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The Motifs of Blindness and Invisibility within the Influence of Postwar Existentialism as Reflected in *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

Yildiray Cevik
Lecturer
International Balkan University,
Skopje, FYROM

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Abstract

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison introduces the major themes that define the novel. The motifs of invisibility and blindness allow for an examination of the effects of racism on the victim and the perpetrator. The novel also places itself within larger literary and philosophical contexts. Especially apparent is the influence of existentialism. At the time of *Invisible Man'*s publication in 1952, existentialism had reached the height of its popularity; Ellison's book proposes to undertake a similar examination of the meaning of individual existence, but through the lens of race relations in postwar America. In existentialist works, physical infirmities frequently symbolize internal struggles; Ellison locates the tension of race relations in similar conditions: invisibility and blindness.
 The motif of invisibility manifests itself with the motif of blindness. The novel portrays blindness in a negative light. Invisibility can bring freedom and mobility. The positive program of existentialism calls for the individual to affirm his or her own worth and sense of meaning despite the absurdity of the universe. The narrator's realization of the world's absurdity prepares him to write his memoirs and eventually cast off his invisibility at the end of the novel.
Key words: Existentialism, invisibility, blindness, race, realization

Contact Information of Corresponding author:

Existentialism is defined as a *'philosophy that makes human life possible in a meaningless and absurd world'* (Panza and Gale, 2008: qtd in Mart, 2012). As Mart (2012) states in his article: *'It is the search of the condition of man and the state of being free'*. It is also a philosophical thought that deals with the conditions of existence of the individuals' emotions, responsibilities, and thoughts (Mart, 2012).

Existentialism becomes tools that Ellison employs to capture African-American particularity so that his work will express 'man's triumph over chaos (Cotkin, 2003). *'Ellison is attuned to the African-American tradition'* and he understood that human condition varies for every writer. Cotkin (2003) in his book states: 'Each must live within the isolation of his own senses, dreams and memories, and each must die his own death'. The celebration of freedom is a critical component in the work of Ralph Ellison. Ellison has spoken and written about the connection between existentialism and blues: '*There is an existential tradition within American Negro life and, of course that comes out of the blues'*, states Ellison (Geller, 1969). An existential emphasis on freedom helped to define Ellison's art and thought during 1930s. He was powerfully drawn to Malraux and the heroic ideal of existentialism. Ellison found in Malraux a dual hero, both as an actively creative writer and as an actor on the stage of history. He transformed the ideal of heroism into the stuff and everyday life (Cotkin, 2003).

Ellison was predisposed to existentialism because the African-American was confronted with situations that were alienating in America. In line with *'Ellisonian existentialism'*, we see that it gives precedence to the individual over the community and, resultantly, undermines group solidarity (Cotkin, 2003).

Existentialism produces good effect within the text of *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952). Early in the novel we can see foreshadowing of critical references to existentialism. The opening scenes of the underground man, living in his subterranean place echo one of the principal texts of the existentialism tradition, Dostoevsky's *The Underground Man* (Cotkin, 2003) What defines *Invisible Man* as an existentialist novel is how Ellison narrates his protagonist's life experiences at which point the narrator realizes that he must assert an identity. Thus, much of the problem of identity is about not being able to make choices in an existentialist sense, and then with the failure to perceive the heavy weight of responsibility that comes out of knowledge of limitations. The narrator is baffled and battered as if he were experiencing some other fate. When he derives some insight into the absurd nature of existence, both his own and that of others, the narrator is able to leave his den of hibernation.

The consequences of postwar developments in history, politics, economics, philosophy, religion and sociology are vividly reflected in American literature. Individual in mass society is focused on in many works of literature. American writers of the second half of the 20th century had to confront the problems of confusion of values, lack of individuality, solve conflicts between spirit and commerce, culture and society. Thus, the novels of

the 50s and afterwards constantly treat the topic of moral criticism in an indirect way. These novels receive their true subject; that is, the recurrent search for personal identity and freedom. In connection with developments in societal morality and radical outlook as regards long lasting challenges of American society, postwar existential novels rejected the concept of man's omnipotence. Postwar existentialist novels rejected the concept of man's omnipotence, his ability to understand the outer reality. The explosion of industry and technology in America, to a degree unsuspected before the wartime, was to generate the distinctive contemporary nature of the American city: it was no longer a stable group of individuals with shared values but a mass of people, passive and indifferent (Mazlaveckiene, 2010). Mazlaveckiene (2010) states in his article:

> *The postwar era is remembered by American literature of ethnic minorities, especially Afro-American, which depicts human beings in a rather different light from that of contemporaneous white writers. In this trend, Ellison occupies the central position in the development of black literature as well as of contemporary American writing.*

Ellison's character depiction includes many postwar existentialist elements, which are emphasis on a character's vulnerability, inauthenticity, loss of identity, and search for identity and struggle for visibility in mass society. '*Two major aspects could be considered while analyzing it in greater detail, namely the narrator's struggle for visibility and acknowledgement both as a human being and as an Afro-American*' (Mazlaveckiene, 2010).

Ellison drew attention to human condition in mass society, its vulnerability, and loss of identity and hypocrisy that was the natural outcome of constant fear of being rejected and oppressed by other people. For Ellison, race, color and wealth are minute and rather insignificant things, as compared to mental and physical health, spiritual maturity, personal freedom and identity as well as the ability to reason and express one's opinions in the technological America of the mid-20th century.

Invisible Man is the combination of 15 chapters, each of which treats a different aspect of the main theme. We hear and learn from the narrator's mind and outlook. His filter plays the role of omniscient narrator. Ellison seems to criticize the downsized scope of the happenings in the novel. His protagonist – an unnamed Afro-American youth, designated as 'the narrator' – is invisible in the eyes of the white American society; he is forced to seek his identity, struggle for visibility, and analyze himself throughout the whole novel only to find out that he has been constantly manipulated by other people, both white and black. As Irving Howe (1970) puts it, this novel is '*a soaring and exalted record of a black man's journey through contemporary America in search of success, companionship, and, finally, himself.*' Like most fiction of the second half of the 20th century, the novel is devoted to the idea of experience: thus, the protagonist moves from '*the province to city, and from faith to*

disenchantment' (Howe, 1970) in a rather feverish, even hysterical way. All these features – feverishness, hysteria, naivety, disenchantment, bitterness, incoherence – are typical issues in postwar existentialism. In the development of the protagonist's identity, Ellison raises a number of rather controversial dimensions of unfolding human existence, the first of which is the motif of invisibility.

2. The motif of invisibility

Because he has decided that the world is full of blind men and sleepwalkers who cannot see him for what he is, the narrator describes himself as an '*invisible man*'. The motif of invisibility pervades the novel, often manifesting itself hand in hand with the motif of blindness: one person becomes invisible because another is blind. While the novel often portrays blindness in a negative light, it treats invisibility much more ambiguously. Invisibility can bring disempowerment, but it can also bring freedom and mobility. Indeed, it is the freedom the narrator derives from his anonymity that enables him to tell his story. Moreover, both the veteran at the Golden Day and the narrator's grandfather seem to endorse invisibility as a position from which one may safely exert power over others, or at least undermine others' power, without being caught (Ellison, 2001)[1]. The narrator demonstrates this power in the Prologue, when he literally draws upon electrical power from his hiding place underground (6); the electric company is aware of its losses but cannot locate their source (7). At the end of the novel, however, the narrator has decided that while invisibility may bring safety, actions undertaken in secrecy cannot ultimately have any meaningful impact (579). One may undermine one's enemies from a position of invisibility, but one cannot make significant changes to the world. Accordingly, in the Epilogue the narrator decides to emerge from his hibernation, resolved to face society and make a visible difference (581).

The motif of invisibility treats a black man's situation in the United States. For a long time an Afro-American's individuality was ignored by the society, and the narrator in *Invisible Man* faces the same problem. For centuries blacks were oppressed by the whites and treated as inferior creatures, a cheap workforce, and 'a *flock of invisible people'* (Juozapaitytė, 2001). Afro-Americans were considered as people of lower social and intellectual status: they were not allowed the same possibilities as the white people, like receiving education, participating in public events, even deciding upon their future. They were simply deprived of their individuality (Juozapaitytė, 2001).

The motif of invisibility is developed throughout the whole novel. Ellison emphasizes that the narrator understands his state of being invisible (8). His controversial conditions make him completely at a loss and more vulnerable to exterior impositions. The narrator's invisibility is contrasted to his

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[1] Ellison, R. (2001). *Invisible Man*. Penguin Classics, Clys Ltd. England. All subsequent citations will be given to this edition in the text of this essay.

surroundings. Ellison at this point implies that if a man is invisible, it is possible that his surroundings are invisible, too. Through the description of the school and nature, the narrator's inner state is also revealed: he feels broken, 'dry' and dead (16). Ellison describes people as lost souls, having no self-respect, or unable to achieve self-realization. They are mere playthings, creatures that are invisible, forgotten by all the world and people. They have suffered extreme degradation − both moral and psychological, like the vet in Chapter 3 (93).

Invisible Man is the story of a human being's degradation, which is caused by consumer society; in clear terms, man who is willing to become somebody and is merely stamped and destroyed by the huge machine called society. The vet is a symbol of a person striving for freedom, self-realization and self-dignity. He realizes man's invisibility; in this case the narrator's lies in the society and imposed rules. Therefore, the vet addresses the narrator as a 'walking zombie', 'a black amorphous thing', 'a walking personification of the Negative', 'the mechanical man', who 'has eyes and ears', but 'fails to understand the simple facts of life' (93). He is rejected and 'unseen' by the society both as an Afro-American and an individual.

The narrator is seen as a part of a machine and is expected to behave in a way that is required from him by the society. The social codes dictate him how to live as in the case of Mr. Norton, the self-centered trustee imposing his authority on the narrator, and of Dr. Bledsoe, the black headmaster of the school for Afro-American youth who constantly flatters the white trustees and exploits the students to retain his position (105). In the further chapters of the novel the motif of invisibility is taken to such heights that even the Brotherhood, the party the protagonist joins in New York also takes advantage of its members merely to satisfy the needs of the party authorities. In all these codes the narrator remains submissive, unable to express his feelings. Yet, he blames everyone but himself for his bad luck (Mazlaveckiene, 2010).

2.1. The benefits of invisibility

Ellison treats the advantages and disadvantages of invisibility. By making himself a prominent figure in his contribution to the Brotherhood's fight for social equality, the narrator may have gained power for his movement, but he also puts himself in jeopardy. In contrast, the letter writer gains power over the narrator by remaining invisible. Later in the chapter, the narrator again learns the dangers of visibility when Wrestrum accuses him of opportunism regarding the magazine interview—he objects to the narrator's high profile and public image (495).

The narrator uses his invisibility to his advantage; he can exert a force on the world without being seen or suffering the consequences. He speaks to us through his written text without revealing his name, shrouding himself in another form of invisibility in order to gain the freedom to speak freely. We find ourselves confronted by a disembodied voice rising from underground, the voice of one whose identity or origin remains a secret. Invisibility affords the narrator the opportunity to steal electricity from the power company. By

illegally draining their resources—both electrical and otherwise—he forces the company to acknowledge his existence yet preempts any response from them, including any racist response. By remaining metaphorically and literally invisible to them, he announces himself as a presence but nonetheless escapes the company's control.

The element of deception and illusion reintroduces Ellison's motif of invisibility and blindness. For example, Norton exerts his power invisibly, without appearing to be a controlling force; indeed, his power allows him to become intimately involved in the lives of thousands of students who have never seen him. There is a chilling undertone to his remark to the narrator that *'Young man, you are part of a wonderful institution. It's a great dream [that] become[s] reality'* (38). The narrator is reminded of the paradox of invisibility:

> *'You're hidden right out in the open – that is, you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything'* (151).

From this recognition, there follows an opportunity and possibility to make use of one's invisibility, whose acknowledgment helps to change one's faces and manipulate other people. The narrator's grandfather warns him: '*Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it'* (151). However, at this point of the narrative, the narrator has hardly reached the stage of development where the recognition of invisibility and the opportunities it offers are possible. Towards the end of the novel he comes to appreciate the benefits of his invisibility like a protean man. He changes his roles and shapes in accordance with the situation and the society's demands, resulting in his disability to *'give coherence to his world'* (Tanner, 1971).

3. The motif of blindness

Blindness is the most critical and dominant motif in *Invisible Man,* which recurs throughout the novel and generally, represents how people willfully avoid seeing and confronting the truth. The narrator discovers people's inability to see what they wish not to see—their inability to see the one which their prejudice doesn't allow them to see—has forced him into a life of effective invisibility: *'He will do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny'* (95). However, prejudice against others is not the only kind of blindness in the novel. Many figures refuse to acknowledge truths about themselves or their communities, and this refusal appears in the motif of blindness. For instance, the boys who fight in the *'battle royal'* wear blindfolds, symbolizing their powerlessness to recognize their exploitation at the hands of the white men. The Founder's statue at the college has empty eyes, signifying his ideology's stubborn neglect of racist realities (102). Blindness also afflicts Reverend Homer A. Barbee,

who romanticizes the Founder, and Brother Jack, who is revealed to lack an eye—a lack that he has dissimulated by wearing a glass eye. The narrator himself experiences moments of blindness, such as in Chapter 16 when he addresses the black community under enormous blinding lights (346). In each case, failure of sight corresponds to a lack of insight (Mazlaveckiene, 2010)

The narrator struggling in postwar existentialism adopts a set of masks and faces to survive in a white-dominated society. The narrator cultivates various norms existing in the society hiding behind the blindness of ethnic traditions, etiquette and tastes. Therefore, the faces he puts on at the same time can serve as a means both to reveal the soul and to hide it. Various characters of Ellison's novel and their behavior illustrate the motif of blindness. For instance, Dr. Bledsoe pretends to be an authority to the students and a servant to the whites in order to keep his position as the school headmaster (104); Mr. Norton, by pressing on black people and thrusting his authority on them, tries to attain recognition in the white part of the society; the members of the Brotherhood, joined by the protagonist in the second half of the novel, also appear to be hypocrites in order to retain their authority and power. The narrator becomes aware of hypocrisy and starts wearing a mask himself, which helps him to see the reality behind the mask. Towards the end of the novel he changes his clothes and pretends to be another person, wandering along New York streets without being recognized. The narrator starts questioning human identity: *'If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out my identity so quickly, who actually was who'* (485)? This shows that there is always a possibility which can lead to liberation of the self: *'You could actually make yourself anew'* (491). As Mazleveckiene (2010) puts forth through this kind of epiphany, the narrator learns that it is possible to manipulate the environment to his own advantage.

Ellison injects in the novel the narrator's awareness that the world is a game. The narrator feels that he has to accept the game; however, he is unable to understand the rules. *'We the machines inside the machine',* says Lucius Brockway (217).

The loss of identity and the vision of invisibility are deeply underlined in the hospital scene. The narrator can't even remember his name, or his family's. He is ruled by and dependent on the doctors' mercy. After being released from hospital, the narrator feels himself quite in a different way: *'I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged within me'* (244). He is no longer afraid; he accepts things as they are. He has undergone some change in his personality; so, he has become indifferent and cold like most people of the mid-twentieth century as it is emphasized in the philosophy of human existence. He is no longer worried about his identity; he accepts the role of a society's plaything and is satisfied with it. At the same time he suffers the split of personality: *'My mind and I – were no longer getting around in the same circles. Nor my body either'* (245), which means that he is still at a loss, unable or too weak to understand what has happened to him. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator undergoes a positive development via critical self-understanding, and this carries him further from a group identity towards a personal one. That is

why he decides to arrange a public funeral for Clifton despite common resistance from the party (450).

The narrator has gone through a comprehensive transformation throughout the novel. When the novel draws end he sounds to be a fully changed man, who is less engaged in social maters, but more philosophical as the result of radical realization in his outlook. He has reached the realization that he could better place himself in the ways of the world through the sufferings in misfortunes. Ellison still repeats the aforementioned motifs like alienation, invisibility, blindness but in a different angle. Now we can assert that the narrator is more mature and capable of realizing what has happened to him. He says; *'I'm invisible, not blind'* (567). So he now can see that he has been humiliated and abused in the existentialist modern world. So far he has been manipulated both in his ways and identity, but now he can comprehend what he is really to be.

Such a profound transformation does not entail the happiness longed for. Further, this results in unhappiness, sense of futility and exploitation. It is not easy for him to delete his past, as it is the past that makes the present (309). The narrator cannot get rid of illusions, because he refuses to accept his past, his heritage, and refuses to ask himself, *'who am I and what do I want'* (310)? In all the interactions he is exposed to disillusionment, horror and treachery by almost all people he meets. However, the protagonist searches for a solution. He understands that individual's identity is a result of everyday activity and his continuous self-creation. His decision that white is not a color 'but the lack of one' (567) suggests that he has freed himself from the dependency upon the whites. Dissatisfied with his invisibility both as an individual and as an Afro-American and admitting his responsibility for it, the narrator decides that he should go in search of his true self (576).

In the process of the ultimate decision he moves from the realization that a person's color should define the character to be evaluated in society. In other words, the white men can be extremely 'black' inside, while the black men can be pure. The individual attempts to resist the suppressing power of the mid-century's civilization, denies the roles imposed on him by society and seeks to create a visible life. These are the main aspects of Ellison's understanding of the human both as an individual and as an Afro-American, which places the writer in the tradition of modern existential thought.

4. Conclusion

Ellison depicts the narrator as searching for their freedom, individuality and authenticity in the postwar existentialist society. The novel depicts the struggle for self-realization of a young black man's awakening to racial discrimination. In the course of the process he has to bear the consequences like humiliation and disillusionment as the major problems encountered in postwar existentialism.

The motifs of invisibility and blindness serve several factors. To begin with, the predominant white society ignores the individuality and humanity of the blacks and views them as stereotypes of slaves. As a result of this approach, the blacks are exploited and their needs are disregarded rendering them down to invisibility in a 'blind' society. Secondly, the narrator himself is white-oriented and feels inferior and ashamed of his dark skin color. He is a part of the crowd of people who comply with the rules and customs prescribed by white society. The narrator shapes his life according to other people's life models, imitates them and refuses to question his own choices and preferences. Therefore, he ignores his own responsibility in his own development and acknowledgement as a visible man. In an existential reality, as Ellison maintains, a person can become a genuine and visible personality if he resists the oppressing power of dominating civilization.

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