

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA  
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF MOHAMED BOUDIAF - M'SILA

FACULTY OF LETTERS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



DOMAIN: FOREIGN LANGUAGES  
STREAM: ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
OPTION: LITERATURE & CIVILIZATION

**Existential Images in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible***

***Man***

**Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Masters Degree**

**Candidates: Dokmane Oumaima  
Basti Zahra**

**Supervisor : Dr. Mihoubi Houria**

**2017**

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**Academic Year: 2016 /2017**

## **Declaration**

This dissertation is our own original work and has not been submitted for any assessment or award at the University of M'sila or any other university

## **Acknowledgement**

We thank Allah for giving us the strength and patience to do this study. We also thank our supervisor Dr. Mihoubi Houria for her guidance, help, and support whenever needed. Thanks to our teachers, especially Mr. Senoussi, for their kindness and help.

## Dedication

Oumaima

To my family, my friends, and my husband Zakaria. I'm blessed to have you in my life.

Zahra

To my family and friends.

**Abstract**

The present dissertation tries to demonstrate that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an existential work. It further argues that Ellison uses Existentialism to discuss the identity issue of the Afro-Americans, and he uses it as psychotherapy. To confirm this claim, the notions of bad, good faith, authenticity, absurdity, alienation, freedom, anxiety, dasein, essence, and existence coined by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre are used in analyzing key passages in *Invisible Man*. Additionally, The Freudian Psychoanalysis, mainly, the interpretation of dreams is utilized in conducting the study due to its relevance the question this dissertation raises. The findings of this study show that Ellison uses the philosophy of existence to tackle the issue of Afro-Americans identity.

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## **Introduction**

It is an acknowledged fact that literature is tied with what the writer and society undergo. That is to say, most of the literary works represent the stand from which the writer expresses a certain cause for a specific reason. Additionally, an intimate link between psychology and philosophy cannot be denied, because they are interrelated disciplines which can be traced within the majority of literary texts. Therefore, analyzing literary works from a psychological as well as a philosophical perspective is crucial in understanding what is said and what is hidden. African American literature is a rich field with dense texts that contain various attempts to address critical issues from which Afro-Americans suffered for ages. Therefore, an Afro-American novel is highly assumed to provide a vivid example of how psychology and philosophy are implemented within literature in order to address specific issues.

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* is one of the Afro-American literary texts that displays the amalgamation of Existentialism with literature. It is important to note that the latter is a psychological philosophy. The novel was published in 1952, just after America's triumph in World War II. This period is notably marked by the rise of the Existential school of thought, as a consequence of the harsh circumstances and the trauma that modern man endured back then. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison's nameless black protagonist tries, at different stages of his journey, to identify himself within the American society. However, this society dehumanizes him and refuses to acknowledge his existence. Consequently, the protagonist's sense of self and identity is lost throughout his journey which leads him to an existential crisis. This dissertation focuses on tracing the presence of Existentialism in Ellison's only novel *Invisible Man*.

Ellison's only fictional masterpiece attracted all kinds of criticism and studies due to its ongoing influence on society. Researchers conducted numerous studies using different approaches in order to comprehend this literary work. The works that share similar interest with this dissertation will be reviewed here, due to the relevance of their findings to this research.

"The Identity of Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (1972), a thesis made by Marianne Bolgar, tackles the theme of identity in terms of music. That is, she argues that Ellison's protagonist identifies himself through jazz and the blues which accompany him through his journey. According to Bolgar, the blues provides "correct alienation" (25). Bolgar adds: "Jazz serves as a model for *Invisible Man* because it too is existential" (29). Consequently, she claims that Ellison employed jazz and the blues, for they represent the black heritage which is part of the Afro-Americans' identity.

"The Meaning of Freedom in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (1975) is another thesis made by Dolores Beth Powers in which she argues that the protagonist is looking for ultimate freedom in a society that keeps restraining him by its racial segregation. Powers adds that Ellison's novel tackles two main ideas: the limitations imposed on blacks by the white society, and the possibilities that exist within these limitations once the black men assert their identities. Additionally, she links freedom with Existentialism by saying that when the protagonist acts from personal choice "he then can become what the existentialist calls a being of action, not a being acted upon" (5).

Another reading of *Invisible Man* is Aimable Twaligimana's "Alienation as Narrative Strategy in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (2009). Twaligimana argues that the invisible man's alienation is not of his choice. Rather, it is imposed on him by society. Moreover, he

claims that “the alienation of Invisible Man allowed him to experience and critique American society” (102). Furthermore, Twaligimana points that alienation is necessary for it leads the protagonist to be a grown man.

One of the most recent studies of *Invisible Man* is Alpaslan Toker's “*The Invisible Man: An Alien in New York Searching for Identity*” (2013). In his article, Toker argues that alienation is what led the protagonist to find his identity at the end of the novel. Additionally, Toker equates the novel to Sartrean Existentialism by saying: “If the episodes that challenge the Invisible Man are dissimilar in style to those of the entangled Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, then both the characters are exploring the similar existential outcome and striving to design a course of action in spite of Nothingness” (30).

Although the studies mentioned above share a reading perspective which is close to Existentialism they do not establish a strong link between the novel and this school of thought. Alienation, a key existential element, is discussed in these studies but not with reference to any existential philosopher. Alpaslan Toker's essay is the exception, for it equates *Invisible Man* with Sartre's novel *Nausea*. However, it fails to draw the aim behind this equation. Consequently, these works prove to be limited because they neither show nor demonstrate to what extent the protagonist is an existential hero.

The present dissertation is important because it fills the gap left by these studies. That is, it will trace the threads of Existentialism in the novel. Additionally, it will investigate how Ellison used existential key concepts such as alienation, freedom, anxiety, bad and good faith in treating the issue of Afro-Americans' self perception in the 1940s.

National Fiction Award-winner, Ralph Ellison, grants the humanity a novel which is not written for the sake of art only. *Invisible Man* is, rather, a novel of Afro-American protest. It

dives into the soul of the Afro- American man to show how American racism denudes him of his identity, and leaves him with a meaningless existence.

Ellison's depiction of the protagonist's search for identity is highly complex. During his journey, the main character confronts critical situations in which his own existence is questioned. This narration contains common concepts with Existentialism (existence, essence, alienation, anxiety, freedom, and good and bad faith). Therefore, this research is going to study the implementation of Existentialism in *Invisible Man* as a psycho-therapeutic philosophy.

The critical approaches that will be utilized in this study are the philosophical as well as the psychoanalytic. That is to say, Existential key principles and the Freudian interpretation of dreams are going to be implemented in this dissertation. *Invisible Man* is a novel which treats the existential issues of identity, alienation and self underestimation. Additionally, this novel takes the reader into a journey inside of, both, the author's and the protagonist's psyche. Therefore, the Existentialism and Freud's psychoanalysis (the dreams' interpretation) are highly assumed to provide the suitable tool for this dissertation.

The objectives behind writing this dissertation are numerous. The first objective is to find out if *Invisible Man* is truly an existential work, specifically, to find where Existentialism can be read in the novel. Another objective behind this study is to examine the use of existential concepts in addressing the issues of Afro-Americans' self perception in the postmodern era. Finally, this dissertation aims at investigating the psychotherapeutic side of existential philosophy by studying the invisibility of the protagonist, both, at the beginning and at the end of the novel.

The main question upon which the dissertation raises is: is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* an existential work? Other sub-questions that this dissertation entails are: What are the moral dilemmas that face the protagonist? How is the existential theory used to tackle the protagonist's loss of identity? Do the main character's acts signify any evolvement in his self perception? And how does this novel affect the reader?

This research on Existential Images in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is innovative because it does not only read the novel from an existential perspective but it links the key elements of Existentialism with the protagonist character. Additionally, it investigates the therapeutic effect of this modern philosophy on the protagonist. Besides, this research is helpful because it makes the reader understand the existential philosophy in depth as well as the literary work being investigated. Additionally, this work enables people to comprehend how literature can intertwine with philosophy in order to find solutions for a certain cause, which is here the existential crisis of the Afro-Americans in the racist American society. However, the reader can associate himself with the protagonist because self-assertion is considered a universal issue rather than being merely a racial one.

In the execution of this research, the work will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will be devoted to the theoretical part of this study, including an overview of the Existential philosophy mainly selected concepts coined by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, for they formulate the lens by which the novel will be read. Moreover, an overview of the Freudian psychoanalysis, notably the section of dreams' interpretation, is going to be provided. Additionally, the historical context of the novel will also take place in this chapter. The second chapter will present the analysis of the novel in light of the

theoretical chapter. That is, it will investigate the presence of Existential thought in *Invisible Man*.

## **Chapter One: A Theoretical Background for the Study**

The present chapter represents the theoretical background of this study. The ideas tackled in this chapter will be utilized in analyzing the novel in the next chapter. It will tackle the Existential concepts produced by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Sartre. Additionally, the Freudian interpretation of dreams will take place in this chapter, as well as the socio-historical context of the novel.

### **Existentialism as a Philosophy**

Historically speaking, Existentialism emerged as a result of two forces. The first was the demolition of traditional culture as science and bureaucracy replaced religion. The second force was the socio-cultural destruction of human existence in the Holocaust. In his book *Irrational Man* (1958), William Barrett, an American philosophy professor, maintains that “The central fact of modern history in the West—by which we mean the long period from the end of the Middle Ages to the present—is unquestionably the decline of religion”(24). That is, as science took place religion failed to provide man with answers concerning the universe and his inner-self. Consequently, man took another road to look for answers in an attempt to understand everything within and around him.

Furthermore, according to Barrett, the loss of the church was the loss of a whole system of symbols, images, dogmas, and rites which had the psychological validity of immediate experience, and within which hitherto the whole psychic life of western man had been safely contained (25).

In addition to the loss of the church there are other worries as well. One of which is the inability of man to recognize the world around him because of the quick change of everything. In other words, the familiar world in which man lives has no fixed sense as it used to be. As a result man always feels lost in this indistinct world. Another issue is that the *traditional* values and absolutes have been broken. This means that what was once considered a general truth became invalid. William Barrett puts these issues, as well as others, within Existentialism because they create man's fundamental dilemma: how should he use his freedom and responsibility?

An answer to this question requires a closer look to the claims of Existentialism regarding freedom and responsibility within modern society. In this respect, the existential theory maintains that man must create his own "psychic container" (Kennedy 18), in order to individualize social truths. This is crucial because the only truths that are taken into account are the ones derived from man's own experience. Therefore, man ought to understand the world as an individual rather than as part of society. This means that Existentialism stresses the importance of the subjectivity of truth as the starting point of what to do with one's own freedom (a focal point in *Invisible Man*).

The more one lives the more they gain consciousness of life and their ability to learn from experience. This correlates strongly with *Invisible Man* in which the protagonist, evolve gradually due to his experiences. This notion joins Ellison with Existentialism because he demonstrates, through his main protagonist, what happens when people do not rebel against the pressure of society and do not create their own "psychic container".

The following chapter of this dissertation argues that Ellison recommends (constantly though indirectly) that establishing a plan of self-assertion or self-creation is one crucial way

for one to transmit and conceptualize their experiences significantly. This recommendation made by Ellison also implies a more ethical style of existence itself. To put it differently, an existentialist is the person who tries to employ what he understood from his own lived experience in determining what is valuable, what is worth keeping, and what is to be left aside and avoided.

### **1. An Overview of Soren Kierkegaard's Philosophy**

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is the 19<sup>th</sup> century key thinker who put the pillars upon which the existential movement was built and, therefore, is arguably considered the father of Existentialism. One of Kierkegaard's major contributions to Existentialism is an unprecedented emphasis on the individual and his responsibility toward subjective thinking and therefore subjective truth.

#### **1. 1. Life Essence and Subjectivity of Truth**

In Kierkegaard's philosophy, we are not victims of the conditions that we have no control over such as our gender, family, culture and race (the case of the protagonist). Consequently, the individual should choose the essence under which he exists in this world. In other words, the individual is *responsible* for the quality of his life and must choose the values he wants to bring into the world because his choice directs the meaning of his life. Kierkegaard denies the objective truth (science), when it comes to existence, and promotes the subjective one instead. This statement is confirmed in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* where Kierkegaard says: "the objective path thinks it has a security which the subjective path lacks (and, of course, existence, or what it is to exist, and objective security cannot be thought of in combination)" (163). Simply put, personal choice leads to subjectivity and subjectivity leads to truth. "Subjectivity is truth" (171), as he argues.

## **2. An Overview of Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy**

In addition to Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is another philosopher who went forward with existential theory. Unlike Kierkegaard who is known as a religious existentialist, Nietzsche is an atheist.

### **2. 1. Authenticity and Religion**

In his most important philosophical work, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he portrays an authentic formulation of morality. In this book, Nietzsche argues that the concept of God was designed to weaken the strong and strengthen the weak against the natural order. He claims that because of Christianity, Western man has become a stranger unto himself. That is to say, the concept of religion, in general, and God, in specific, push man to act against his real nature on the behalf of being religious. Because to Nietzsche, it is not natural for man to make himself poorer; it is not natural to turn the other cheek when confronted with violence, or to knuckle under the power of hierarchal social order. Moreover, in his book *Twilight of the Idols* he states that western man has not been able to evolve and promote the faculties he needs to understand himself because he has lived by a false set of values for more than two hundred Centuries (xvi). Simply put, authenticity to Nietzsche implies being a God of one's own self.

Finally, Nietzsche urges man to live his life as an artist making a piece of art, and as an artist takes risks creating his masterpiece then man must take risks reaching his authentic self, thus becoming a superior person.

### **3. An Overview of Martin Heidegger's Philosophy**

The second set of existential ideas that will be highly implemented in this dissertation belongs to Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Unlike Kierkegaard who analyzed the concept of the individual from a religious and a social perspective, Heidegger uses psychology in analyzing the concept of the individual. By publishing his most famous work *Being and Time*, Heidegger marked the beginning of an era where Existentialism was accepted as a mainstream philosophical movement.

#### **3. 1. Authentic Vs Inauthentic Existence**

The main theme in *Being and Time* is the issue of Being. In this book, Heidegger created the concept of "Dasein" which is of a German origin. "Dasein" means "what does it mean for me to be in the world?" (Heidegger 40). A right answer to this question would grant the human being an understanding of his own existence in the world. All people answer this question but most of them fail in providing the right answer because they think that being in the world means to accept life as it is without looking for alternatives. Consequently, according to Heidegger, the existence of such people is inauthentic. However, the authentic person when answering the question looks for a genuine answer that comes from him only not from others. That is, the authentic person looks for all the choices that his existence provides, and selects the ones that help him confirm his identity and therefore gets to have his own "Dasein".

### **4. An Overview of Jean-Paul Sartre's Philosophy**

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is another philosopher whose existential insights will be utilized in this dissertation. Unlike the previous philosophers, Sartre is the only one who accepted to be called an existentialist for he is the one who coined the term Existentialism in the first place. Sartre went further than the other philosophers in insisting on the individual's responsibility for the choices he takes and the importance of leading an authentic existence.

Focus will be on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* which is also known as the "bible of Existentialism" because it challenges the previous assumptions concerning the relationship between the individual and the world around him, and analyzes the notions that have just been mentioned above. Furthermore, In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre tackles the concepts of being, nothingness, freedom, and bad faith which will be used, in addition to other concepts, in the next chapter.

#### **4. 1. Existence Precedes Essence**

Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, says that being is divided between unconscious being and conscious being. In Sartre's terminology they are called being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is simply to exist in the world with no ability to change just like inanimate objects (Sartre 60). To Sartre "Man makes himself" (64); consequently he is not related to this mode of being. However, by denying the fact that *he* makes himself, man might choose to exist like an inanimate object. According to Sartre, man has no fixed nature or essence and therefore he is able to be whoever he wants to be. In other words, Sartre maintains that unlike any object in the world that has a predetermined essence; human existence has no predefined essence. That is, when it comes to humans "existence precedes essence" (474), as Sartre argues. This means that man comes to the world with no essence, and therefore he is supposed to find or create the essence of his existence according to the choices he takes.

#### **4. 2. Authenticity**

To Sartre, although man is faced with conditions and situations in which he has no control of like race, gender, family and physical appearance, he is responsible for making choices to have an essence of his existence. Sartre further maintains that these situations are just a

starting point, a background from which the individual can start shaping his life according to his own motives. In spite of this, the responsibility of taking decisions is not recognized by all human beings; therefore some of them may *choose* to be inauthentic by living according to the standards of society (an example of which is the protagonist at the beginning of the novel). In Sartrean philosophy, to be authentic is to be the kind of person one wants to be and to live the life one chooses to live away from any external influence.

#### **4. 3. Freedom**

To Sartre man has to fully know that he enjoys a free will of choice which enables him to adopt a mode of existence free of hypocrisy. However, freedom can be limited by what he calls "bad faith" (Sartre 12). Bad faith can be identified as the inability of man to separate his human existence from his occupation in society. That is bad faith occurs when man starts to believe that he is nothing but the role he is playing. As a result man loses his self and becomes no longer free.

#### **4. 4. Bad Faith**

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre maintains that, "In bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (86). Sartre inserts that bad faith comes as a result of man's refusal to realize that his existence has no essence except what he himself creates. Thus man denies the freedom that he, from all creatures, possesses because of the consequences this freedom entails. "Human reality perpetually tries to refuse to recognize its freedom"(378). Instead, man opts for what society imposes on him; therefore, he chooses bad faith. For this reason, Sartre does not reject the roles that man plays in society, but he urges man to be careful of falling in the traps of bad faith.

To Sartre man, then, is free whether to choose not to choose and consequently falls into bad faith; or to choose to be decisive and therefore becomes authentic, i.e. there are no limits for man's freedom except for the limits he puts for himself like bad. Sartre says: "This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free. To the extent that the for-itself wishes to hide its own nothingness from itself and to incorporate the in-itself as its true mode of being, it is trying also to hide its freedom from itself" (378).

Furthermore, Sartre maintains that although man is always exposed to bad faith, and is likely to fall in its traps, he is not doomed to remain in that position for good (Sartre15). Therefore, man is able to turn from bad faith to authenticity by renewing his efforts in looking for an alternative interpretation of reality (which happens at the end of the novel). Additionally, man ought to be aware of both his responsibilities and the unlimited freedom he enjoys.

## **5. An Overview of Sigmund Freud's Interpretation of Dreams**

Mostly referred to as the "father of psychoanalysis", Sigmund Freud (1856- 1939) provides a key road through which the mind of the human being can be deciphered. According to Freud, dreams are much more than ambiguous hallucinations. In fact, Freud believes that the unconscious mind feeds the actions of the human being. That is, the actions of the human being are stimulated by his unconscious mind which makes the real motives behind his actions hidden even from the person himself. Furthermore, Freud notes that all the impulses and urges held back by the human being, to satisfy society, are unleashed in his dreams. Consequently, the unconscious or the 'id' displays man hidden desires through dreams.

To Freud, the dream content that is remembered as soon as one awakes is called the "Manifest" (Freud 103), whereas, the dream content which contains the hidden urges, and therefore is the true meaning, is called the "Latent" (Freud 97). To put it differently, the "Manifest" is the disguise through which the "Latent" is displayed. There are five ways of disguise: displacement is the symbolism of a wanted thing or a person by another thing or person. Projection happens when the wants of the dreamer are forced onto someone else. Symbolization occurs when the dreamer's urges are displayed metaphorically in the dream. Condensation occurs when the repressed feelings and urges are manifested in the dream explicitly. Rationalization is a way in which the mind transforms a weird dream into a logical one (Tyson 14-15). Due to the fact that *Invisible Man* contains numerous dreams, the interpretation mentioned above will be used in analyzing these dreams in the next chapter.

## **6. The Historical Context of *Invisible Man***

Undoubtedly, any literary work cannot be fully understood if it is not read in relation to the context under which it was written because all writers are tied to their societies and, therefore, are influenced by what the society undergoes. Moreover, the author's turning life events also affect his writing style and ideology. Consequently, the meaning of *Invisible Man* can only be fully understood by fitting it around Ellison's most important life events and the historical context in 1940s and the 1950s (the time when the novel was written and published).

Ralph Ellison's biography tells that he was born in Oklahoma, the United States, in 1914 and studied music at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama which was used by Ellison as a model for the black college attended by the narrator in the novel. The Tuskegee Institute was founded by Booker T. Washington, one of the most influential black educators in American history. Later on, Ellison joined the Federal Writer's Project in Harlem, New York. He was

influenced by numerous writers both black and white such as T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and Richard Wright. Consequently, Ellison's writing style and ideology took shape according to his experiences and cultural background. Furthermore, at the time when *Invisible Man* was written, Afro-Americans were unacknowledged in the United States. That is, their status stood on shaky grounds. Additionally, many Afro-Americans, including the author, were attracted to the American communist party (which resembles the Brotherhood in the novel).

It might be important to draw attention to the point that Ellison was highly influenced by Existentialism as a modern philosophical movement which questions individuality and the nature of meaning in a clearly meaningless universe. Many scholars relate Ellison to this movement. The first scholar to make the link between Ellison and Existentialism is Esther Merle Jackson. In her article "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd", she argues that Ellison among other authors analyze man's "alienation from the larger community, his isolation within abstract walls, his loss of freedom, and his legacy of despair" (359). Another critique who puts Ellison within the existential camp is George Cotkin. In his book *Existential America* Cotkin states that: "...for Ellison, the use of existentialist terminology [...] provided him with cultural capital, the imprimatur of being in a conversation with a European philosophical and literary movement" (176).

It needs to be stressed that the reason behind Ellison's influence by Existentialism is due to its themes. The themes of the existential philosophy such as alienation share similarities with the black man's circumstances. Ellison identifies himself with Andre Malraux, French intellectual whose writings were about meaning of life. His writings such as *Man's Fate* categorized him within the existential camp (Moorer 1136).

Additionally, Ellison declares in his interview with Allen Geller that “there is an existentialist tradition within American Negro Life” (84). Moreover, when Geller comments that *Invisible Man* is an existentialist novel in a dramatic way, Ellison responds: “Philosophy in art should be dramatized, it should be part of the given situation, part of the motivations of the characters, a part of their way of confronting life” (84). These quotes prove that Ellison is influenced by the philosophy of existence. Finally, all the elements mentioned above contribute thoroughly in conducting this study for they provide the background of the novel that will be utilized in the subsequent chapter.

## Chapter Two: Study and Analysis

This chapter represents the practical section of this dissertation. On light of the previous chapter, the novel will be initially studied from an existential perspective. Specifically, the existential ideas referred to previously are to be utilized in detecting the presence of any existential images in the work. It is important to note that Existentialism does not have one constant definition for it changes according to each philosopher, yet the common concept between all the existential philosophers is that the individual's life can only be determined by his own actions. Moreover, the dreams displayed in the novel will be interpreted from a Freudian perspective. Additionally, the socio historical context in which the novel was written is of high importance since it will provide an elaboration that helps understand the text thoroughly.

### 1. The Protagonist's Blind Obedience

Ellison's uses an unnamed protagonist who tells his journey of self-assertion, as a kind of flashback. The protagonist's inability to recognize the fact that he exists in a meaningless world can be traced throughout the novel. At each stage of his journey, he defines himself according to society. That is, he accepts any role that is given to him by other superiors, black or white, and he defines himself according to that role.

This can be seen in the scene of the battle royal where he was asked to participate in a boxing match against his classmates before delivering his speech. Although the protagonist is invited to make a speech not to fight, he accepts to be part of the fighting which is aimed to amuse the "big shots" of the town. When the match starts the drunken town leaders scream with racist epithets. The narrator and his classmates fight each other. Soon after, the protagonist is left to fight against the strongest boy for the finals. Consequently he is knocked out. Additionally, the white men put the money of the boys in a rug and ask them to come and

take it for participating in the match. When the narrator and the other boys try to take the money from the rug they find it electrocuted but they take the money in spite of the pain.

It is observable that the protagonist is constantly seeking approval by what others consider right, such as the men at the battle royal, Bledsoe, Brother Jack and other people. Yet at each time he is left disappointed because he is following other people's beliefs. Consequently, it can be concluded that the protagonist is facing an existential crisis.

By engaging in the fighting against his classmates, the protagonist accepts to be seen as the white man sees him; that is as inferior and inhuman. This is portrayed when one of the white men in the battle says: "let me at that big nigger!" (Ellison 17). Another scene in which the protagonist embraces what society dictates on him is when he is delivering his speech after being bruised in the fight. After saying that he made a mistake by using the expression of "social equality", the protagonist accepts the order of a white man who gets enraged tells him not to cross the limits by speaking of equality, and resumes his speech.

The protagonist resumes letting people control his life and therefore his identity. An example of which is thinking that his expulsion from college by Dr. Bledsoe's - is for his own good. The narrator gets expelled because of taking Mr. Norton to see Trueblood, and the Golden Day. After expelling him, Bledsoe tells the narrator that he is a "fighter," and congratulates him for his spirit. Additionally, He convinces the protagonist that instead of expelling him, he is sending him to New York to collect his next year's tuition fees. Moreover, Bledsoe deceives invisible man by providing him with warning instead of recommendation letters to his business contacts in the city and tells him: "Son, if you don't become bitter, nothing can stop you from success. Remember that 'I shall, sir,' I said" (Ellison 116). In this quote, the protagonist is encouraged to exist in this world as Sartre maintains, a-being-in-itself. That is, to live with no ability to change anything in life. Bledsoe asks the protagonist not to be bitter. This means, not to complain or change any undesired circumstance.

Although it is clear that he is not allowed to get back to college, the protagonist believes Bledsoe's words that his expulsion from college is temporary and is for his own good. "I convinced myself; I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment. Dr. Bledsoe is right, I told myself, he's right." He adds trying to convince himself: "The school and what it stands for have to be protected. There was no other way, and no matter how much I suffered I would pay my debt as quickly as possible and return to building my career . . ." (Ellison 115).

Shortly after, the protagonist travels to New York where he meets Brother Jack who convinces him to join the Brotherhood. To fill the void, he accepts the position to be a speaker for the Brotherhood, and instantly loses any sense of self he has, as he places his morals into the organization. Brother Jack says "This is your new identity" (Ellison 309). This identity that he receives correlates with the Brotherhood's beliefs, and not his own. Once he takes on this new identity, the ideals and concepts in his mind are forced to shift to those of the Brotherhood, placing emphasis again on false and untested ideals.

At the beginning of their encounter, Brother Jack attracts the protagonist by his wide knowledge of history and scientific theories in addition to his expertise in politics; however, he turns to be an opportunist as he is more interested in using the power he has gained from the Brotherhood for his own interest. The protagonist fails to see Jack's true intentions and obeys his commands blindly. Similarly to the other occupations he has occupied, the protagonist performs his job as an orator flawlessly yet he perceives himself as an invisible man.

The protagonist tries to collect praise from the white men even if it is at the expense of his self-worth. Soon after starting the speech his hope of achieving praise collapses because the white audience doesn't even listen to him. He says: "I spoke automatically and with such fervor that I did not realize that the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth,

filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me” (Ellison 24). The protagonist is willing to risk his health just to satisfy the white man's wishes. This blindness is applied in the rest of his experiences as he seeks to satisfy the others without thinking by doing whatever they ask him to do. Moreover, the protagonist obeys and adopts the plans of others for him with excitement. However, he keeps evaluating each experience he has lived by questioning his beliefs at each time. The protagonist starts each experience planned for him by others with excitement and hope to find his identity; but at the end of each experience he concludes that he has changed without achieving self assertion. In other words, the protagonist is aware that he has to create his own identity and self assertion, but he does it wrongly. Consequently, the feeling of dissatisfaction accompanies him throughout the novel. This dissatisfaction pushes him to look further for his role in life.

The protagonist keeps looking for his identity and meaning behind his existence from a place to another believing that by fully accepting any role given to him by society, he will eventually create his identity. The common point between being a student, a painter, and an orator is that the protagonist performs his tasks perfectly assuming that by doing so he would find the meaning behind his existence and, therefore, his identity.

## **2. The Quest for Meaning**

In the novel, the narrator is constantly trying to understand the aim behind his existence. This is portrayed in the protagonist's determination to occupy high positions in society such as hoping to be a university teacher, trying to obtain a job in New York, and seeking to achieve some influential status within the Brotherhood. *Invisible Man* portrays the protagonist's shifts over several situations, and places (moving from South to North) so as to fulfill the dream of obtaining a sense of identity.

At the beginning of the novel the protagonist states, "All my life I had been looking for something, and 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...I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!" (Ellison 15). This quote shows that invisible man is an existentialist for this "something" which he is looking for is, as Sartre maintains, the essence of his existence. That is the meaning of his life. However, the protagonist states that people were the ones who told him where to look and how. Invisible Man is so busy impressing the white man that he fails to see the most important thing which is no one can tell him where to look for the meaning behind his existence. One reason for this is that he believes if he plays his role as he should, he will be rewarded and therefore he will be visible to the white man.

The protagonist's behavior throughout most of novel is characterized by following blindly the rules that are set by society. However, the protagonist's awareness of the necessity to adopt his own essence can be traced. The narrator comes to conclude that he has been living his life according to what others regard as right ignoring the simplest yet crucial things that make him happy, such as the taste of a yam. When the protagonist meets a man in Harlem who is selling yams he feels homesick for he used to eat yams back in the South. He says: "to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am!" He further adds: "They're my birthmark, I yam what I am!" (Ellison 205).

From this quote, it can be seen that the protagonist refuses to be ashamed of eating yams in the street and doesn't care about what others might think. In fact, he identifies himself through yams since they represent his black heritage. This moment enlightens the crumbled idols in his mind, as he comes to realize that when he creates his own way of thinking, and does what he sees right, he reaches happiness. Being alone eating yams shows the protagonist that he ought to have his own moral compass by which he moves in life.

One way to build one's own personal essence is to question everything and to be wary of being exploited by any external power. This is an apparent characteristic in the protagonist's behavior who questions everything. When he was chased by Brother Jack in the roof, he says: "Everybody wanted to use you for some purpose. Why should he want me as a speaker? Let him make his own speeches" (Ellison 228).

Furthermore, at each influential event, the protagonist's self awareness that he has to create his own essence in life increases. This is expressed when he says: "Coming to New York had perhaps been an unconscious attempt to keep the old freezing unit going, but it hadn't worked..." (Ellison 201). The "old freezing unit" means his old ways of seeing the world. Consequently, he wants to say that in New York he has come to realize that by blindly following societal rules in the South he has lost himself as a free individual. Therefore, he is aware of his non-existence.

Another way to build a personal meaning of existence is to be free. The protagonist portrays the notion of freedom as explained by Sartre in the previous chapter. That is, man has to fully know that he enjoys a free will of choice which enables him to adopt a mode of existence free of hypocrisy. "...It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble". This quote shows that the narrator knows to what extent freedom of choice is important.

Ellison, implicitly, puts within his narration the fact that an achievement of self assertion is a must, and that humans' life is more complex than being pre determined by a set of rules or plans. It is through the protagonist's attempts to follow blindly external guidelines that he eventually realizes his existential mode of being. In *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre writes: "In life man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is

nothing. No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts" (37-38).

As previously maintained in the first chapter, Sartrean Existentialism can be summed up as existence precedes essence. That is, there is no single general frame for individuals, rather each person has to create his own personal frame, his own fate, by the decisions he makes. Sartre regards this as the ultimate freedom of will: "In life man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing" (37-38). Instead of the exterior circumstances that influence the individual's consciousness, focus is put on his inner motives.

Sartre stresses that from within the individual a moral compass should be built, beliefs created, and his life lived. In the quote above Sartre argues that if an individual concludes that they have not accomplished anything in their lives, they can put the blame on no one but themselves. Responsibility or what Sartre calls good faith is a key element for an authentic existence. Once the individual comprehends that his actions give meaning to his life, he acknowledges his responsibility towards making life decisions.

When the protagonist witnesses Harlem riots, he was mistaken, several times, for a man named Rinehart. Rinehart has many identities: an entrepreneur, a pimp, a lover, a fighter and a priest. Consequently, he serves as model of self-creation to the protagonist. This is portrayed when he says: "I'd have to do a Rinehart" (Ellison 393). He means that he'd have to establish an identity.

### **3. The protagonist's Dasein**

At the very beginning of the novel, the protagonist affirms the notion of Sartre, explained above, as well as the notion of Kierkegaard which states that individuals are not victims of the conditions that they have no control over such as gender, family, culture and race. When he starts telling the reader his story, the protagonist says: "I am not complaining, nor am I

protesting either” (Ellison 3). Consequently, the protagonist claims his responsibility for the quality of his life. Additionally, the protagonist admits that he has neither created a psychic container nor established a subjective truth. He says: “I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes...” (Ellison 206). The protagonist's numerous occupations throughout the novel demonstrate his attempt to establish the essence under which he wants to exist in this world. However, he initially fails to recognize that he has to create this essence rather than adopt it from others.

It is observable that the invisible man does not ask explicitly the question which Heidegger accounts as the key to authenticity; however, his journey from the South to North entails his constant search for an answer to what does it mean for him to be in the world. Although he does not find an answer until the end of his journey, searching for alternatives makes him an authentic human being. Consequently, invisible man is in a process of creating his own *dasein* which leads him eventually to have his own identity.

Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, says that being is divided between unconscious being and conscious being. In Sartre's terminology they are called being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is simply to exist in the world with no ability to change just like inanimate objects. To Sartre “Man makes himself” (64); consequently he is not related to this mode of being. However, by denying the fact that *he* makes himself, man might choose to exist like an inanimate object. According to Sartre, man has no fixed nature or essence and therefore he is able to be whoever he wants to be. In other words, Sartre maintains that unlike any object in the world that has a predetermined essence; human existence has no predefined essence. That is, when it comes to humans “existence precedes essence” (Sartre 474), as Sartre argues. This means that man comes to the world with no essence, and therefore he is supposed to find or create the essence of his existence according to the choices he takes.

It might be obvious that the reader of the novel can never undermine the fact that the protagonist shortly feels satisfied when he rejects the previous ideals instilled upon him and embraces his own desires and wishes, as he says: "What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste!" (Ellison 266). The parallel between the quote and Sartre's notions is evident, as the narrator realizes that all he has believed in is false.

#### **4. From Evaluation of Values to Self-Assertion**

It is undeniable that Ellison shares with Nietzsche the existential ideal of questioning the beliefs that are instilled in societies. Nietzsche questioned the ideals that were set by Christianity for the church was dominant in the nineteenth century. Ellison questioned the ideals put by racism in *Invisible Man*. Furthermore, similar to Nietzsche, Ellison discusses the wrong set of values instilled upon the human mind and how it hypnotizes it completely leading individuals to take wrong life decisions. This takes place at the end of the novel when the protagonist reaches the climax of his existential crisis. Nietzsche writes: "A different convalescence... is *to sound out idols*... There are more idols than realities in the world: that is my 'evil eye' for this world; it is also my 'evil ear'... Here for once to ask questions with a *hammer* and, perhaps, to hear in response that famous hollow sound which speaks of swollen innards" (3).

In his book *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche emphasizes the elimination of the old morals and the revaluation of all values. Furthermore, he insists on the need to question all values for they guide people's lives. Similarly, Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, points to the necessity of filtering all values. That is, to keep what is beneficial and to get rid of what paralyzes the individual's involvement in life. Ellison expresses this idea by making the protagonist live numerous experiences in which the racist values control him. In the quote mentioned above, Nietzsche states that breaking down from old ideals has to be done strongly. He uses the

metaphor of breaking them with hammer, to stress the idea that if these old morals are solid enough they will not break down. Additionally, sounding the morals with a hammer will show if they are hollow or not. This metaphor implies that the hammer is the questioning of the morals. Consequently, one has to question the morals that affect his life to decide whether to break away from them or not.

What needs to be derived from Nietzsche's quote is the presence of contradictory thoughts is essential to find out what is right and what is wrong. This is the situation the protagonist endures in the novel. The protagonist hits the morals with a hammer and discovers that they are hollow. At each time he puts on test a set of ideals and concludes that they are hollow for they never lead him to establish an authentic identity. Without following, initially, the false set of ideals, the protagonist would not be able to distinguish what is right from wrong. In other word, thanks to the experiences he has lived, the protagonist develops a sense of logic through which he realizes the importance of personal choice.

In spite of discovering the Brotherhood's fake intentions, the protagonist argues that he thinks for himself. He says: "I would do the work but I would be no one except myself- whoever I was. I would pattern my life on that of the Founder" (Ellison 311). The protagonist defines himself through the Brotherhood. However, he discovers that it does not represent what it stands for. Consequently, he decides to think for himself but he fails because he patterns his life around that of the Founder, the man who established the college of blacks. From a Christian perspective, the Founder is like a God to the protagonist. God is the provider of life- guiding rules and so is the Founder. According to Nietzsche's principles, the protagonist upholds himself higher than others just like the European Bourgeoisie yet he believes false concepts of how to live his life.

The protagonist eventually realizes the hollowness of the Brotherhood ideals. As a result, he reaches the ultimate existential deduction: he is alone. By rejecting the Brotherhood, the narrator portrays a change within him. He starts to see the racial frame he is put in by others superior to him. As a consequence, he becomes gradually certain that he cannot reach what he wishes through others.

From Nietzsche's perspective, the protagonist is having a "revaluation of all values" since he starts questioning all the Brotherhood's contradictory rules. This is shown when he meets Brother Clifton selling sambo dolls. The protagonist finds Clifton's withdrawal from the Brotherhood suspicious. He says: "Why should a man deliberately plunge outside oh history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to 'define himself?'"(Ellison 340).

Soon after this scene, the protagonist discovers the reality of the Brotherhood. Consequently he refutes all its standards. Moreover, he becomes aware of their plots. This is demonstrated when he says: "When I arrived the meeting was in session, just as I expected, and word had been left that it was not to be disturbed by anyone. It was obvious that they hadn't forgotten to notify me...when they do decide to call me they'll have to find me" (Ellison 332).

One may understand that the quote above implies that an organization cannot define a person, and the protagonist finally comes to this conclusion, that he cannot be defined by the morals put by others, that he has to seek definition by his own morals. To decide for himself what is right and wrong. As Nietzsche states in his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the individual cannot accept the ideas given to him without challenging them, and create his own for each situation. However, the Brotherhood repudiates this idea, by representing the old

morals as Brother Jack says, "Such crowds are only our raw materials, *one* of the raw materials to be shaped to our program...Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them!" (Ellison 472-473). This quote represents the hidden intentions of this organization which oppose Nietzsche's ideas. Additionally, the protagonist rejects the Brotherhood when its intentions become clear to him. He says:

Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men... For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. It was a joke, an absurd joke. (393)

This deduction leads him to conclude that he was used for his speaking abilities, and not for who he is. That is, being a Brotherhood member made his role in life is limited to his voice, and the color of his skin. Through this realization the protagonist figures out that his journey and struggles were shaped by the color of his skin.

Invisible Man leads a divergent life because he is born and growing up in a racist society. This makes his struggle to find meaning doubled because society always discards him from the scheme. In other words, the existential crisis of Invisible Man is doubled because he is black. That is, as any black man, the protagonist was raised on the ideal that the white man is always right. Consequently, his search for meaning is highly complicated because he always links it with the satisfaction of others. Seeking others' satisfaction makes it impossible for the protagonist to attain his personal essence due to the fact that one has to choose the way he wants to live starting from his own moral convictions. To put it differently, in order to live authentically one has to create the meaning he wants to live with provided that he takes the responsibility of the consequences of his choice. However, before adopting this perception, he has; firstly, to get rid of what Sartre calls bad faith. That is, he has to embrace his freedom of

choice, and he has to cease from relying on the impositions of society. Invisible man reaches this realization only at the end of the novel when he discovers that Brother Jack deceived him.

Towards the end of *Invisible Man*, the protagonist starts questioning the idols which he took for granted. After moving North to New York, he is hired to be a motivational speaker for the "Brotherhood". Unaware that he has just lost himself, the protagonist believes that in the Brotherhood, he will find the essence of his life because he can deliver all the morals and values of humanity to his community. After delivering many speeches, the protagonist feels lost because preaching the people of his community did not help him shape his identity. Although he becomes known for his speeches, his invisibility remains. Consequently he feels confused; he states, "Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly I couldn't help being different from when I left the campus; now I had a new, painful, contradictory voice had grown up within me" (Ellison 259). These questions are deeply existential; they actually show that the protagonist is in a state of growing awareness of the change that is happening inside of him. That is to say, the way he sees himself and society is changing, and that what creates the confusion in first place.

The protagonist always feels superior to the others. That is, he enjoys a strong self-esteem. However, it can be seen in the narrator's behavior that there is a contradiction of beliefs. The narrator is fully aware of his capacities yet he subjects himself to the racist treatment of the white men at the battle royal by accepting to join the dehumanizing fight. This is portrayed when he says: "I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech...I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together in the servants elevator" (Ellison 14). He only suspects that if he participates in the fight, his speech will lose dignity. He does not realize that by accepting to fight not only the dignity of his speech will be questioned but his own self pride will be degraded.

## **5. Alienation of Invisible Man**

The Invisible Man ends his journey that was encircled with leading-to-meaning events. As he looks for what defines him, moving from South to North, and joining a Brotherhood, he is still unsatisfied. This leaves him with the depressing recognition that he is *alone*, and invisible. However, a compelling change occurs within him, as he comes to understand that the essence of his life can only be achieved when the racial beliefs being used by the white man are completely uprooted from his mind and from society, and until then he shall remain invisible. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre determine ways through which a human being can achieve self satisfaction, by applying his personal desires and adopting what he assumes ethical morals. However, what all the four existentialists share as common is the simple fact that all human beings are alone, and only on themselves they can rely in order to reach an authentic state of being.

At the end of the novel the idea that hope can mislead to futile expectations is expressed in the novel. The protagonist's hope of becoming an influential society member is destroyed. He did not graduate from college and ceased to be part of the Brotherhood. As a result, the protagonist becomes fully aware that he must lead his own life, and that he is like all human beings alone. Consequently, he decides to rely on himself, to shape his own identity, and therefore to live authentically in this world.

## **6. Invisibility of the Protagonist**

Invisibility for the protagonist is exterior and interior. That is not only others did not see him; he did not see himself. However, at the end of the novel, the protagonist accepts himself as he is. That is, he identifies himself as invisible to others not because they do not see him but because that is who he is. Treating the issue of invisibility has two solutions either the protagonist changes the racist lens through which the white man sees him or changing the way

he sees himself. According to Existentialism, the protagonist has to look at himself regardless of how others see him.

The protagonist achieves self assertion, when he realizes that putting faith in others and in false morals destroys his being. The key to satisfaction is total self reliance. This purely existential conclusion leads him to understand that his whole journey was defined by his skin color. That is, the white men decide to see him as black only. Invisible Man tries constantly to define himself through their racist eyes. As a result, he remains invisible to himself and others all his journey.

### **7. The Symbol of the Brief Case in the Novel**

All along his journey the protagonist carries the brief case that was gifted to him when he delivered his speech in the battle royal. It contains all the objects that identify him. These objects are his high school diploma, the anonymous letter he received in the Brotherhood, Clifton's sambo doll, and the piece of paper that contains the new name given to him by Brother Jack. When the Invisible Man falls and gets trapped in the hole, he realizes that his only solution to have light is to burn his brief case. "If I was to make a torch. I'd have to open my brief case. In it were the only papers I had" (Ellison 440).

The objects being burned are of high significance to the protagonist for they portray his identity. The high school diploma represents his eagerness to be educated in order to fight the white dehumanization of blacks. The anonymous letter serves as a reminder to never try to be someone he is not. Clifton's sambo doll which reminds him of how he was used as a puppet by the Brotherhood to achieve white interests. The last burned object is the new identity given to him by the Brotherhood, a false name used to remodel him into a pawn to teach the false ideals of the Brotherhood. Burning all these objects signifies that all the wrong beliefs that were engraved in the protagonist's mind begin to disappear.

He eventually comprehends that if he continues to subject himself to the will of others, his existence will always be inauthentic. This implies that Invisible Man's role in life will be of no personal significance if he does not embrace being invisible. Moreover burning the objects symbolizes the idea that only by getting rid of old values and any remnants of the former self one can establish the meaning of their existence.

Ellison puts his protagonist in a continuous inner dilemma which makes him question everything around him. Although he fulfills his duties, he is never satisfied and never gets rid of his invisibility. Aware of his own invisibility, the protagonist keeps meeting people who implicitly show him how to be visible in his own eyes. That is, they show him how to be an existential human being. An example of which is the vet, from the Golden Day, who meets the protagonist on his way to New York. The vet says: "Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it" (Ellison 121). "Be your own father" implies adopting what Kierkegaard calls Subjective truth, and what Heidegger and Sartre perceive as being authentic. The vet in the novel is a retired doctor. Consequently, the Ellison used this character precisely to symbolize the psychotherapeutic side of Existentialism.

Anxiety and fear accompanied the protagonist in his journey. The protagonist was in this moral state because he did not know the meaning of his existence in life. At the end of the novel, he accepts being invisible and decides to live on his own terms. Consequently, the ambiguity he used to feel disappears and so do the feelings of anxiety and fear. This implies that Existentialism has a psychotherapeutic side which the writer highlights in the novel.

In the hole, the narrator reaches full existential growth as he was gradually developing in the novel. In the darkness of the hole he starts hallucinating; he imagines seeing all the characters that previously shaped his false thinking such as Bledsoe, Norton, the school superintendent and Jack. The protagonist imagines them asking him to return to them but he

responds saying: "No, 'I said.' I'm through with all your illusions and lies, I'm through running" (Ellison 441).

In this quote the protagonist finally recognizes that he was following lies and illusions. Additionally, he realizes that he was running after nothingness as existentialists state. By saying "no", he trips off that mode of being. That is, he refuses to be a chain in society, or a pawn in others' chess games.

Furthermore, his imagination continues as he sees the characters telling him that they will free him from his illusions if he returns to them. He refuses, again, saying: "'No, thank you; I'll free myself', I said, struggling to rise from the cutting sand" (Ellison 441-442). The protagonist changes from having bad faith in his journey to having good faith when he falls in the hole. He acknowledges that he is a free individual and decides to free himself from all kind of social chains. Moreover, the protagonist admits that having one's own rules is as difficult as rising from "the cutting sand" but he is willing to struggle in order to live like he wants.

Without the painful experiences he lived, the protagonist would not be able to know how to exist in life. He says to the imaginary men: "'at a price I now see that which I couldn't see'" (Ellison 442). Since his old life contained so many false ideals, Invisible Man says: "And now I realized that I couldn't return...to any part of my old life" (443). He believes that the previous phase of his life must come to an end because was living it the wrong way.

In the epilogue, the protagonist addresses the reader as he finishes telling his story. He says: "I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole -- or showed me the hole I was in, if you will -- and I reluctantly accepted the fact" (Ellison 443). The quote implies that he eventually accepts being who he is. He accepts being invisible, being black for it is the only way to live authentically. Moreover, the protagonist states what he felt when he used to follow blindly others demands. He says: "I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until

my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out and wagged like the door of an empty house in a high wind. Oh, yes, it made them happy and it made me sick” (444). Seeking to satisfy others made him sick because in his unconsciousness that is not what he wants to live for.

It seems that Invisible Man rejects his previous ways of thinking and acknowledges the problems that stood between him and his true identity. The first problem is that he was mentally enslaved by others, as a result he believes in them rather than himself. He says: “my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own” (Ellison 444). The second problem is that society refuses to acknowledge his presence. He expresses this by saying: “I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself” (444). This means that no one cares if he creates his identity because either way they will not see it.

“So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man. Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which I originally aspired” (Ellison 444). The protagonist finally rebels against all the chains of society; he rejects all the patterns, the ways and beliefs that oppressed him. Additionally he accepts to be invisible as long as he does not have to conform to exterior obligations.

One may observe that the protagonist is afraid of falling in the trap of blind obedience again, so he decides to stay in the hole until he decides what to do in the next step of his life. Moreover, he blames himself for all the struggles that happened to him for he says: “... deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame...” (Ellison 446). This stands in parallel with what Kierkegaard says; a person should blame himself only for the quality of his life. Additionally, the Invisible Man argues that all human beings, himself included, have the freedom of choice when it comes to overcoming obstacles in life. That is, even if one fails in one phase of their life, like he did, he can overcome it by changing his ways of perceiving

things. This is portrayed when he says: "... you can either make passive love to your sickness or burn it out and go on to the next conflicting phase" (446).

Still, there is a need to highlight the important fact that the protagonist celebrates his existence by shifting from following society to standing against it. In this respect he says: "now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit" (Ellison 446). This quote, also, shows the protagonist's refusal to be categorized under any specific definition. Additionally, he refuses to get out of the whole because he does not want to conform to society measures. He expresses this by saying: "I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern" (Ellison 447). The protagonist wants to live according to his own patterns. This decision is purely existential.

### **8. Absurdity as an Existential Theme**

At the beginning of the novel Existentialism appears through the implicit theme of absurdity. This theme appears frequently in the novel. An example of which is the scene of the Battle Royal in which the protagonist does not fathom the causes and effects of the fight on him. Another scene in which the theme of absurdity is displayed is the visit of the protagonist with Mr. Norton to Tueblood's quarters. Additionally, the encounter that happens at the Golden Day. In all of these scenes *Invisible Man* shows his inability to understand what has occurred and why.

Such events mortify the protagonist because he moves from one absurd event to the next. However, at the near end of the novel he starts to realize the absurdity of life; this is portrayed when he says: "for all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd" (Ellison 449).

It is remarkable that when the protagonist realizes the absurdity of life at the end of his journey, he becomes aware of the nothingness of the world, and his duty to rise from this nothingness by creating the meaning behind his existence. Consequently, he decides to put an

end to his hibernation in the hole and starts a new phase in his life. He illustrates this when he says: "The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (450). Additionally, the protagonist wants to start this new phase using the existential notions as a basis. That is, he wants to exist in this world according to his own terms by taking choices that he deems right. Moreover, he is willing to be responsible for his choices results.

The protagonist ends the novel by announcing that: "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (Ellison 450). In this quote, the protagonist shows the difference between submitting to social rules and fulfilling his role in society. He refuses to lose his sense of self by following blindly social convictions yet he confirms his responsibility towards his society for he has a role to fulfill. This slight shift of definitions is what makes an individual an authentic being; that is, one has to play his role in society putting in mind, as Sartre maintains, that he should never lose himself in the process.

This quote also portrays Ellison's responsibility towards his race for he took it upon himself to address the issue of being black and American. That is, although blacks' sufferance has not come to an end, they still have a role to play in America as part of the country whether the white American accepts it or not.

## **9. Freudian Interpretation of the Protagonist's Dreams**

*Invisible Man* contains many dreams most of them are seen by the narrator. There is a strong link between the protagonist's dreams and his unconscious. This can be observed through Freud's notions concerning dreams' interpretation. The protagonist dreams of his grandfather the night he receives the scholarship. He says,

That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I

found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. 'Them's years,' he said. 'Now open that one.' And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. 'Read it,' my grandfather said. 'Out loud.' 'To Whom It May Concern,' I intoned. 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running'. (Ellison 27)

Invisible Man keeps dreaming of his grandfather who died before his journey starts. Ellison uses the protagonist's grandfather as the holder of truth. That is, he knows that even if slavery ended long time ago, racism is still rooted in the white society. The dream that the protagonist had contains many symbols. The circus represents society, and the clowns symbolize the white men. The grandfather's refusal to laugh at the clowns whatever they did implies that he refuses to be controlled by them, and that he is aware of all their tricks to enslave the mind of the black man. Another interpretation is that the clowns want his grandfather to laugh but he refuses to do what they expect him to do. It can be observed that the protagonist's grandfather possesses the existential trait of not following others.

The other symbol is the brief case which he asks him to open. The brief case symbolizes the illusion of having an identity by occupying high status in society. The brief case that was gifted to the protagonist at the end of the Battle Royal contained a scholarship. The protagonist believed that if he gets his diploma then a job he will not be invisible to others anymore. What his grandfather tries to tell him in the dream is totally the opposite. The brief case contains so many envelopes that lead to one short message: "keep that nigger boy running". This implies that by taking the brief case at the Battle Royale, the protagonist has accepted to be a puppet of the white man. Consequently, the dream is a wakeup call to the Invisible Man.

To Freud, dreams can reveal the nature of the relationship between the dreamer and others. Additionally, dreams expose the dreamer's inner desires. Consequently, the protagonist has an inner desire of breaking from the rules imposed on him by the white society. Moreover, using Freud's dream tools in interpreting this dream, it is observed that this is a projection. That is

the unconscious of the Invisible Man sends him messages through another person which is his grandfather. In other words, the unconscious of the Invisible Man is aware that following the ways of the white man will not lead him to self discovery. According to Freudian dreams analysis, dreams can contain future predictions. This dream expresses the prediction that the protagonist will be fooled at the end of his educational journey. That is what happens near the end of Invisible Man's journey; he is deceived by Brother Jack (Dream Moods).

The second dream that protagonist has is different from the first one because in this dream he is awake and he sees himself rather than his grandfather. He says: "When I stopped, gasping for breath, I decided that I would go back and kill Bledsoe. Yes, I thought, I owe it to the race and to myself" (Ellison 151).

This dream of having revenge sides with Freud's theory. As mentioned in the first chapter, what man cannot do in reality to satisfy others takes shape in dreams and imaginations. This happens in the dream above. The protagonist dreams of killing Bledsoe to revenge for him and his race because he cannot do it in reality. Moreover, from a Freudian perspective, the dreamer's hidden personality can take place in his dreams. In this dream the protagonist's nature is bad unlike his nature in reality. Consequently, there's a duality in his character as Freud maintains.

Invisible Man has another dream when he is in Gwen's bed. He says: "It was dead quiet, yet I was certain that there had been a noise and that it had come from across the room as she beside me made a soft sighing sound. It was strange. My mind revolved. I was chased out of a chinkapin woods by a bull. I ran up a hill; the whole hill heaved. I heard the sound and looked up to see the man looking straight at me from where he stood in the dim light of the hall, looking in with neither interest nor surprise. His face expressionless, his eyes staring. There was the sound of even breathing. Then I heard her stir beside me" (Ellison 323).

This dream is about Gwen, the only woman the protagonist had sex with. The protagonist says that the process “was like a dream” (Ellison 323). This sides with Freud’s theory that dreams have sexual roots. The protagonist sees a bull chasing him which symbolizes the fear of Invisible Man from Gwen’s husband in case he finds out (Dream Moods). The dream interrelates with reality, because Gwen’s husband comes at the same moment in which the dream ends. However, Gwen’s husband, unlike in the dream, sees the protagonist but does nothing about it which further enhances the protagonist’s sense of invisibility.

The protagonist has a dream about Rinehart’s girl. He says “And just as I caught sight at the glasses I remembered grasping Rinehart's girl's hand. I lay there unmoving, and she seemed to perch on the bed, a bright-eyed bird with her glossy head and ripe breasts, and I was in a wood afraid to frighten the bird away. Then I was fully awake and the bird gone and the girl's image in my mind” (Ellison 396).

The transformation of Rinehart’s girl into a bird portrays Freud’s theory of symbols in dreams. According to Freud, when a transformation occurs in a dream this phase is called symbolization. Symbolization happens when the desires of the dreamer take shapes of symbols. The desire of the protagonist according to dream is to have a mate. Rinehart’s girl and the bird she changes to are symbols. Rinehart used to have a nice relationship with his girl, and that’s the desire of Invisible Man. Moreover, the other symbol is a “wood” which according to Freud’s interpretation has sexual connotations (Dream Moods).

From the Freudian interpretation of the protagonist’s dreams, one can observe that his urges and desires keep appearing in his dream through different symbols. His fear of not having an identity takes form in his grandfather’s dreams. Additionally, his desire to have a woman in his life is unleashed in his dreams.

## Conclusion

The conclusion that one can draw after a thorough analysis of the *Invisible Man* is that only after a cycle of experiences that the *Invisible Man* realizes he was looking for his identity in the wrong place. *Invisible Man* was looking for a definition in others' eyes and he kept trying to look for his identity, at each time, by following others' ways. Consequently, whatever he did he was always invisible to himself as well as to others. However, at the end of the novel he realizes that he looked everywhere for the meaning of his existence but inside of him. All what he looks for outside is within him. The meaning of existence comes from within the individual. In other words, it is up to the individual to celebrate his freedom. One way to do so is by being responsible enough to take choices that determine the way he lives provided that these choices are taken on the basis of what *he* deems right. Consequently, he will be, as existentialists say, an authentic human being and the creator of his own meaning in life.

When using the existential concepts as explained by their exponents in the first chapter in reading *Invisible Man* many similarities can be drawn. The author builds the novel around his unnamed protagonist who lives a journey full of experiences. At the end of each experience, Ellison's narrator develops his own existential beliefs. This gradual development in the hero's perception leads him, nearly at the end of the novel, to a full existential consciousness. The manifestation of existential concepts can be detected through the novel. Such as Kierkegaard's subjectivity of truth, Nietzsche's evaluation of values, Heidegger's Being-for-itself, and Sartre's bad faith, good faith and freedom of choice. Ellison's usage of these themes makes his hero and, therefore, his novel existential par excellence.

Additionally, what makes *Invisible Man* an existential novel is the way the protagonist describes his experiences. Ellison centers the journey of his hero around a shock of recognition. Consequently, the protagonist is aware of the necessity of values creation and identity-assertion. However, the major obstacles which face him are: he is not able to choose on an existentialist basis, and he often fails to embrace responsibility that results from knowing the limitations put by society. However, when he eventually understands the absurdity of existence he reaches an existential epiphany. He says: "...my world has become one of infinite possibilities" (Ellison 446). Invisible Man becomes an existential hero; as a result, his way of seeing things changes. He finally understands that he has no fixed nature and the world, also, offers him infinite meanings to adopt.

Finally, one can establish the fact that indeed Ellison has used Existential philosophy in his work to address the identity issue that most Afro-Americans endure. Ellison's message is: just like his protagonist accepts his invisibility, Afro-Americans should accept themselves as they are for it's the only way to establish an identity. In conclusion, taking into account the study and analysis conducted in this dissertation, it can be affirmed that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* contains existential images.

## Glossary

**Absurdism:** The belief that human beings exist in a purposeless, chaotic universe .

**Anxiety:** A nervous disorder marked by excessive uneasiness and apprehension, typically with compulsive behavior or panic attacks.

**Alienation:** A state of depersonalization or loss of identity in which the self seems unreal, thought to be caused by difficulties in relating to society and the resulting prolonged inhibition of emotion.

**Authenticity:** (In existentialist philosophy) relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive, and responsible mode of human life.

**Bureaucracy:** A system of government in which most of the important decisions are taken by state officials rather than by elected representatives.

**Conscious:** (Of the mind or a thought) directly perceptible to and under the control of the person concerned.

**Convalescence:** Time spent recovering from an illness or medical treatment; recuperation.

**Dasein:** (in Hegelianism) existence or determinate being; (in existentialism) human existence.

**Essence:** A property or group of properties of something without which it would not exist or be what it is.

**Existence:** The fact or state of living or having objective reality.

**Existentialism:** A philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.

**Freedom:** The power of self-determination attributed to the will; the quality of being

independent of fate or necessity.

Hallucination: An experience involving the apparent perception of something not present.

Id: The part of the mind in which innate instinctive impulses and primary processes are manifest.

Identity: The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is.

Innards: The internal workings of a device or machine.

Nothingness: Worthlessness or insignificance.

Philosophy: the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline.

Psyche: The human soul, mind, or spirit.

Psychology: The scientific study of the human mind and its functions, especially those affecting behavior in a given context.

Psychoanalysis: A system of psychological theory and therapy which aims to treat mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind and bringing repressed fears and conflicts into the conscious mind by techniques such as dream interpretation and free association.

Psychotherapy: The treatment of mental disorder by psychological rather than medical means.

Racism: Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.

Self-assertion: The confident and forceful expression or promotion of oneself, one's views, or one's desires.

Trauma: Emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may lead to long-term neurosis.

Unconscious: The part of the mind which is inaccessible to the conscious mind but which affects behavior and emotions.

WWII: World War Two

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## ملخص

هاته الدراسة تهدف إلى إثبات استعمال الكاتب رالف إليسون للفلسفة الوجودية في روايته الرجل الخفي، كما أنها تسلط الضوء على كيفية توظيف الكاتب لهاته الفلسفة في معالجة مشكل الهوية الذي يعاني منه الافروأمريكيون. لإجراء هاته الدراسة تم استعمال المفاهيم المتعلقة بالفلسفة الوجودية في تحليل الرواية و هي: الاغتراب، العبئية، الحرية، القلق، الذات، الوجود، الماهية، الأصالة و الإيمان. إضافة إلى ذلك تم استعمال التحليل النفسي لفرويد ، تحديدا نظريته الخاصة بتفسير الأحلام. أكدت النتائج المتوصل لها استعمال الكاتب رالف إليسون للفلسفة الوجودية في روايته الرجل الخفي من أجل معالجة قضية الهوية الضائعة لدى الافروأمريكيين.