fruitful lands. The first settlers had learnt how to cultivate tobacco from the Indians. Settlers from the Caribbean had reached the American South loaded with a respectful experience in cultivating sugar. The cultivation of tea, tobacco and sugar flourished in the South. That in fact created several problems. One of the major problems was how to cultivate all these vast lands.

The white Americans were not used to cultivate the land, and even if they were, lands were vast and the settlers were few. A lot of money was in jeopardy and none of them was ready to take that risk. The answer was simple and in reach, slavery. Indeed, it was by the beginning of the 17th C. that slavery started to be related to the agricultural sector because *“white people very soon found that Negroes made much better slaves. They could be used for years and years. They could be treated very badly before the hard work would kill them”* (B. Cieciora and F. Cieciora 15).

Blacks were imported for one simple reason, to work in the field. The South became dependent over the slaves especially with the invention of the cotton gin. Their number increased in a fast rate. *“There were 4 million slaves-most of whom were responsible for harvesting a million tons of cotton . . . the sale of this product represented considerably more than half of the country’s total foreign income . . . whatever the criticism, slavery was certainly good for the nation’s treasure”*(Tims 85) .

Thus, the survival of the thirteen colonies was greatly linked to the continued supplies of slaves from Africa. The supplies increased and subsequently resulted in worsening the blacks’ conditions. A systematic process of dehumanizing and discriminating the black

slaves spread among the Southern colonies. Living conditions in the newly founded country were horrible for the new comers from Africa. Once the Negroes had reached the land, their lives turned to be a set of nightmares.

New workers sent into the field were gradually beaten to 'encourage' them to work as fast as possible. They worked from dawn to nightfall, with only 15-minute lunch break. At the end of the day, anyone whose personal cotton harvest was considered to be 'unadequate' [sic] by the boss was automatically whipped And after this long day in the field, there were still many other tasks to accomplish –feeding the farm animals, cutting woods and preparing a dinner of . . . corn and some bacon. (86)

The settlers grew proud of themselves. The South took the lead putting the colonies on the right economic track. Inter-colonies trade gave a new sense of freedom and belonging among the white settlers. Tea became a new agricultural product. Thousands of miles were cultivated with that priceless product which Britain used to import from its India. This made Britain a supreme power of the time. As a consequence, Britain had to tolerate anything but to lose its thirteen colonies. The latter became more and more sensitive challenging the British tax policies in the area. Tensions rose between the newly established colonies and Britain and war became inevitable.

A.2. Declaration of Independence

The unjust and exaggerated British rules and taxation policies imposed on the newly founded thirteen colonies were vigorously opposed by the settlers. The latter refused to be ruled by the king of England in the time they controlled larger and more fertile lands and were able to establish their own economy and defense policies as well. The British soldiers'

existence in the growing colonies dictating the settlers what to do was another reason the latter did not tolerate.

The settlers did not like the way the British treated them nor did they like the taxation and representation system applied in their territories. Tensions augmented between the patriotic white settlers and the British soldiers stationed on the Eastern American Coast. The Boston Tea Party of the 1773 was a clear example of the settlers' intolerance towards the British Soldiers' policies. This presented the first planted seed towards the independence of these growing colonies.

The subsequent Intolerable Acts of 1774 worsened the already fragile situation when settlers were obliged to pay extra taxes for the privilege of being ruled by the British. They finally decided to meet in the first Constitutional Congress in 1774 to organize and head their own plans towards such intolerable policies. Their decision did not take much time; they agreed to boycott all the British goods. In the second Continental Congress things became clearer with the settlers being more and more willing to declare their independence. Thomas Jefferson introduced America's first Declaration of Independence in July 4th, 1776 (36). The real independence was still to come in 1783 after the fighting against Britain.

Slaves had their share of war. By the beginning, they were not trusted enough to be given weapons in order to fight. However, the British soon became convinced of the Negroes' strength. When the whites had authorized the blacks' participation in the war against the British, things started to change. *"It was their [the blacks] fighting which made the difference between winning and losing"* (B. Cieciora and F. Cieciora 3). They were brave strong fighters who fought side by side with the white soldiers. In fact, they had no choice. As a human property, they had to fight to survive.

Nevertheless, their bravery, courage and sacrifice did not help them much. They were still black slaves. They were not granted any kind of recognition or even appreciation.

Yet, there were some Americans who did believe in the blacks' rights. They opposed the whites' supremacy over the other races and wanted to help those slaves. They hence launched the first Emancipation of the slaves in the American territory. But, the larger majority remained in dark slavery for many years to come.

As a consequence, the North, which was independent from slavery, started to think about the articles of the declaration of the independence. The Northerners became thoughtful about "*the universal equality of men These rights included that of life, that of liberty, and that of pursuit of happiness*" (Farhat 26). Thus, after a long fight through legislations and laws, the USA abolished slavery in the North.

B. North Vs South

Now, America became an independent industrial country. It gained the autonomy to set up its legislations and laws related to slavery. Laws on trade and foreign policies were set as well. This was accompanied with the largest Westward movement in the American history as a result of population's growth. The national economy started to progress in a very fast rate. Thus the demand for handworkers doubled every day especially in the agricultural South. Large plantations of tobacco, tea and maize needed workers to carry on the economic growth of the American South. The deal was simple, "*Southerners planted more and more cotton . . . to be worked by more and more slaves*" (Tims 72). As a result, the importation of black slaves seemed very legal. The South became seriously dependent on its slave machinery. The North, by contrast, grew dependent on industry to increase its income.

The two areas grew proud and independent in every aspect of life. In the near past, all white settlers had felt that they shared common destiny and future. They worked together in order to gain freedom and liberty. They saw in the British Crown a common enemy. Simply put, they agreed on their Americanism against the British enemy. However, Independence came with different prices. The North thought of itself as the defender of the oppressed people

against all kinds of racism, discrimination and maltreatment. They believed that the articles of the Declaration of Independence are a universal law whereby all humans could freely live together.

The South, on the other hand, grew more practical in terms of agriculture, money and economy. The principles of freedom and equality were a mere political idea which had no weight on the ground. The Southerners believed more in the material success resulting from planting larger fertile lands with more fruitful products. Using slaves to work in the field was a must for the settlers of the South. They had no choice but to use that cheap available human product. The landlords were ready to go to war if that would protect that capital. The articles of the Declaration of Independence were far away from practice when it came to the slaves' rights.

Northerners became skeptical about the use of slaves in the plantations of the South. The brutal treatment and continued discrimination against the blacks challenged their belief in their slogan 'all men are created equal'. They openly declared their refusal to slavery. It was illegal for them. They wanted the newly established America to engrave its basis as a free country for free men and women. The Northerners believed that the fight against slavery was a part of their struggle against the British oppression to gain their freedom and liberty. Their efforts to eradicate the importation and use of humans eventually succeeded in pushing the American legislators to outlaw slavery in 1808. Nevertheless, the number of black slaves increased by more than three millions in all the American territory. (72)

Voices rose in the North asking for an effective abolition of slavery. Politicians, musicians, writers and common people joined other ex-slaves to put an end to slavery. Most of them were in the North. The abolitionists worked secretly to help the slaves escape from the racist South to the promising North. Black intellectuals were very active in the Underground Railroad net. This was a secret net organized by the abolitionists to help the

slaves escape using the railroads from the slave states in the south to the North reaching Canada. Tens of hundreds of black men, women and children were set free.

The operation was not that easy. The freed slaves were followed and hunted by the white Southerners. Hundreds were killed or even forced to return to servitude in the South. This meant further discrimination, humiliation and racism against them. They became targeted to the whites' hatred and awful treatment. The blacks suffered all kinds of degradation. Yet, the success of the Underground Railroads spread anxiety and tensions amongst the Southerners. They saw their cheap human labor escape which caused them huge money losses.

B.1. Civil War

The American Civil War was one of the key facts in the history of slavery. B. Cieciorcka and F. Cieciorcka explained that “it [civil war] *was caused by the different needs of the North and the South. Laws that were good for agriculture in the South were bad for industry in the North. And laws that helped industry hurt agriculture*” (29). Problems between the South and the North increased when thousands of gold searchers moved westward to California because of the gold rush. This however disturbed the whites of the South because this move did not accept the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The latter had stated that all territories south of latitude 36° would be a slave territory and much of California was under that line. (Tims 74)

Hunting the dream of wealth and material success, the Americans had found in California's gold mines a great opportunity. Full families migrated westward. They crossed the borders' lines from state to state drawing new realities on the ground. The large groups of miners had certainly not respected the laws of the Missouri Compromise. New areas were created at the expense of others in different states. As a consequence, balance had to be made between the South and the North in a way to regulate the problem.

In order to avoid further territory conflicts between the two sides, both agreed on the Compromise of 1853. It was a controversial agreement in which *“the South agreed to let California become a ‘free’ state but, in exchange, slave-owners obtained the ‘Fugitive Slave Act’”* (74). That act meant in fact that any slaves who succeeded to run away from the South to North would be captured and returned to their Southerner owner. Now, slaves had no choice but to run and hide even in the free North or they would run to Canada if they wanted to be free.

B.2.Emancipation Proclamation

The California Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Act worsened the situation between the South and the North. Each time a new territory was to be registered, the North and the South waited for its decision. Whether to be a slave or a free state meant change on the ground. Simply put, the whole country was on the edge of war because the two parts could not tolerate their differences. The nation was eventually split into two blocks; the anti-slave North Union and the pro-slave Confederate South. Both sides took arms and fighting started in the Civil War of 1861.

The war was harsh and the South won several battles. Abraham Lincoln agreed to allow slaves to fight with the Union army. Once more, they made great brave soldiers. He eventually *“issued the Proclamation Emancipation on New Year’s Day in 1863. Whatever the reason, the abolitionists were joyful. They had finally won freedom”*(B. Ciecioraka and F. Ciecioraka 26).

Nevertheless, the Emancipation did not bring freedom as it was supposed to do. Instead, *“Negroes were no longer slaves, but they were not citizens either. They did not become citizens until the 14th Amendment to the Constitution was passed. They did not get the right to vote until the 15th Amendment was passed in 1865”*(38). The Proclamation Emancipation declared that no slave shall remain in slavery in all states. This was much away

from having a solid and legitimate ground in the stubborn South. Fighting continued until 1865 with the victory of the Union over the Confederates.

The segregation system which was called Jim Crow² continued to be applied in the South and a separation system was legally established. Separate but equal spread legalizing the division between the whites and the blacks. Buses, trains, schools and all types of facilities were all separate between colored and white people. Several cases such Plessy Versus Ferguson (1896)³ of Louisiana were a reflection of the hypocrisy of the American law. *“Judges considered that Louisiana state law was not a violation to the 13th and 15th Amendments- as long as the train company offered’ separate but equal’ travelling conditions to people of both races”(Tims 91).*

B.3. The Negro Movement

After the end of the Civil War, blacks managed a little bit to improve their political rights. Some of them could take higher positions in the Southern states. Some of them could even own houses and local businesses. Literacy among the African Americans increased in a very slow rate. Still, the progress was felt compared with the pre-war years.

Despite that enhancement, blacks couldn’t enjoy their achievements. The Civil War had ended with a mass destruction of the South. The whites had lost their slaves, plantations and wealth. Thus, their revenge was too severe. Blacks of the South were forced to live through a legalized set of rules which discriminated them from the rest of the American society.

Hundreds of thousands of Blacks became the target of brutal discrimination by racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan burnt, buried, raped and killed hundreds of black people in systematic well-organized attacks on the Negroes’ communities in the South. The members of this cult thought that their mission was holy and sacred. They engaged themselves in cleaning the South from the sinful blacks.

Therefore, the majority of blacks were caught in poverty too. They were obliged to live into a continuous chain of debt and dependency upon the white lenders which hindered the growth of their businesses. The Black Codes⁴, on the other hand, created a sort of legal slavery which deprived blacks from obtaining real and effective access to freedom or citizenship. The Literary Tests and the Poll Tax⁵ were all used to maintain Negroes under the Whites' control.

Endnotes to Chapter One

¹ In the fall of 1862, Lincoln first elaborated his plan, and then in January of 1863, the president made it official when he signed the “**Emancipation Proclamation**”: “. . . all person held as slaves within any state. . . shall be, then, thenceforward, and forever free.” (Tims 77)

² Jim Crow Laws: . . . the Southern States continued to pass discriminatory laws, from the time of the Plessy decision until well into the 20th century. These collectively became known as “Jim Crow” laws. Separate trains, separate buses, separate theaters, separate schools, separate hospitals, separate restaurants. . . Blacks were indeed separated by a strict ‘color line’ that Frederick Douglass had denounced decades earlier, and nothing in their condition was ‘equal’.

(Tims 91)

³ After the state of Louisiana had passed the Separate Car Act in 1890, Homer Plessy said that even-though his blood was mixed, he could benefit from the railroad system. His lawyer argued that his was protected under the 13th and 14th Amendments of the United States Constitution. The judge John Howard Ferguson declared that it was the right of the state of Louisiana to regulate its railroad law within its boundaries and that was not a violation to the American Constitution.

(Wikipedia.org)

⁴ The South ardently refused to apply the new Constitutional measures-and instead passed local “**Black Codes**” which discriminated against the ex-slaves. Individual states forced blacks to carry special passes, for example, and severely limited their freedom of movement. Blacks could be completely excluded from certain jobs or schools. They were not allowed to buy land, or to testify against a White person in a court of law

(Tims 78)

⁵ To keep blacks from using their new right to vote a number of black laws were passed. Sometimes **literacy tests** were used –if Blacks could not read well enough, they were not allowed to vote. Or a “**poll tax**” was created-and only those citizens who could pay the special tax of a dollar or two could participate in an election

(Tims 88)

Chapter Two

About Invisible Man

A. Ellison's Biography

A.1. The novel's social and political background

A. 2. Short Summary

B. Themes

B. 1. Racism

B. 2. African American Identity

Chapter Two

About Invisible Man

*My blackness was there, dark and unarguable, And it
tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered
me.* (Fanon 117)

Invisible Man (1952) is an outstanding book that still after sixty five years of its first publication captures people's hearts and minds. It is certainly one of the most readable and analyzed books in the world of literature and Arts nowadays. Maria Helena V.P. Noronha demonstrates that “ *Invisible Man* (1952) was judged in 1965 by a group of critics, authors and editors as ‘ the most distinguished single work’ published in America since 1945”(83). Being such, the book does not only represent the vision of a suppressed black character in a racist society prior to Civil Rights Movement, it can also be read as a book “ *about maturation and the search for identity, about defining oneself within a culture and a race*”(Greller 352). This broader dimension of the book introduces it to the reader as a universal legacy shared by all suppressed and oppressed people.

Ellison has succeeded in creating his protagonist as the prototype of all people facing racism and discrimination as a result of being racially ‘other’. He has violently brought the ugliness and hypocrisy of man to the surface of the human experience. As a matter of fact, John Callahan in the book's introduction seriously believes that “*in an extraordinary imaginative leap, he [Ellison] hit upon a single word for the different yet shared condition of African-Americans, Americans, and, for that matter, the human individual in the twentieth century, and beyond*”(XVII). Therefore, Ellison is addressing the entire humanity beseeching their conscience to recognize and tolerate its differences.

The events and complex experiences lived and tested by the hero of the novel reflect the complexity, indifference and the shallowness of man's views towards other men. They indicate that when it comes to believing in man's goodness and empathy, daily realities become a mere pale image that breaks on the edge of the truth.

Ellison's own pride of his black heritage as well as his unquestionable belief in his people's rights, freedom and social and political acknowledgement are undoubtedly traced in his masterpiece. He celebrates his blackness in the character of his anonymous protagonist. The latter has travelled from the ugly racist South to the bright free North to carry on his dreams. The writer never gives up on his hero despite all misfortunes he has faced throughout his journey towards self-recognition and self-determination.

A. Ralph Waldo Ellison's biography

Ralph Ellison was officially born Ralph Waldo Ellison, after the writer Waldo Ellison, in March 1st, 1914 in Oklahoma City. As the grandson of slaves, he grew in a working class family with a constructor foreman and a maid as his parents. He attended Tuskegee Institute to carry on his passion with Jazz music (Grellet 352). Although America of the 1920s was immersed in racism from top to bottom, Ellison's Oklahoma had no tradition of slavery because it was a newly founded state. There was no clear division of community there between whites and blacks. Nevertheless, attending a segregated school was a repulsing and a depressing experience to Ellison. This was heavily reflected in his writings. A deep sense of unfairness and psychological backwardness was deepened into his first and only novel Invisible Man (1952).

Much like his protagonist, Ellison was obliged to drop college because of his financial troubles. Thus, he headed to New York City looking for better opportunities to collect some extra money in order to return to his college Tuskegee which he never did. On the Independence Day July 4th, 1936, Ellison arrived to Harlem, New York. That Harlem which

would strongly appear in his best book was the city where black writers and artists had launched their Harlem Renaissance¹ during the 1920s and the 1930s. There, he moved from an odd job to the other. He read a lot and worked a lot observing the hard conditions of the African Americans in the ghettos of Harlem.

He befriended with several black writers such Richard Wright and the famous socialist Albert Murray (Amari 15). Wright's writings inspired him. Hence, he started reading his writings before publication in the communist newspaper *Daily Worker*. He later published his first book review in 1937 in the *Marxist Literary Magazine*. From then on, Ellison launched his career as a novelist and a critic with a great encouragement and support from his friend Richard Wright.

His rapprochement to the Marxist views would be rooted in the protagonist's relations towards the brotherhood in the novel. He hoped that the Marxists would help his people reach their dreams of equal treatment just like his protagonist would. When he had discovered the party's hypocrisy he detached himself from it. The same happened when the hero of the book has discovered that the brotherhood is just using him and his talents in order to gain further territories in Harlem especially after his first meeting with Ras the Exhorter.

During the WWII, he joined the segregated army as a cook in 1943. By its end, he started writing the first draft of his masterpiece Invisible Man (1952) while writing several of his best short stories as well. He married Fanny McConnell whom she supported a lot in his career. After five years of writing and re-writing, Ellison published his book in 1952. The book soon became a bestseller and won the National Book Award in 1953. The novel brought him a major financial and literary success by which he lived in Rome for several years (Noronha 83).

He eventually returned to his beloved Harlem. He continued writing and lecturing in different prestigious institutions while concentrating on his second novel. He became the

president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1957. Several chapters of his coming novel were progressively published in different newspapers. In 1963, he was rewarded the National Russwurm National Newspaper Publishers Award.

Unfortunately, his second novel was never published for it was damaged in a fire which destroyed his summer home in Massachusetts. He continued to receive rewards and positions not only in America but all around the world. In 1985, he received the National Medal of Art. After several years struggling with the Pancreas Cancer, Ralph Waldo Ellison died in New York on April 16th, 1994 (Amari 15).

A.1. The novel's social and political context

Ralph Ellison has located his masterpiece Invisible Man (1952) in the 1920s and the 1930s America. Unlike the rest of the American citizens, African Americans were still the victims of the stereotypical identities imposed by whites. After long years of daily struggles, they were still hopeless against the continued prejudice and separation system which had spread among the Americans for several centuries before.

African Americans, once more, became the target of hate groups such as the most famous Ku Klux Klan. Even though the violent Klan had been dismantled around 1870s, it re-emerged during the first decade of the 20th C. It in fact became crueler and more violent as a result of the successes blacks had won after the Reconstruction era². Neither the 13th Amendment (1865) which ended slavery, nor the 14th Amendment (1868) which gave legal citizenship to blacks, or the 15th Amendment (1870) which gave them the right to vote, had improved their socio-political status or even protected them from the Klan's brutal racist actions that affected hundreds of thousands of blacks in modern America. (Tims 78)

Even the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which came to reinforce the political rights of blacks, was not applied effectively. The first three decades of the 20th C. were believed to be the worst to the African Americans simply because of the spread of the Jim Crow Laws and

the disfranchisement. Not surprisingly “in 1883, the Supreme Court [had] declared the law [the Civil Rights Act of 1875] unconstitutional, reasoning that the Fourteenth Amendment prohibited discrimination by states but not by individuals. Congress accordingly could not prohibit individual acts of discrimination” (Friedman 21).

The African Americans of the 20th C. were miserably caught in a sort of a status quo. The American Constitution freed them indeed from legal slavery. It moreover acknowledged their citizenship and offered them the right to vote like the rest of their white citizens. Despite all these apparent achievements, they could neither enjoy their citizenship nor could they vote because of the segregation laws such as the Jim Crow Laws, the Poll Tax and the Literacy Tests.

‘Separated but equal’ spread during the 20s and the 30s American South. It practically divided the nation’s public facilities between two American sub-societies, white and black. White Southerners cleverly legalized the ‘separate but equal’ using the segregation laws. Tims ensures that fact stating that:

These collectively as ‘Jim Crow’s Laws’. Separated trains, separate buses, separate theaters, separate schools, separate hospitals, separate restaurants . . . Blacks were indeed separated by a strict ‘color-line’ that Frederick Douglass had denounced decades earlier, and nothing in their condition was ‘equal’. They were second class citizens who had to tolerate third or fourth-rate living conditions. (91)

The Great Migration which took place during the 1920s and 30s from the South to the North gave the African Americans new opportunities to enhance their life conditions. This gave them new chances to support their financial and economic situation indeed but it dramatically exposed them to new kinds of racism though. The North welcomed them.

However, it accused them of causing extra urbanization problems such as those related to jobs, housing and education.

As a reaction to the legal segregation laws, riots among the blacks spread in both the North and the South. Blacks became despondent with their deteriorating social as well as economic status. Thousands of African Americans were killed or arrested and their homes and facilities were set on fire by angry whites especially the Ku Klux Klan's members. To worsen the situation for the blacks, the Great Depression of 1929 hit the nation severely. Their already fragile falling situation became unbearable when great numbers of them found themselves jobless and homeless. They were obliged to move to the dirtiest and poorest ghettos of the Northern cities. Harlem's ghettos were the most famous in which poverty, violence and crime spread. Ellison has depicted Harlem's riots in his novel throughout the last chapters.

A. 2. Short summary of the novel

Many readers believe that Invisible Man (1952) is one of the longest books. It is composed of a prologue, twenty five chapters and an epilogue. The story is told in the first person narrative who is a Southern nameless man. He lives now in an underground hole in a white people's building electricity and rant-free. He openly explains that he is an invisible man. He is invisible because others intentionally refuse to see him. He lights up his residence with 1,369 lights. He says that he loves light because "*truth is light and light is truth*" (3). He insists on living in full light because without it he is "*not only invisible, but formless as well*" (2). He needs light to "*confirm his reality*" (2). At this stage of his life, he believes that his irresponsibility comes as a direct outcome of his invisibility.

Using flashbacks, the narrator goes back to his high school years. He has become a good orator. This pushes a group of white rich men from Greenwood, South Carolina to invite him in order to deliver a speech about social responsibility. In the gathering, the protagonist

surprisingly finds himself, besides other black young boys, the subject of the night's entertainment show. The boys are blindfolded with white sheets. This is called the Battle Royal under the whites' cheering using names such as niggers and Negroes. Before the fight, the boys are seduced by a white young woman dancing unclothed. The boxing starts and it is very violent and bloody in which the narrator loses for another black boy. Humiliation has not stopped yet. The boys have to scramble for fake golden coins on an electrified rag.

Despite the fatigue, the narrator manages to deliver his speech in which he accidentally substitutes the word social responsibility with social equality. This awakens the drunken whites who ask him to correct it over and over. By the end, he is awarded a scholarship to a fine Black College. At night, his grandfather visits him in his dream ordering him to open the briefcase of the scholarship and read it. To his surprise, it contains a note stating "*to whom it may concern . . . keep this nigger-boy running*" (12).

At the college, the narrator is appointed and ordered to drive Mr. Norton, a university trustee, to black sites. He, by accident, reaches Trublood's house, a black man who has lost his community's respect after having both his wife and daughter pregnant at the same time. The protagonist becomes ashamed hearing Trueblood's story while Mr. Norton enjoys it a lot to the point he has given him a hundred dollars. Leaving this district, the trustee wants to drink some liquor in the Golden days bar. This turns to be a dangerous decision when Norton becomes sick and injured by some veterans there. The accident horrifies the narrator of losing his scholarship.

Dr. Blodsoe, the black college president, accuses the narrator of being careless for exposing Mr. Norton to unjustified terror and expels him from college. The president orders him to go to New York City with seven recommendation letters. Harlem attracts him directly with its apparent sense of freedom.

After settling there, he starts contacting the addresses of six of the recommendation letters but still without any positive response though. Until one day, Mr. Emerson, a trustees' son, exposes the truth to the narrator. The letters are condemnation letters and are supposed to keep him out of the Negro College for good. Shocked, he accepts a humble job in a painting factory. His task is concluded in producing the optic white. By the end of the day, he has become the victim of an explosion and therefore is fired from work with a small compensation. Jobless and homeless, the protagonist finds refuge in Mary's house, an old black generous lady in the district.

Following a mobilization speech the narrator delivers after an eviction in Harlem, he is offered a position in the Brotherhood by Brother Jack. The organization claims to work for the well being of the oppressed people in the district. Others of the brotherhood ask him to openly reject his own name, past and identity and is thus given a new name. The new position offers him fame and material success. In a short time, he has become a well-known orator in Harlem.

After the suspicious death of the black brother Tod Clifton, the narrator discovers that the organization is losing its strength and respect in the area. When he decides to prepare an official funeral for Clifton, Brother Jack and the others in the organization refuse stating that it's something personal. This, however, raises his confusion and doubts about the brotherhood.

To worsen the situation, Ras the Exhorter confronts with him accusing him of betraying the blacks' heritage and identity. Ras believes the organization is taking benefit from all its black members like the narrator and Brother Clifton and that it has nothing to do with their good. To avoid further conflicts with Ras, the protagonist decides to wear dark glasses and a white hat. Surprisingly, none recognizes his real identity in Harlem. Instead, he

is mistaken for someone named Rinehart who has a set of identities. This new fake personality allows him to move freely among people.

Brother Hambro informs the narrator that the brotherhood has decided to sacrifice the people of Harlem because it has greater political connections with other groups. He feels that the brotherhood is fake and deceptive. He now believes that all his work and hopes are all invisible to the organization and that he has abandoned his identity for nothing. Angry and disappointed, he decides to plan his revenge. He eventually discovers that “*for the 1st time . . . I began to accept my past . . . They [his experiences] were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me*” (173).

From then on, the narrator decides to literary become invisible in order to plan his revenge. By applying his grandfather’s and Dr. Blodsoe’s advice, he starts to follow the brotherhood’s orders. He even tries to have a sexual relationship with a girl from the inside to collect information about the members of the organization. Suddenly, violent riots initiate in Harlem. The protagonist participates with the masses in the burning down of a Harlem tenement. Abruptly, Ras the Exhorter tries to find and hunt him.

Two white men chase him in the chaos. He manages to run but falls in a black hole. He cannot find his way there. To light up the hole, he burns his official papers one by one. For days, the narrator lives in hallucination and nightmares of his past. The book finishes with the epilogue in which the protagonist becomes able to take a step back to analyze his life. He decides to write his experiences in order to make sense out of chaos.

B. Themes

The novel of Ralph Ellison is one of the books that show great complexity and richness in terms of themes. The novel is considered to be a minority book. Thus themes related to black African American identity, race, and invisibility are seriously and thoroughly

tackled. Ralph Ellison has succeeded in depicting the African Americans' situation in America.

The protagonist of the book is facing an existential dilemma. He is the target of racism in a white society. He is trapped in his blackness and asked to live through the roles imposed by whites in his community. He neither can get out of his blackness, nor can he choose the identity he wants. Thus, throughout the novel's events, the protagonist struggles to obtain his respectful place in society carrying his own chosen identity.

In this section of the thesis, racism and the African American identity will be analyzed in order to demonstrate their great negative impact in the creation and progressive growth of the personality of the protagonist.

B.1. Racism

The author of the book has created a story of a black man living in a white society and struggling for self-recognition. Racism, by this token, becomes a vital theme in the book. Ellison is aware of his people's sufferings as a result of being racially other in America. White American citizens link their Americanism to their whiteness. Hence, blacks' existence seems to be ironically linked to something beyond their choice. Their blackness determines the extent to which they may or they may not be accepted among the Americans. In his interesting essay "*What America Would Be Like Without Blacks*" (1970), Ralph Ellison stated that

Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was "nigger"; it made them feel instantly Americans. (qtd. in Boyagoda 53)

As a consequence, African Americans become caught in a traumatic dilemma that threatens their existence. They have struggled for centuries to gain acceptance in society because “*racism forced black people to devote most of their energies and imagination to overcoming discrimination . . . , racism also trapped its victims into believing the myth of their inferiority*” (Lane). Whatever the narrator thinks or does, he is unable to live outside the circle of racism, dehumanization and backwardness drawn by white Americans.

He scrabbles to maintain his own identity within the limits of his blackness. The experiences he faces, starting with the Battle Royal in which innocent black boys become the entertainment subject to a group of rich white men to the racist exploitative and abusive deeds of Brother Jack and the brotherhood, are all examples of the hypocrisy and shallowness of the supposedly democratic American society.

Simply put, “*racism puts mechanisms in place that declares black people (or any out group) to be a problem, marginalizes them through ethnocentrism and barriers to participate, and contains them through forms of suppression such as intimidation, pacification, and majority role*”(A. Franklin and N. Franklin). This cruelty and segregated system have created an inferiority sense in the blacks’ personality.

Interestingly enough, “*for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man*” (Fanon 110). The opposite is true as well; i.e. whites recognize their supremacy once they are confronted with other blacks in society. Ellison points out that the narrator has to use ten drops of black painting in order to produce the optic white (Ellison 68). Thus, the purity of white depends largely on the ugliness of black which the majority of American whites admit through the use of black boys like the narrator and Brother Clifton by the brotherhood.

B.2. African American Identity

The nameless protagonist is modeled in a way to be the prototype of the African American race in America. Along the novel's prologue, twenty five chapters and the epilogue, he is given several identities. No one is of his choice though. The narrator explains that "*all my life I had been looking for something*" (5). He continues that "*everywhere I turned, someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory*" (5).

He is always someone that someone else believes he is. He is the black boxer entertainer in the Battle Royal, the chauffeur for Mr. Norton, the nigger order-follower for Dr. Blodsoe, the sex machine for Sybil, the orator for the brotherhood and even the traitor for Ras the Exhorter. In his pathetic longing for acceptance and recognition, the narrator has accepted to embrace all kinds of identity the others impose on him. Ironically, when he has decided to wear the black glasses and the white hat, all people think he is Rinehart who himself has several identities as well.

His approval to live through these identities is due mainly to his grandfather's advice to "*live with your [the narrator] head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em[sic] with yeses, undermine 'em[sic] with grins, agree 'em[sic] to death and destruction, let 'em[sic] swoller[sic] you till they vomit or bust wide open*" (6). The question of assimilation becomes crucial in finding one's place in such a racist society. The protagonist, as a matter of fact, has no real choice but to assimilate and to play the game of roles in order to survive in the anti-black American community.

It is worthy to mention that Ellison has created a nameless protagonist. He is defined by the author, himself and by the reader as the invisible man. This anonymity is symbolic for it indicates the narrator's loss of identity. Throughout the book, the reader is never given the opportunity to know the protagonist's name which makes of him an enigma to the readers.

When the narrator is given a position in the brotherhood, he is asked to forget all about his past and real identity. Brother Jack asks him to be “*the new Booker T. Washington, but even greater than he [sic]*” (105). By linking the narrator to that famous black figure, Ellison, once more, deprives him from exposing his own identity. Brother Jack believes that the narrator is a great brilliant spokesman by nature. That is what the organization needs, a voice that is able to influence people, gather, motivate and mobilize them for the case. By means of job, fame and material success, the narrator is forced to follow the orders and to live through the personality which they create for him.

Even when Emma first meets the narrator in the brotherhood, she tells Brother Jack “*do not you think he [the narrator] should be a little blacker?*” (103). Despite his apparent blackness, she is ready to put another blacker mask on him just to follow the norms set by the organization. Indeed:

The author Ihab Hassan concluded that in Ellison’s Invisible Man the Negro as [a]victim, rebel, outsider, scapegoat and trickster ‘confronts us, in the darkness of which no man can bleach himself, with the question: Who am I . . . throughout the novel the hero’s personality shifted like a chameleon, but he threw off one mask only to find himself entrapped within another dehumanizing stereotype or disguise. (qtd. in Lane)

Endnotes to Chapter Two

¹ The Harlem Renaissance was the first cultural and literary movement initiated by Black writers and artists. Centered in Harlem, it was active from the early 1920s to the early 1930s . . . Many young Black writers therefore found themselves In Harlem, which became the cultural center of the Black American Community, and a magnet for painters, musicians, singers, actors, writers and journalists. The emphasis was on black pride and a study of one's African heritage. (Grellet 289)

² Reconstruction Era: from 1865 to 1877, Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson both took moderate positions designed to bring the South back into the union as quick as possible. (History.com)

³ Jim Crow Laws: . . . the Southern States continued to pass discriminatory laws, from the time of the Plessy decision until well into the 20th century. These collectively became known as “Jim Crow” laws. Separate trains, separate buses, separate theaters, separate schools, separate hospitals, separate restaurants. . . Blacks were indeed separated by a strict ‘color line’ that Frederick Douglass had denounced decades earlier, and nothing in their condition was ‘equal’. (Tims 91)

Chapter Three

The Survival of the Black Character

- A. Invisibility of the Black character**
- B. Visibility of the black character**
- C. Center versus Margin**
- D. Invisibility: an existential choice to survival**

Chapter Three

The Survival of the Black Character

It 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 first I had discovered that I am an invisible man. (Ellison 5)

To be invisible is to be without substance, shape or form. To be unseen is to lack dimension which therefore restricts one's physical existence to certain limits in time and space. The narrator of Ellison's book believes he is invisible and that the others around do not see him. He understands that others' blindness is intentional. The others, whether white or black, choose not to see him simply because he is black.

To put it simpler, his physical blackness is the first and only reason he is unseen. This may be understood if the other is white like Mr. Norton or Brother Jack, rich men in the battle royal or the members of the brotherhood. What is more impressive about the narrator's invisibility is that in some cases the other is a black person just like the narrator. Dr. Blodsoe is a good example.

Such invisibility requires blindness on the other side, i.e. the other must be blind in order to fail to see the protagonist. Practically, both blindness and invisibility are not physical but rather psychological. Both, the whites in the novel and Dr. Blodsoe, are not blind in reality. They can see but they purposely refuse to see the narrator as a person with an identity, past and existence. They only see the narrator who is ready to follow their orders. In other words, they only see the person who exists in their minds based on stereotypical images.

By refusing to visualize or recognize the existence of a person, he is in fact pushed to the margin of society. A marginalized character is never granted the right to reach the center for the latter is above the roles the marginalized is asked to follow. Hence, marginalization is directly linked to the oppressed minorities. The minority finds itself incapable to compete with the privileged majority's role, place and potentials. The majority or the center is so powerful that it dictates the minority or the periphery what to be and what to do in order to survive in society.

Once the minority becomes courageous enough to ask about its rights, it is suppressed or simply ignored by being unseen and invisible. Thus, the narrator's invisibility comes to be the consequence of a long process of marginalization and incognizance by whites towards him.

A. The Invisibility of the Black Character

Anderson J. Franklin and Nancy Boyd-Franklin explain that a person's invisibility is the direct result of discrimination. The latter causes the syndrome of invisibility which is a psychological disease. They believe that:

Adaptive behavior and psychological well-being of African Americans can be affected by prejudice and discrimination. Encountering repeated racial slights can create 'psychological invisibility'. The invisibility syndrome is presented as a conceptual model for understanding the inner evaluative processes and adaptive behavior of African Americans in managing experiences of racism.

Ralph Ellison initiates his masterpiece with one of the most famous quotations in modern American Literature, "*I am an invisible man*" (Ellison 1). Ellison carries on to explain that our protagonist is "*not a spook like those who hunted Edgar Allan Poe, nor am I one of*

your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids” (1). By this, the narrator is clarifying that his invisibility is not by any means related to the world of ghosts and phantoms. He explains that he is a normal human being and that his substance can be easily recognizable.

He goes further to accuse the others to be the cause of his invisibility. He says that *“when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination. Indeed, everything and anything except me”* (1). The others are aware of his existence but they decide not to see him. Thus, his invisibility occurs in the others’ inner eyes, i.e., they psychologically refuse to see him. Even though their physical eyes do in fact visualize him, their inner eyes become blind and fail to do so.

Living most of his life under the curse of being invisible because of his blackness raises many psychological problems to the narrator. By ignoring him each time they come in contact with him, they push him to doubt his own existence, *“you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds”* (1). This lowers his self-esteem and convinces him that he lacks the real or even equivalent conditions as the others to acknowledge his existence.

One of the many examples Ralph Ellison has represented in his book is the incident in which the narrator attacks a white man in the street. After hitting him several times, the protagonist stops realizing that the poor white man has not seen him at all. He concludes that the white man cannot see the narrator simply because he is psychologically blind and therefore his blindness paralyzes him from visualizing the protagonist.

Ellison . . . introduced an innovative point . . . blindness is not only a matter of whites and invisibility a matter of blacks, blacks and whites can be mutually blind and invisible. While whites are blind because they perceive blacks as a mass

rather than as individuals, blacks are blind for submitting to their inferiority and for not conceiving any white exception as an individual being. (Alejandro)

To simplify, the white man becomes psychologically blind. This is basically due to the set of the pre-existing stereotypical ideas about blacks and blackness in general. His blindness results directly in the invisibility of the black narrator. Whites are in fact following the path of their grandfathers believing that blacks are an inferior race. True, *“invisibility evolves out of society’s racism as a mechanism for achieving its comfort with people considered unacceptable”* (A. Franklin and N. Franklin). It is a simple conscious choice on the part of whites to deal with the problem of blacks’ existence in society because they *“were incapable of conceiving blacks as equal being”* (Alejandro). They choose to ignore them and therefore to push them towards their invisibility.

On the other hand, the narrator is always told that he is not worthy. He is forced to question his own existence, to lie and to keep his head down in order to get the whites’ approval. Dr. Blodsoe tells him *“you’re black and living in the South. Did you forget how to lie? . . . The dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie”* (Ellison 48). It is the same what his grandfather has once told him.

By agreeing to the whites, following their orders and lying to please them, the narrator is submitting to his invisibility. *“It becomes increasingly likely for individuals in this ‘racialized [sic] context’ to believe that their true personality and unique abilities are hidden by a cloak of psychological invisibility woven by attitudes of prejudice and discrimination on the part of others”* (A. Franklin and N. Franklin). No matter the narrator thinks or does, he is unable to function outside the limits of invisibility caused by whites’ incapability to perceive him on equal footing.

When the protagonist joins the brotherhood, he accepts to follow the orders to reach acceptance among its members. He is openly asked to throw away his old identity and to embrace the one imposed by the brotherhood. Brother Jack and the rest ignore his real identity. The only condition under which he is recognized and appreciated is to accept the new him. Simply put,

Ellison's fundamental assumption in Invisible Man was that black people became recognizable only when they suppressed their real self and conformed to emasculating parodies of the white man's self-contradictory image of them. In their twisted psychics, white Americans had defined black men as violence-prone yet childlike, docile yet unpredictable, oppressed yet happy, implosive yet stoic, primitive yet religious, and super masculine yet impotent in contact with whites. (Lane)

B. The Visibility of the Black Character

Once we have tackled the invisibility of the black character, it is time now to examine the term's binary opposition; the visibility of the black character. Without doubt, the Battle Royal is the real exemplification of the narrator's visibility according to Ellison's point of view. The battle is crucial in understanding the extent to which blacks' visibility in the American society is traditionally linked to degradation, humiliation and racism.

In Battle Royal, the black nameless protagonist finds himself asked to wear boxing gloves to fight other black boys in front of a group of white rich Southerners. He has previously been invited to the gathering to deliver a speech about social responsibility. In this regard, the white men do in fact recognize his existence as a black boy. He exists in their minds as the black high school boy. The poor black boys become astonished, scared and

afraid to death when pushed into the arena to fight each other. They feel the heavy stares of the whites that fall sharply upon their black skin.

The narrator explains that “[*they*] allowed ourselves to be infolded with broad bands of white cloth” (Ellison 7). The protagonist is, as a matter of fact, trying to convince himself that they have chosen to be blindfolded. This is contradictory for he has previously said, “there was nothing to do but what we were told” (7). The boys are simply forced to fight just as they are forced to be blindfolded. The two actions proof very thoroughly how much blacks find themselves hopeless and powerless in front of such racist dehumanizing actions of the white Americans. The narrator painfully says” *blindfolded, I could no longer control my emotions, I had no dignity*” (8).

The white crowd becomes excited while visualizing the fighting among the boys shooting and insulting them using terms such as “*let me at that big nigger . . . let me at those black sonabiches [sic] . . . I want to get at that ginger-colored nigger*” (8). This entire sum of racist insulting words is thrown upon the black boys in their presence.

Simply put, as long as the whites are able to visualize the blacks in front on them, they do not hesitate to insult them openly. They treat them as badly as they can because they become confronted with their blackness which they disgust. The whites are conscious of the otherness of the blacks. They intentionally want to dehumanize them.

The worst is still to come; the white mass is very drunk, nevertheless, when the narrator has mispronounced the words social equality instead of social responsibility, all drunken men awakened. They order him to correct it over and over:

Say that slowly, son!

What sir?

What you just said!

Social responsibility, sir . . .

You weren't being smart, were you, boy? . . .
No, sir
You sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?
Oh, yes, sir . . . I was swallowing blood
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. (11)

In this particular scene, the white man in fact sees the narrator. He knows that this black boy may have thought of replacing responsibility with equality. He insists on making the boy correct the mistake by himself. After all, the black boy ought to stick to his place and limits. On the other hand, he has taken the choice not to get angry despite of all humiliation and insults. His assimilation tactics push him to, as his grandfather told him, keep his head in the mouth of the lion to win his war against the whites. (6)

Thus, A. Franklin and N. Franklin believe that “the *visibility for African Americans is frequently a day-to-day process of choice*”. The longer he is visible and exposed to whites, the harder his life as a black man is going to be.

C. Center versus Margin

The novel of Ralph Ellison presents the universal image of struggle between the center and the margin. The white Americans hold the center for they are the source of power, wealth and civilization. African Americans by contrast are forcibly squeezed into the periphery or the margin of society. They present the suppressed, the deprived, uncivilized and the unworthy. The struggle between the two is dated back to the first days of slavery. Neither the center is ready to tolerate the margin's differences, nor does the latter have the tools to reach the center.

To marginalize a person, is to believe in his limits and incapability to reach certain levels of progress and self-improvement. Hence, the American society is indeed one of its

kind. Along its history, it has made of its principles of existence the separation of races. The white Anglo-Saxon race, being the superior, has used all its strength to suppress the other races. The African Americans in particular have found themselves in the bottom of the human races' rank. For centuries, they have been treated as an inferior minority simply because of their blackness. This puts them on the margin of society.

The whites hold the center due to their power and position and the African Americans being a weaker section of the society is still marginalized and mistreated even after all the pronouncement of their liberation and independence from the clutches of slavery and repression as is evident from the novel. (Azad)

The white Americans do believe that the Negroes who have been once brought from the dark uncivilized continent are unworthy. It is a matter of a pure psychological American perception. They disregard the blacks' rights of equality, respect and social approval. They insist on considering them as voiceless, illiterate and violent minority. *"The domination of the weaker by the powerful will continue as long as the existence of the 'other' is neglected and their rights are denied"* Azad believes.

She also believes that *"Ralph Ellison narrates the tale of African Americans being on the margin and at the bottom of social hierarchy"*. Our protagonist, as the exemplar of African Americans, is a black man who lives in a white society. He has lived most of his life in the shadow. White characters in the book put him on the margin and refuse to let him get into their center. His only flaw is his skin-color. For such reason, *"Du Bois (1868-1963) . . . believed that '[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line'"* (qtd. in Deedari and Naziri).

To put the matter another way, the narrator's blackness becomes his own defeat. Frantz Fanon speaks about the black's understanding of his blackness saying that "I [*the black*] am overdetermined [*sic*] from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (116). The narrator is caught in the doom of his blackness. Fanon, again, explains "my blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And [*sic*] it tormented me, perused me, disturbed me, angered me" (117).

Since the first days of high school, he has been discriminated from the center of his Southern community. However, the American Constitution has acknowledged the blacks as full citizens. Thus, the separate but equal comes as a solution to avoid any contact between the center and the margin. The protagonist and his black fellows in *Battle Royal* decide not to complain or even refuse the whites' mistreatment. They peacefully agree to fight each other because they are convinced that the whites in the center hold enough power to further mistreat them.

Moreover, when Dr. Blodsoe has accused the narrator of being careless taking Mr. Norton to a slum and therefore expelled him from the college, the latter has accepted this decision. In this case, Dr. Blodsoe has become the new center to the narrator even though he is also a black man. But having such power, influence and control, gives him the characteristics of the center. He tells him that:

Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else . . . , nor white folk either. True they [whites] support it, but I [Dr. Blodsoe] control it . . . those are the facts, son. The only one I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. (Ellison 49)

The hierarchy of power goes up from the narrator on his margin, deprived from any effective access to action; to Dr. Blodsoe, who plays the role of blacks' center; to the whites

on the pick of its center as the first and only source of power in America. Even when the protagonist has joined the brotherhood, and in spite of what he has gained as fame and success; he is, again, placed on its margin. Brother Jack draws his attention to the fact that he is “*not hired to think*” (160). By this token, he is forced to act in the limits of the role and identity he has been given by the brotherhood whatever his position in the organization is. His blackness defines him and restricts him from having any equal role to that of Brother Jack.

Both Brother Jack and Dr. Blodsoe represent the abusing center which pushes the narrator to hide in his secured periphery. Fanon explains the blacks’ psychological need to hide in a shell of invisibility and to avoid conflict with the center:

I [the black] slip into corners, and my long antennae [sic] pick up the catch phrases strewn over the surface of things . . . I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me. (116)

Nevertheless, the relationship between center and margin is quite critical and interdependent. Neither the center stops dehumanizing, exploiting and discriminating the margin, neither the latter can stop longing to get access into the center. Further, the center cannot live dependent of the inferiority of the periphery nor the margin can survive without the center’s guidance and help. Yet, they will never agree to tolerate their differences.

D. Invisibility: an Existential Choice to Survival

Previously in this chapter, invisibility of the black character has been thoroughly tackled. As a psychological syndrome, we have also demonstrated its very damaging consequences on the personality of the blacks. The narrator of Ellison’s book has lived in

invisibility most of his life. This invisibility has been imposed on him by the whites as well as the blacks of his society. Before becoming conscious of it, he has suffered a lot of its effects on his psychic and life as well.

The reader may notice that the protagonist's life is divided into two parts, before and after invisibility. In both parts, he has experienced it indeed. However, the first kind of invisibility goes beyond his ability of control. We have proved this in the first part of this chapter. The second part of invisibility, on the other hand, comes as the outcome of his consciousness. i.e., he has decided to be unseen psychologically and physically as well. The narrator has done this for one particular reason; for survival.

On the same first page of the novel, the narrator declares "*I am an invisible man*" (Ellison 1). Before he eventually concludes that "*it is sometimes advantageous to be unseen*" (1). Between recognizing his invisibility and being aware of its advantageous quality, the protagonist lives through self-discovery and maturation. The two quotations represent the contradictory dimensions of his life.

It is when the narrator has confronted with brother Jack after the narrator has organized the funeral of brother Clifton that our protagonist decides to rebel against the brotherhood. Brother Jack accuses Clifton of being a traitor saying "*under your [the narrator] leadership, a traitorous merchant of vile instruments of anti-Negro, anti-minority racist bigotry has received the funeral of a hero*" (158). The narrator violently disagrees saying that brother Clifton "*was a man and a Negro, a man and a bother*" (158-159).

This confrontation has exposed the brotherhood to the narrator. He believes now that it is full of hypocrisy and lies, and that it does not care about the well-being of the black people. This is well demonstrated when Brother Jack tells him that all black people are simply used to strengthen the position of the organization in Harlem. He explains that "*such crowds are only*

our raw materials to be shaped to our program" (161). The narrator replies "*no wonder they insult us and accuse me of betraying them*" (161).

In simpler terms, the black people, the narrator and Brother Tod Clifton among them, are no more than human tools used in the hands of the brotherhood to gain further successes in Harlem. He says "*outside the brotherhood we were outside history; but inside it they didn't see us We were nowhere*" (170). When the narrator takes the initiation in Clifton's funeral, he has faced opposition by the organization's members. This becomes clearer when Brother Jack tells the narrator that his job in the brotherhood is to follow the orders and never to think (160). The protagonist eventually replies that "*now I [the narrator] know where I am*" (160). Indeed, he has finally confronted with the ugly truth. He has no value or worth there. He says

I was simply a material, a natural source to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the brotherhood, and it all came out of the same -- except that I now recognized my invisibility. So I'd accept it, I'd explore it, rine [sic] and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet. (173)

From now on, the narrator becomes fully conscious of the real intentions of the organization and therefore changes completely. He decides to literally follow his grandfather's advice in order to get revenge. He wants to make Brother Jack and his fake brotherhood payback for all their lies and greed. The first step was to return to the brotherhood's orders and follow them strictly; to obey the brothers' instructions without questions; and to be the instrument they think they can trust and use. He even tries to have a sexual relationship with Sybil to get information about the organization's members. Certainly, he manages to live

electricity and rent-free using his invisibility (2). His plan is to remain in the shadow and get their trust to get access to their center and there to destroy them from the inside.

For the first time in his life, the narrator feels free from Brother Jack and the brotherhood's influence. He has more self-confidence and trust in his ability to conduct his own life. He has ultimately known his dilemma. His problem is "*that I [the narrator] always tried to go in everybody's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adapt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man*"(195). It is this realization that will dramatically change his existence. He has reached inner-peace when he has accepted to be invisible. Moreover, he has decided to use his invisibility for his own benefit. Indeed, "*finally the realization of his invisibility was a progression, a necessary first step towards manhood*"(Lane).

He also links the use of his invisibility with his own survival. To live and to grow being himself, he has to be unseen; "*the longer I remained unseen the longer I'd be effective*" (100). By this, he can move freely among them, use their resources, and take advantages from their own position. Moreover, he wants to find a place in the whites' world without being considered less important than them. The plan is simple:

I'd [the narrator] over-com them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I'd agree them to death and destruction. Yes, and I'd let them swallow me until they vomited or burst wide open. Let them gag on what they refused to see. . . . Nor did they know that they could discipline themselves to destruction, that saying "yes" could destroy them. Oh, I'd yes them, but wouldn't I yes them! I'd yes them till they puked and rolled in it. All they wanted of me was one belch of affirmation and I'd bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! YES!
(173)

The narrator's plan of revenge cannot be clearer than this. He will apply what he has been advised to do. No matter how he is going to do it. What really matters for our protagonist is to make the whites see and recognize him without even seeing him. He intends to invisibly confront with them by being what they originally want him to be. He carries on his plan saying:

That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh! All right, I'd yea, yea and oui, oui and si, si and see, see them too; and I'd walk around in their guts with hobnailed boots They wanted a machine? Very well, I'd become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions, and just to hold their confidence I'd try to be right part of the time. (173-174)

Here, the narrator is fully aware of his place in the whites' universe. He is able to locate his people among the other American citizens. They want him to be worthless and to obey them to death. They want an order- follower who is ready to scarify his own existence for them. Our protagonist has eventually understood that his image in the whites' minds is no more than a pale reflection of a human being.

Oh, I'd serve them well and I'd make invisibility felt if not seen, and they'd learn that it could be as polluting as a decaying body, or a piece of bad meat in a stew. And if I got hurt? Very well again. Besides, didn't they believe in sacrifice? They were the subtle thinkers -- would this be treachery? Did the word apply to an invisible man? Could they recognize choice in that which wasn't seen . . . ? (173-174)

This very long quotation summarizes very well what the narrator intends to do; to hide from the enemy in his own house, and to use his own tactics to demolish him. This can be considered to be a psychological conscious invisibility. Furthermore, in order to survive in the

dark streets of Harlem especially when Ras the destroyer has ordered his men to kill the narrator, the latter has to be physically invisible. He wears dark glasses and a white hat which allow him to freely move in the streets.

Thus, the protagonist cleverly establishes his physical as well as psychological invisibility as a means of his own survival and preparation for his revenge. Unfortunately, he falls in the black hole before fulfilling his plan. Nevertheless, he insists on carrying on his arrangement. After awakening from his supposed hibernation, he declares that he is ready to live through his intentional invisibility. He says “*despite Brother Jack and all that sad, lost period of the Brotherhood, I believe in nothing if not in action. Please, a definition: A hibernation[sic] is a covert preparation for a more covert action*” (5). This action comes with revolt, evolution and resistance in order to find his respectful place in his society.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Ellison starts his novel with “*I am an invisible man*” (1), and closes it with “*who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?*”(198). The book thus initiates as the story of a single black man starving for recognition and ends up as a universal story of all oppressed people in the world. However, between the beginning and the end lies the truth. A hero has been born out of his misery, defeat and invisibility. Ellison’s main objective has been to prove that one’s survival is one’s choice.

Along this humble dissertation, we have tried to associate the narrator’s survival to his self-discovery. The black character finds his place in the American society and thus in the universe only when he has become able to locate his identity among other identities. Living under the white man’s guidance and influence limits the black character’s potentials and destroys his self-esteem. As long as he guarantees his submission and obedience, he lives in his blackness denied from his rights and freedom. Hence, the narrator’s success in escaping his invisibility’s trap is due mainly to his understanding of the characteristics of that invisibility.

The journey has been difficult towards visibility. Blacks have lived one of the most difficult and controversial tales in history. They have struggled to gain their respectful and rightful place in society. Starting from slavery, to emancipation to citizenship, African Americans have been the target of racial hatred, racism and discrimination because of their blackness. Even-though their freedom has come through laws, their social situation remains very fragile and sensitive.

Through this thesis, we have attempted to help the reader establish a clearer thesis about the book. The narrator has succeeded in remodeling his imposed invisibility to serve his own survival. Ralph Ellison has proved that the black character’s failure to find his place in the White American society starts with his inability to embrace his own racial identity. Blacks

suffer from degradation and prejudice because of their unlimited readiness to submit to that society's racist orders. Once the narrator recognizes his own identity and origins, he becomes capable to rightfully locate himself among others. His survival comes through his invisibility because he confidently says *"I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my Invisibility , [invisibility] allows me [the narrator] to feel my vital aliveness"* (5).

Indeed, being invisible to the whites provides the protagonist with new tools of survival. Through practice and trial, he has painfully learnt to live through two paralleled worlds. The first is his, a pure world of the black man which allows him to be himself and to live among other blacks free of shame and self-disgust. The second, however, is the one which the white man wants to see. In this world, the black character is restricted to a pre-existing set of racial roles and identities to follow. Here, he cannot and has not the strength to function outside what he asked to do. Moving freely between the two world turns to be an art of survival which the narrator has eventually maneuvered.

Ultimately, we have proved that what has helped the narrator to survive is the same thing that has defeated him before his self-discovery. Invisibility cannot destroy a black character as long as the latter is able to use it the way he intends. Ellison's book has opened the door wide for Black Americans to believe in themselves and heritage but above all to believe in their blackness as their unique ethnic trait.

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Abstract:

The main subject of this thesis is based on the idea that the survival of blacks in the American history is related to their acceptance to be invisible in society. The black protagonist of Ellison's masterpiece Invisible Man (1952) has suffered a lot from racism and humiliation. Whites have refused to see him because of his natural blackness. Hence, he has learned to embrace such invisibility imposed by whites and use it for his own survival. He has kept his head down to please the whites and has followed their orders in order to secretly escape the margin of society and reach its center which holds the source of power and decision.

Résumé:

Le sujet principal de recherche de cette étude se base sur l'idée qui stipule que la survie des noirs dans l'histoire Américaine dépend de leur acceptation d'être invisible dans la société. Le protagoniste noir du chef d'œuvre d'Ellison Invisible Man (1952) a beaucoup souffert du racisme et de l'humiliation. Les Blancs ont refusé de l'accepter à cause de sa noirceur naturelle. Par conséquent, il a appris à embrasser une telle invisibilité imposée par les blancs et à l'utiliser pour sa propre survie. Il a gardé la tête basse pour satisfaire les blancs et a suivi leurs ordres pour à la fois échapper discrètement à la marge de la société et atteindre son centre qui détient la source du pouvoir et de la décision.

ملخص:

إن رواية "الرجل الخفي" 1952 لكتبتها رالف إليسون تعتبر بحق واحدة من أشهر الروايات الأمريكية في القرن العشرين، تكمن أهميتها في كونها تعالج قضية جادة حساسة في التاريخ الأمريكي ألا وهي رفض الأمريكيين ذوو البشرة البيضاء رؤية السود في أمريكا. هذا التهميش خلق الكثير من الصعوبات الوجودية للأمريكيين من أصل إفريقي. و أدلى الى انتشار التمييز العنصري ضدهم على مدار قرون من وجودهم هناك. وعليه فبطل الرواية استعمل هذا التهميش لأداة استطاع من خلالها خلق وجود له في المجتمع الأمريكي الأبيض من خلال قبوله بان يبقى غير مرئي للبعض.