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Ellison's *Invisible Man*:
A Journey from Invisibility to Self-Enlightenment.

*An Extended Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for a Master's Degree
in Literature and Civilisation*

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Dedications

This extended essay is dedicated to my beloved mother and younger brother, who have supported and inspired me throughout this journey. Thank you for being my greatest motivation.

I also want to dedicate this extended essay to my precious friend Mouloud for his motivation and endless sense of humour.

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Abstract

This research work examines the profound narrative of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a journey from invisibility to self-enlightenment, shedding light on African Americans' identity struggle and their quest for recognition through Ellison's protagonist. Ralph Ellison's seminal work captures the journey of a nameless African American hero who seems lost in a society plagued by oppression and racial discrimination. This extended essay analyses the protagonist's physical and psychological transformation at the hands of his racist society by employing two theories: Critical Race Theory, which focuses on the protagonist's relationship with his society, and psychoanalytic criticism, which delves into the protagonist's psychological transformation. This extended essay also seeks to describe the protagonist's transformation trajectory from his metaphorical invisibility and blindness to maturation and self-enlightenment through a harsh and painful journey that made him reconsider his perspective on his society and the people around him. By the end, the protagonist's profound metamorphosis by the story's conclusion is proof of the transformative nature of his experiences. This analysis uncovers the difficulties of his success, illustrating that while he gains a significant degree of self-awareness and enlightenment, his journey reveals the challenges he faces along his quest for identity and recognition in a racially divided society. Not only did he manage to embrace his invisibility, but he also transformed his perspective towards his people and society.

Key Words: Invisibility, Self-Enlightenment, Racism, Oppression, Blindness, Identity.

Abstract in French

Ce travail de recherche examine le récit profond *d'Invisible Man* de Ralph Ellison, un voyage de l'invisibilité à l'éveil de soi, mettant en lumière la lutte identitaire des Afro-Américains et leur quête de reconnaissance à travers le protagoniste d'Ellison. L'œuvre phare de Ralph Ellison retrace le parcours d'un héros afro-américain anonyme qui semble perdu dans une société en proie à l'oppression et à la discrimination raciale. Cet essai approfondi analyse la transformation physique et psychologique du protagoniste aux mains de sa société raciste, en employant deux théories : la théorie critique de la race, qui se concentre sur la relation du protagoniste avec sa société, et la critique psychanalytique, qui approfondit la transformation psychologique du protagoniste. Cet essai approfondi cherche également à décrire la trajectoire de transformation du protagoniste, depuis son invisibilité et sa cécité métaphoriques jusqu'à la maturation et l'éveil de soi à travers un voyage dur et douloureux qui l'a amené à reconsidérer sa perspective sur sa société et les gens qui l'entourent. À la fin, la profonde métamorphose du protagoniste jusqu'à la conclusion de l'histoire est la preuve de la nature transformatrice de ses expériences. Cette analyse révèle les difficultés de sa réussite, illustrant que même s'il acquiert un degré significatif de conscience de soi et d'illumination, son parcours révèle les défis auxquels il est confronté tout au long de sa quête d'identité et de reconnaissance dans une société racialement divisée. Non seulement il a réussi à accepter son invisibilité, mais il a également transformé sa perspective envers son peuple et sa société.

Mots clés : Invisibilité, Éveil de soi, Racisme, Oppression, Cécité, Identité.

Abstract in Arabic

يتناول هذا العمل البحثي السرد العميق لرواية *Invisible Man* لـ رالف أليسون، وهي رحلة من الاختفاء إلى التنوير الذاتي، وتسليط الضوء على صراع الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي من أجل الهوية وسعيهم للحصول على الاعتراف من خلال بطل رواية أليسون. يصور عمل رالف أليسون الأساسي رحلة بطل أمريكي من أصل أفريقي مجهول يبدو ضائعاً في مجتمع يعاني من القمع والتمييز العنصري. تحلل هذه المقالة الموسعة التحول الجسدي والنفسي لبطل الرواية على يد مجتمعه العنصري، مستخدمة نظريتين: نظرية العرق النقدي، التي تركز على علاقة البطل بمجتمعه، والنقد التحليلي النفسي، الذي يتعمق في التحول النفسي للبطل. يسعى هذا المقال الموسع أيضاً إلى وصف مسار تحول بطل الرواية من الخفاء المجازي والعمى إلى النضج والتنوير الذاتي من خلال رحلة قاسية ومؤلمة جعلته يعيد النظر في وجهة نظره تجاه مجتمعه والناس من حوله. وفي النهاية، فإن التحول العميق لبطل الرواية من خلال خاتمة القصة هو دليل على الطبيعة التحويلية لتجاربه. يكشف هذا التحليل عن الصعوبات التي تعترض نجاحه، موضحاً أنه بينما يكتسب درجة كبيرة من الوعي الذاتي والتنوير، فإن رحلته تكشف التحديات التي يواجهها في سعيه للحصول على الهوية والاعتراف في مجتمع منقسم عنصرياً. فهو لم يتمكن من احتضان اختفائه فحسب، بل غير أيضاً وجهة نظره تجاه شعبه ومجتمعه أيضاً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاختفاء، التنوير الذاتي، العنصرية، القمع، العمى، الهوية.

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General Introduction

Racism in the American society is considered a deep-rooted issue that has existed since the discovery of the New World. This issue has been a severe problem throughout the nation's history and has penetrated social, political, economic, and even religious spheres. Historically speaking, the minority most exposed to racism in America is African American people; this was after years of practising slavery and the denial of their human rights. However, in the twentieth century, after the Great Migration movement, racism spread dramatically, which led to a repetition of the same scenario: the suffering at the hands of white people. Therefore, due to these mistreatments faced for centuries, African Americans decided to raise their voice and call out for their human rights through what is known as "African American Literature". African American authors focused their writings on racism and discrimination; many writers arose as a result of their contribution to the cause of race.

The writer Ralph Ellison is best known for showcasing the topic of racism and the suffering of his people in finding their identity in the face of white dominance through his masterpiece *Invisible Man*. His first literary works were short stories like "Flying Home" and "King of the Bingo Game" which were released in the year 1944. These two works marked the beginning of his literary career, which enabled him to pursue literature, which motivated him to write *Invisible Man*, that took him seven years to finish. The writing of the novel *Invisible Man* comes from a wide range of personal experiences and imagination to create a remarkable fictional piece of literature.

I am highly motivated to work on Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ever since I started reading English literature, I have been drawn to historical fiction that portrays social realities, which is why I was inspired to tackle this novel in the first place. Through this extended essay, I aim to shed light on the true nature of American society and bring attention to the fact that racism is

deeply rooted in American culture. It has been a pervasive issue for centuries and continues to persist today. I want to emphasise that people should not be misled by the portrayal of the United States as solely a place where dreams come true, as there are hidden facts about how the US treats its citizens. These hidden facts include systemic inequalities, social injustices, and economic disparities. Similar to the novel, although it was set in the 1930s, these societal issues still persist today. One important example is George Floyd's lynching in May 2020, which started the Black Lives Matter campaign. This can be compared to a similar event in the novel, the lynching of Tod Clifton, which led to a riot in the streets of Harlem. These events show that racism remains a persistent issue, and the conflict between races is unavoidable.

The novel's story addresses how it is so hard to be perceived as a human being, especially if the person is coloured and not white. Ellison was able to describe his nameless protagonist as an invisible man due to the denial of his society as an individual; therefore, his society is blinded by racial prejudice and racist beliefs. *Invisible Man* is set against the backdrop of early to mid-twentieth-century America. The novel incorporates many symbols and themes that enrich the narration and reflect social realities in the U.S. During the fourteenth and the fifteens of the twentieth century, such as invisibility, blindness, racism, and many other symbols that enrich the narration.

The novel also includes important historical events, like the Great Migration and the Civil Right Movement, in its narration. During the protagonist's quest for self-enlightenment, Ellison sheds light on the theme of invisibility, which torments marginalised individuals throughout the whole story in a society that makes the nameless hero grapple with questions of identity and the quest for recognition.

This extended essay is concerned with a comprehensive analysis of *Invisible Man*. First, the historical background is emphasized to provide solid background information about the context and the time zone in which the novel was set. Secondly, the essay explores the novel's characters, events, and important themes that shape the story. The main concern is the theme of invisibility, blindness, and the psychological impact on the protagonist. Each element offers the reader a deep analysis of the protagonist's struggle before his self-realisation and awareness. Lastly, this extended essay analyses the protagonist's final quest for self-enlightenment and how the experiences he encounters along his journey change his perspective on his society and the people he once idolized. Therefore, at the end of this essay, the reader will understand the protagonist's journey for identity formation, from a naïve, inexperienced young man to a mature and aware individual at the climax of the narration. *Invisible Man* is not just a story to be read but a story that confronts uncomfortable truths about American society and the ongoing legacy of racial prejudice.

According to these examinations, two research questions have been drafted to study the current research work:

1. To what extent does the concept of invisibility impact the protagonist's journey throughout the novel *Invisible Man*?
2. In what way did the antagonistic figures contribute to shaping the protagonist's awareness and self-enlightenment during his journey?

In order to answer these research questions, each question suggests a hypothesis for a better understanding of the analysis. The hypotheses are as follows:

1. It is hypothesised that invisibility is a central theme in the story; due to narrator's experiences along his journey, he can draw a solid understanding of his oppressive society, which fails to acknowledge him as an individual. Therefore, through his invisibility, the unnamed narrator learns to embrace it and use it to his advantage, and this ability ultimately leads him to achieve his desire to form an identity.

2. It is likely that some central characters in the novel contribute to shaping the protagonist's understanding of his awareness and self-enlightenment. Through the experiences gained from these characters, he was able to transform his state of invisibility into a state of maturity and enlightenment.

The material used to study Ellison's *Invisible Man* a Journey from Invisibility to Self-Enlightenment is classified into primary source, which is the novel itself, and secondary sources, which are websites, journals, books, theses, essays, poems, and articles. The research approach used in this extended essay is qualitative and is based on two theories: Critical race theory and psychoanalytic literary criticism. The reason behind using these theories is to understand and analyse the novel using different and diverse comprehensions to provide a solid understanding of themes, symbols, and even the characters in the novel.

This research is separated into three chapters. The first chapter is composed of two parts. The first is the historical context, which deals with several historical events that shaped the future of African Americans. The second part is a literature review examining Ellison's *Invisible Man*, specifically the themes of invisibility and self-enlightenment. Chapter Two analyses significant themes such as blindness, alienation, isolation, and invisibility. It aims to showcase the oppression and suffering faced by the protagonist at the hands of his society; it also highlights

how the protagonist embraced his invisibility to find his lost identity. The last Chapter is about the protagonist's final journey, which will enable him to challenge and overcome all racial obstacles set by his society members. It also aims to prove the determination and sacrifices made by the unnamed narrator to prove his maturation and awareness.

This extended essay was conducted using MLA 7th edition. In this extended essay, terms such as black people and black individuals are used to describe African Americans' experiences and struggles in the novel. It is important to underscore that these terms are utilised solely within the context of scholarly discourse and literary analysis. Their usage does not, in any manner, intend to perpetuate or endorse racist ideologies or discriminatory attitudes. Instead, they are used to explain the novel's underlying themes and socio-cultural aspects.

Chapter One: Backgrounds and Literature Review

I. 1. Introduction

The African American people went through four centuries of struggles and hardships, which led them into a continuous struggle with the white people. They had to fight hard to reclaim their social and political rights. Today's America was built at the expense of black people; it was based on oppression, racism, and discrimination. In light of this concern, this chapter is divided into three parts the first one delves into the historical background of how the novel is read and written. Starting from the triggering event, which is Slavery that witnesses the unjust treatment of the African Americans experienced for centuries. This latter contribute significantly to one of the bloodiest battles in America's history, the Civil War. Also, this chapter studies another significant event, "The Great Migration", which paved the way to social, literary, and economic success. Later, the Civil Rights Movement and its efforts to shape African Americans' future and to bring their rights against white domination are discussed. The second part examines the theoretical framework, focusing on multiple literary theories, including "Critical Race Theory" and "Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism". Each theory tackles the novel *Invisible Man* from different perspectives and unique points of view. Finally, the last part of this chapter will review the literature of what other researchers have done on the *Invisible Man*, specifically on the themes of invisibility and Self-Enlightenment.

I. 2. Historical Background

Many researchers took it upon themselves to study the crucial subject of racism in the United States that demolishes the significance of humanity. Therefore, many strategies have been conducted to study this phenomenon and its effects on minorities, specifically in the U.S., in this case, African American minority. One example that illustrates what it means by a continuous

struggle for freedom and how the African American people were exploited since the 17th century is through the U.S Census Bureau between 1790 to 1920:

For example, from 1790 to 1810, the Census Bureau designated the following populations as different races: (1) free whites, (2) all other free persons except Indians not taxed, and (3) slaves. From 1820 to 1840 racial categories were as follows: (1) free whites, (2) unnaturalized foreigners (foreigners who were not U.S. citizens), (3) free colored, and (4) slaves. In 1850 and 1860 we had (1) whites, (2) blacks, (3) mulattos (half-white, half-black), (4) mulatto slaves, and (5) black slaves. From 1870 to 1920 we had (1) whites, (2) blacks, (3) mulattos.... (Tyson 397)

The novel *Invisible Man* is not just a novel about one individual but a depiction of the broader historical context of African Americans in the 20th century. The following introduction will analyse the novel through the lenses of three key historical courses: Slavery, The Great Migration, and the Civil Rights Movement Era. Examining these periods gives us richer insights through the protagonist's navigation in his society. The protagonist's desire for a stable identity is connected to his slavery past, which caused him a sense of displacement and the great migration which paved the way to his journey in Harlem in creating his own identity. By connecting the invisible man in this historical background, we can understand how Ellison captures the multifaceted nature of black life in a nation still struggling with its racial legacy.

I. 2. 1. Slavery

The term slavery can be defined as the act of possessing and controlling an individual without his consent; the master will be able to control a slave's life, where he lives, and what he

works. Slavery also can be a form of exploitation, which means enslaving a person he or she regarded as an outsider or a foreigner. Oxford Dictionary of 2011 describes slavery as “a person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them” (Oxford Dictionary). The practice of slavery was an outdated act in human history; it happened many years ago. Schiel and Pargas, the editors of the book *Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery Throughout History*, set a timeline of slavery as follows: in ancient Egypt, slavery was recorded around 2181-2025 BCE (44). In ancient Greece, slavery started around 800-700 BCE (68). The Roman Empire adopted slavery between the third century BCE and the fifth CE (88). However, slavery did not stop there; it continued from ancient times till modern times in the 17th century, specifically in America in 1619 until it was officially abolished in 1865. Orlando Patterson stated:

There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery. It has existed from before the dawn of human History right down to the twentieth century, in the most primitive of human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harboured the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slave holders. Slavery was firmly established in all the great early centres of human civilization (Perbi 1).

Patterson comments that slavery and the slave trade were ancient practices and have being in almost every continent in different timelines around the globe.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, slavery was at its peak in America; millions of Africans were transported from their homeland unwillingly and forcibly. This was a pure crime against humanity, but for white people, it was called the “Transatlantic Slave Trade”, and it

meant gaining money because enslaved people were considered cheap labour. The vast plantations in the South of America required much effort and human power; these plantations were mainly tobacco crops, cotton, and tea. By 1793, the cotton gin was invented, and it became increasingly demanding in Europe because South America was rich with cotton plantations ready to plant and harvest; therefore, the use of enslaved people increased and became the foundation of their economy (Barbar 06). From 1619 till the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, about 12 million Africans were forcibly transported from their homeland to America (06), with hundreds killed, drowned, or died of hunger and thirst during their journey at sea, which was known as the “Middle Passage”.

When the slave-holders saw an unprecedented income because of the slave trade, Southern states sought to legitimize slavery and enact laws that defined enslaved people as properties, therefore restricting their rights. A few months later, Virginia was the first state to pass the slave code in 1705, putting harsh penalties on anyone who violated these laws (General Assembly). From 1619, enslaved Africans endured years of harsh treatment, witnessing killing, raping and exploitation, so they decided to revolt against their enslavers and call out for their rights as human beings. Therefore, in the late eighteenth century, the anti-slavery movement launched in the North, giving enslaved people hope to earn their freedom. However, the Southern part of America did not support this movement and sought to end it as soon as possible because their economy depended heavily on slavery. It was this conflict between the South and the North that gave birth to one of the bloodiest wars in America’s history, the Civil War in 1861-1865.

After years of dispute and risking their lives, enslaved people, white abolitionists, and more people supporting the anti-slave movement joined their forces and fought for equality and

justice. The runaway tactics were among the best in the anti-slave period. During their time in the South, enslaved people took a dangerous journey on foot from the South to the North. They used to take a passage known as the “Underground Railroad”. In the 1830s, with the increase in the number of these runways, secret routes and safe houses were established to facilitate enslaved people’s escape from their masters. Harriet Tubman was probably the most courageous and famous woman who helped facilitate these runways and led many lives for freedom before becoming a national legend (Coombs 42).

After years of fighting against slavery using various methods in the late 1700s, people understood that slavery is an evil act, and since Europeans were mainly Christian, they thought that it was a crime in Christian beliefs. While some admitted that slavery was against the humanity, and in 1860, public opinion rose against slavery, which led years later to the Civil War. During the war, America was split into states; the main conflict was against North and the slave owners in the South. The primary purpose behind this division was slavery and mostly economic issues. Since the South depended heavily on enslaved people to grow and harvest their plantations, which consisted of gin, cotton, and tobacco, the idea of giving slaves their freedom was far from it. However, the North was taking the lead in this war, and it seemed that slavery had reached its end, especially since President Lincoln was opposed to slavery.

After four years of war, historians of the Civil War frequently cite the commonly accepted total of 620,000 dead as a defining reality of the conflict (Faust 32). On January 1st, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Abraham Lincoln, which gives freedom to millions of enslaved African Americans. Although slaves were free and slavery officially abolished, it did not eliminate the ideas and beliefs of prejudice and race that were deeply rooted. By the end of the Civil War, African American people sought to integrate into society, which was

known as “Reconstruction”. However, this movement was met with heavy resistance from the white supremacists who sought to maintain their domination over other races. These conflicts led to enacting racist laws such as Jim Crow, which increased segregation in society, leading to another African American endeavour, which is the “Civil Right Movement”.

I. 2.2. The Great Migration

African American people during their time in slavery suffered greatly; they had no rights, and the simplest things were forbidden. Men were put to hard work from sunrise to sunset with absolutely no rest, while women were considered as sexual property. They experienced rape, sexual abuse and harassment as children; they were beaten and sold like cattle. After years of suffering and other economic purposes, they started their journey for freedom by escaping the segregated South to the industrial North of the United States, hoping for a better life and more economic opportunities, and what later became known as the Great Migration. The Great Migration refers to a massive movement of African American people from the agricultural side of the Southern states to the industrial cities of the North.

It took 54 years, from 1916 to 1970, and it is estimated that about six million black Southerners relocated to the North of the US (Britannica). This massive number of people brought with it radical changes; it reached the social and cultural landscape of the US. The main purposes behind such a mass movement were economic opportunities, racial segregation, and violence that were prevalent in the South, and, of course, a quest for a better life. In the segregated South of the US, there were certain laws known as slave codes established by the whites to oppress coloured people and to prompt absolute control over them. Under these laws, black people were treated as property to be brought and sold, and their human beings’ rights were ignored. Carter G. Woodson states, “We should also develop a literature. Negroes should read

some things written by their own people that they may be inspired thereby.... In this literature, you will get the inspiration you need to be like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, S. Coleridge-Taylor, or Paul Laurence Dunbar” (qtd. in Columbus 69).

Slaves had no right to read and write to avoid intellectualism, to speak for their rights and to compete against the whites in politics, education, and even religion. Individual resistance was taken into consideration; mothers started to kill their own infants to spare them the humiliation of slavery, and men who revolted against the segregated system were brutally punished for leaving a message for other revolters. By taking such a bold step toward freedom and liberty, African American people would be able to assert their agency and find a better life away from the oppression in the South.

During their time in the North, they would have to adapt to the fast pace of urban life, and most importantly, they would have to assert their identities in a society that often marginalized and neglected them. However, such migration comes with a price. Although the North meant freedom, African Americans encountered various forms of racism and discrimination. For instance, their first obstacle faced was housing discrimination because most landowners were white, which meant African Americans either paid twice or redlined simply because of their skin colour (Sugrue and Leuthart 13).

Another form of discrimination was job segregation; although African Americans hoped for better jobs in the North, it did not make much difference between job conditions in the South and the North. They had very low pay, no insurance, and low jobs with limited opportunities for advancement (12). Despite all of these difficulties and hardships, African Americans responded against racial discrimination and prejudice by establishing foundations and movements, for

example, Civil Rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Also, they formed labour unions and even social clubs to fight against discrimination and advocate for their rights. After the Great Migration, African Americans developed a huge wave of intellectuals, artists, and talented literary figures, marking a pivotal moment in the history of African American literature, music, arts, social thoughts, and visual arts, which led to the birth of what later become known as the Harlem Renaissance. This fight for freedom and equality served as a means of empowerment and resistance, challenging the existing stereotypes and establishing their rich and diverse African American culture (Tolnay 210).

I. 2. 3. Civil Right Movement Era

After years of suffering from slavery in the South of the United States, African American people decided to migrate to the North, fleeing their miserable lives as slaves. This migration encouraged African Americans to have hope for freedom, which paved the way for the rise of the “Civil Rights Movement”. Historically speaking, it is believed that the “Civil Rights Movement” started after Rosa Parks's incident in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, when she refused to give up her seat and moved to the back of the bus. Through this unprecedented movement, African Americans started to see freedom, opportunities, and, above all, an equal society after the horror of slavery they witnessed, which lasted from 1526 to 1867 (Oxford Reference).

African Americans had had enough of the racist regime in the United States, launching widespread political movements which sought to fight against any kind of segregated or discriminatory act. During the 1960s, African Americans took various approaches in the fight for equal rights. One prominent example is the nonviolent strategies of Martin Luther King, who headed the Southern Christian Leadership conference in 1957. Another organization known as

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded in 1909 by multiple people, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Mary White Ovington and more. Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party, also known for their aggressive methods, were founded in 1966 (Coombs 50). Although these organizations differ in their methods, they aim to bring justice to their people and claim their social equality.

During the time of these organizations, segregation laws like Jim Crow, *Plessy v. Ferguson* both in 1896 and *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 were prevalently reinforced by the U.S legal constitution and established to separate people of colour. So, by the 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People took the initiative and decided to launch a full attack on segregation. This organisation's most important victory was against the *Brown v. Board of Education* doctrine in 1954. The first step to achieving success and challenging segregation laws would be education, so the NAACP focused primarily on segregated schools. Due to the efforts of the NAACP, the Supreme Court reversed the Plessy decision, which ended school segregation. George Burson draws a comprehension of segregation in schools. He states, “Although blacks comprised over 50 per cent of the school-age population, in the 1960-61 school year, the state spent \$46 million on white education versus \$26 million for black education”(36).

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, headed by Martin Luther King, focused their attention on voting, so they began to work actively to gain voting rights and access public facilities in the South. At the start of December 1955, under the guidance of Martin Luther King, he successfully boycotted the Montgomery, Alabama, segregated bus system (Burson 39). Martin Luther King would later lead multiple attacks on segregation, and the most famous one was Selma March 1965, or what is known as Bloody Sunday. It started from Selma, Alabama, to the

state's capital, Montgomery; roughly 25.000 people participated in the 80km march (Wallenfeldt). Unfortunately, the march was stopped by the police using force and violence; Wallenfeldt describes the scene of the attack against the demonstrators as follows: "In the tear-gas-shrouded melee that followed, marchers were spat upon, overrun by horses, and attacked with billy clubs and bullwhips. More than 50 marchers were hospitalized" (Britannica). After this scandalous incident, which was broadcasted in almost all of America and probably all around the world, things started to change for the African American people through the efforts of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and many efforts by other organization the Voting Right act in 1965 was officially assigned by President Lyndon B, but this does not mean the end of racism because unfortunately, African Americans during the twentieth century are still experiencing racism.

I. 3. Theoretical Background

In the theoretical background section, we will analyse the novel using two main frameworks: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism. CRT focuses on the systemic racism that formed the protagonist's reality, while Psychoanalysis sheds light on the psychological impact of invisibility and its consequences on the protagonist's journey. By employing these theories, we can gain a deep understanding of how societal racism and internal struggles intersect to define the character of the *Invisible Man*.

I. 3.1. Literary Theory

"Critics use literary theories as different lenses to study literature; these lenses allow them to study works of art based on certain conventions, and those conventions come from theories which adopt particular aspects of an important work" (Ouali 18). Literary theory's main objective is to

highlight the nature of literature and its context, whether about society, language or culture. It connects the writer and his work to better understand a piece of literature, allowing writers, readers, and scholars to dive into its deeper meaning and connotations.

I. 3. 2. Critical Race Theory

By the end of the Civil Rights Movement that lasted from 1954 to 1968, many white Americans believed that racism was over, a dilemma that was solved and now the subject of race is a thing of the past. So now, why is it necessary to study race, specifically Critical Race Theory? Among African American people and other minority groups, racism is not over yet, and it did not end as the white people claim. On the contrary, it went underground, which means racial injustice is practised to this very day; however, it is practised in secret by the U.S. legal institutions and the laws of the U.S. Constitution. Critical Race is an intellectual and social movement that originated in the United States of America, dealing with issues related to race and racism. It was a response to the inequality and the oppression faced by minorities, especially the African American people; it was a long struggle for social equality for coloured people to gain justice from the United States laws.

Professor Derrick Bell from Harvard Law University and Alan David Freeman from the University of Buffalo Law School are considered pioneers of this theory. Both laid the foundation of CRT through their works, like Bell's prominent work entitled "Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation," 1967. Freeman's most famous work is "Legitimizing Racial Discrimination through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine" 1978 (Simba Critical Race Theory). Race theorists claim that racist humans drive social inequality; this, however, will lead to an imbalance between people. They explain this through their prominent works, which gave them a solid constitutional

position. A brief overview of what they published as their articles' titles support their claims about CRT:

Lewis Steel, "Nine Men in Black Who Think White" (1968); Derrick Bell, "Property Rights in Whiteness: Their Legacy, Their Economic Costs"(1988); Sheri Lynn Johnson, "Black Innocence and the White Jury" (1988); Kimberle' Crenshaw, "A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Law and Politics"(1989); Karl E. Klare, "Critical Theory and Labor Relations Law" (1981); and Jane B. Baron and Julia Epstein, "Language and the Law: Literature, Narrative, and Legal Theory" (1997). (Simba CRT)

Critical Race Theory argues "that the concept of race is not a biological component of a human being. Still, it is a socially constructed and culturally invented category to exploit people of colour" (Britannica). This theory challenges racial inequalities to individual prejudice or biases. Critical Race Theory asserted that racism is inherited in the laws of the US in order to give the full power to the whites in political, social and economic spheres, which led to a void between whites and non-whites, in this case, the African American people. This latter can create a passage to poverty and criminality among minority groups, especially the African American people. Critical Race Theory states that U.S. laws and policies are prejudiced against people of colour. They have centred their scholarship on how legal institutions support that bias. "It takes only five grams of crack cocaine (used predominantly by black Americans) to trigger a five-year mandatory prison sentence. However, it takes five hundred grams of powder cocaine (used predominantly by white Americans) to trigger that same five-year mandatory prison sentence" (Tyson 385).

The US laws and policies are unjust against people of colour. White people are using their power in the legal system to manipulate the laws among citizens, increasing and decreasing prison sentences regardless of the legal rights of a citizen. The only motive for them is the colour of their skin. These kinds of treatments made many African American people deprived of their civil rights. Critical Race Theory provides a solid understanding that American policies resort to relying on white people to neglect coloured peoples' rights. The main goal of Critical Race Theory is to challenge and eliminate all sorts of social injustice, including racism and inequality. It can be seen as an interdisciplinary approach used by scholars to face race, racism and power.

Researchers, politicians, and specialists use Critical Race Theory to comprehend socially constructed racism so as to achieve more justice, with race as the centre of the analysis. The US policies which permit racist organizations and institutions that prompt and defend racial inequality are topics of debate and discussion for Race Theorists such as Derrick Bell, Lewis Steel, and Alan David Freeman. The power owned by white supremacy creates these divisions, which lead to the marginalization of people of colour. Moreover, it proposes a system for theorists to understand how race links with identity, gender, and class to address various causes of racism that individuals experience. W.E.B Du Bois and Franz Fanon are prominent figures who challenged white ideologies and concepts of whiteness in order to understand how American culture defines race. W.E.B Du Bois and Franz Fanon manage not only to show human nature and the world's experiences in their racial identification but also their participation in class, gender, and nation.

I. 3. 3. Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism

Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism is used to interpret a literary work through the lens of psychology. It aims to discover and study the unconscious motives, desires, internal conflicts, and

symbols rooted in the literary work; it also examines characters and their relationships throughout the narrative, delving deep into their emotions, thoughts, and dreams (Parker 77). This theory aims to offer an in-depth analysis and understanding of characters in literary work through the lenses of psychology and the concepts of Sigmund Freud. In Freud's view, “we cannot even comprehend ourselves, why we behave, and what we do” (Amari 08). Therefore, he establishes several theories and principles that contribute to understanding human behaviours. As a result, these theories and concepts shaped how to analyze a piece of literature through the interpretations of characters, authors, and even the literature itself.

One of the fundamental concepts in psychoanalysis is repression and the subconscious. The concept of repression is an automatic defence mechanism which operates without our conscious awareness. Its role in the human psyche is to protect the mind from thoughts, feelings, and memories that are somehow bad or negative, which can cause anxiety and discomfort (Parker 116). Freud claims that everything we forget has been distressing, i.e. any impulse continues to work and exists in the unconscious, where the mind suppresses or hides it.

Another theory proposed by Sigmund Freud is the three psychic zones: id, ego, and the superego; together, they shape human behaviour and personality (Wolf 42). The id, according to Freud, is the most primitive part of the psyche; it works on the satisfaction of our desires, including hunger or pleasure, without thinking about the consequences and social norms.

In the novel *Invisible Man*, the protagonist can be driven by his id side. The narrator can be seen as enthusiastic and impulsive in his decisions and actions. He directly engages in the ideology of the Brotherhood without thinking about the consequences that follow, which greatly enlarges his state of invisibility. The protagonist's commitment to be a notable member of the

Brotherhood and his desire to follow their instructions without questioning them can demonstrate his id side. His desire for belonging overshadows his reality of being invisible to them, contributing significantly to his exploitation by the Brotherhood throughout his time in the organization.

This desire for self-satisfaction can manifest what Freud claims to be the id side in the human. In contrast, the ego side of the human psyche is more reasonable and realistic towards social norms; it controls the desires of the id through realistic and socially appropriate ways. In the novel *Invisible Man*, the protagonist, driven by his ego, realizes his invisible state at the end of the narration, just after the lynching of his best friend, Tod Clifton. At this particular moment, the hero starts to question the morality of the Brotherhood and begins to prioritize his own beliefs and values over the Brotherhood's ideology, which he once blindly followed.

I. 4. Literature Review

A literature review is like a jigsaw puzzle; you do not have the picture on the box to follow. This literature review focuses on interpreting textual data from *Invisible Man* and incorporating related scholarly sources. The analysis is based on a review of critical essays, theses, and books, with the main focus on the themes of invisibility and self-enlightenment.

I. 4.1. African American Literature

Since the beginning of the slave era, from the eighteenth century to this very day, African American people have suffered greatly, enduring racism, lynching, exploitation and all forms of human persecution by white supremacy. Because they possessed no power over the whites, they resorted to literature as a means or rather as a weapon against the whites' oppression. African American literature is a work of written literature produced by authors of African origins.

Through the use of multiple literary genres, including novels, poetry, autobiographies and essays, African American literature serves as a vehicle for authors to highlight and reflect on their struggles and experiences and seek to raise their voices so that the whole world can see the true nature of America, the “Free Country”.

The main themes of African American literature are issues related to racial identity, racism, race, social justice, and the dream for equality. Many authors took upon themselves this task of writing and publishing their works. As a result, some lost their lives, and others were tortured or imprisoned, all for the sake of fulfilling the heavy burden on their people. Some of the most prominent and influential African American figures carved their names in the history of America, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, and many others. These authors have contributed greatly to the literary canons, in which they delivered unique perspectives, experiences, and distinctive narrative styles, influencing the African American culture and the wider aspects of literary canons. According to Booker T. Washington, “The wisest among my race understands that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing”(qtd. in Columbus 15).

Among the most influential African American figures is Booker T. Washington, in his famous literary work *Up from Slavery* (1902), in which he portrayed his own life in this autobiography; in it, he argues that even black people can obtain their dignity and claims by proving that they are capable of being productive, worthy, and deserving to be members of the American community and to be respectable by the laws. This African American literary work has

been a voice for every African American man or woman in the US during these three past centuries.

I. 4.2. Ralph Waldo Ellison

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on the 1st of March, 1914, in Oklahoma City; his parents were Lewis Ellison from Abbeville, South Carolina and Ida Milsap Ellison from White Oak, Georgia. Like many African American families, the Ellison family had to migrate from the South to the North to escape persecution of the blacks and to seek liberty behind the frontier. His mother encourages Ellison to read and write, as she brings with her books, magazines, journals, and newspapers from her workspace. “When I was in college,” Ellison said, “my mother broke a segregated-housing ordinance in Oklahoma City, and they were throwing her in jail, and the NAACP would get her out.... She had that kind of forthrightness, and I like to think that that was much more valuable than anything literary that she gave me” (Abbott 4).

During Ellison’s time, Jazz music was a popular form for the African American people to stress their struggles and toils; therefore, it was natural for Ellison to be part of the Jazz world. In his last years of high school, he developed trumpet skills and studied music theory. In Oklahoma City, music was everywhere, but jazz was prominent. In 1933, when he succeeded in obtaining a scholarship for the institution of Tuskegee in Alabama, he developed enough skills to master both Jazz and classical music; he was also a member of the traditional black church music. This was a heritage for him as it greatly influenced his writing (Britannica). Ellison spent three years in the Tuskegee Institution, which he vividly describes in his novel *Invisible Man*. His intellectual development in Tuskegee made up for the Southern social disadvantages. The music and the English faculties were excellent, which made Ellison thrive in the institution.

The Harlem Renaissance was a source of creativity and inspiration for Ellison, which made him dream of being part of that movement. It is also meant to taste the feeling of being poor, lonely, afraid, and above all, to stay alive in a society full of oppression and hate. However, it also means getting to know and even befriend the most notable and influential figure at the time, Richard Wright. His best works, *Uncle Tom's Children* 1938 and *Native Son* in 1940 made him a renowned and best writer during Ellison's time in New York. This latter contributes greatly to the writings of Ellison, especially to his novel *Invisible Man*.

Ellison did not remain in Harlem's literature, but he also read about other writers, like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. In 1943, during World War II, Ellison decided to join the U.S. Merchant Marine Army as an initiative to aid the war efforts as a non-racist service. He served for three years, and during that time, he started to write literature, and the best of his writing is *Invisible Man*. These short stories marked the beginning of his literary career, which motivated him to write *Invisible Man*, which took him seven years to finish. The writing of the novel *Invisible Man* comes from a wide range of personal experiences and imagination to create a remarkable fictional piece of literature (Amari 15). Ellison wrote his novel *Invisible Man* according to his experiences, i.e. his time in the Tuskegee institution to write the college chapter and his familiarity with the Communist party to write the Brotherhood chapters. He also uses vivid descriptions of his time in Harlem's streets to describe life in New York street. Moreover, as an African American writer, he resorts to his rich black heritage; he uses references such as Jazz music and Blues rhythms, folktales, as well as stories and myths that he heard when he was young in the city of Oklahoma.

After the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison was a target for interviews and popularity, as his novel was an immediate success among black and white communities. The

special thing about the novel is that the hero of the narrative can resemble people of different backgrounds, as the story follows an African American young man searching for his identity in a racist society where he faces a crisis of values in his way of self-enlightenment's quest.

In 1964, Ralph Ellison published his second book, *Shadow and Act*, in which he portrayed his personal life with a touch of the black experience in America (Abbott 47). Despite the criticism he encountered in the mid-1960s and 70s, he became a renowned and successful writer and became known as a one-novel man due to his novel *Invisible Man*.

I. 4.3. Invisibility in the *Invisible Man*

Many researchers have studied the issue of invisibility, specifically in the novel *Invisible Man*. Alyssa Sellers conducts the first study in her work entitled "Destruction as a Necessity for Creation in Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (2012). In the journal, Sellers discussed how people are invisible in the world. In the novel *Invisible Man*, the author decided to create a protagonist named Invisible Man to prove that the main character is invisible to people around him and to the society in which he lives. As she stated, "Through his nameless narrator, Ellison reveals that the only way to liberate oneself from a certain role is by becoming invisible; in other words, one must annihilate the socially constructed self to allow room for the true complex self to be created" (Sellers 02).

Sellers believes that invisibility is the only way for the narrator to free himself from discrimination and segregation. She added that Ellison speaks for all people and against all those who want to impose racial ideologies and roles on others and to limit their freedom and autonomy. Through Ellison's rich narrative, he examines the universal human struggle of being invisible, unable to be noticed by other people, being neglected and seen not by what he is but

through how he can serve in socially constructed ideologies and stereotypes. Through Sellers's analysis, the reader will know the main character's reaction to his society and his invisibility.

Fatima Zahra Amari argued, in her thesis, *Racism through Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, that anonymity is the most significant aspect of the protagonist's invisibility; his surroundings can not identify him as an individual because he is nameless. Therefore, he managed to gain his freedom from his invisibility. She illustrates, "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be when you refuse to see me?" (Amari 33). Amari states that anonymity is integral to the protagonist's invisibility; being nameless and unknown indicates that he is still irresponsible. In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison echoes his memories of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

The nameless man in the novel represents all African American minorities who have witnessed and suffered from oppression and segregation in their society, which ignored them and neglected them just because of their skin colour. This representation signifies the horrible situations of all African Americans at that time and their struggles in the predominantly racist American society. Furthermore, the author is a living example of many African Americans who lived and witnessed racism and segregation in discriminated societies and the struggle for true identity, which are the main concerns of the novel.

The irony lies in the true nature of the narrator's society; this latter is the main reason behind the protagonist's invisibility, the American society, and the hypocrisy of the whites, as well as the stereotypical images that refer to black people. One example that highlights this passage is in the prologue, in which the protagonist accidentally bumps into a white man. This

latter offended him due to the colour of the protagonist's skin. For a brief moment of time, his invisibility was dominated because of the effect of the light in the alley "right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him by the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 04). A few days later, the accident was published in the newspapers, stating that an invisible man bites a white man. However, this article was completely false; the ideologies and the stereotypes of the whites manipulated the article, showcasing that all blacks are born violent and savages to prompt the idea of destroying the reputation of the African American people.

López Miralles Alejandro is another researcher who conducted a study entitled "Invisibility and Blindness in Ellison's *Invisible Man*" and Wright's *Native Son*. He compares the two novels, which are more connected to each other, for their common aspects of blindness and invisibility. These common points between the two novels lie in the themes of blindness and invisibility. Both whites and blacks can share the two concepts. In contrast, the whites are blind towards the blacks because they regard them as invisible and unseen. They are forced to submit to the authority and supremacy of the whites, which makes the blacks blind to their inferiority. Lopez added, "In both novels, the authors use metaphors, symbols and even discriminatory language to represent blindness and invisibility.... Because it is the best way to understand Ellison and Wright's approach to blindness and invisibility" (López 03).

In his novel, specifically in chapter three of the Battle Royal section, Ellison represents the themes of invisibility and blindness using symbols and metaphors to enrich the narrative. In the passage of the Battle Royale, the whites blindfolded the blacks, among them the main character of the novel, for one side because they are regarded as savages and for the other, they are invisible as if they do not exist. Critics like Muyumba Walton declared, "Ellison blindfolded

the boys to play his themes of blindness and invisibility in the context of white viewership” (04). In the section of the Battle Royale, the protagonist is invited to give a speech about freedom in America; however, he finds himself blindfolded and forced to fight in a racist show for hundreds of whites against his people, where he is going to be humiliated because of his skin colour. Ellison is showing the reader that blacks are blind and accepting of being humiliated. At the same time, they are invisible to the whites. As a result, both races are invisible to each other. White sheets blindfold the boys to symbolize the whites’ supremacy over them; simultaneously, the blacks accept their racial stereotype of submission; therefore, they are invisible both to themselves and to the whites. Because of the boys’ state of blindness, they are unable to comprehend that the fight should be against the whites and not against the people of their race. The invisibility concept appears in both races. One lacks self-perception, and prejudices and stereotypes against them consume the other.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* shares some similarities with the novel *Invisible Man*. Both novels stress the theme of invisibility by the blacks and the whites; for instance, in the novel *Native Son*, the characters of Jan and Mary use prejudiced language. Although they have good intentions, the racial prejudice that dominated the society and the stereotypes that stigmatize the blacks prevented them from recognizing Bigger, the main character of the story, as an individual. Statements like, “You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into those houses and just see how your people live... I just want to see. I want to know these people...” (Wright 101), her racist language like ‘these people’, ‘your people’ and ‘they’ represents the racial prejudice faced by the black people at the time, which made Bigger unseen by others. The fact that Mary said, “I just want to *see*”, the *see* word is in italics to represent her oblivion towards the blacks and her inability to recognize Bigger’s individuality and feelings.

I. 4. 4. Self-Enlightenment Journey

Anthony S. Abbott, an English professor at Davidson College, in his analytical book *1952 Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man*, argues that the protagonist's transformation from his state of invisibility and blindness to his self-enlightenment form comes at the end of the novel. In the story's early chapters, the protagonist is expelled from the college by order of the director, Dr Bledsoe. This latter gives the protagonist a dozen envelopes to help him find a job; however, these envelopes are precisely the opposite; they were designed to punish the narrator's actions at Dr Bledsoe's office. The protagonist keeps the letters in his briefcase until the last chapters, when he finally decides to burn them all. Anthony S. Abbott states: "It is only at the end when he finally burns all the contents of his real briefcase that he can start to control his own momentum" (159). The hero then decides to hibernate, literally going into the city's bowels to rethink all his mistakes and learn from them, and then emerges with full knowledge and power enough to face every possible racial challenge he can encounter.

Another article by Zeena Alwan Nsayf entitled "Loss of Identity: A Journey from Illusion to Reality in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" where declared that the protagonist's movement to Harlem is a part of his journey to his self-realization and finding his identity through eliminating his invisibility, she added "In his journey for searching for identity and meaning in life, the invisible protagonist moves to Harlem. This movement is a metaphoric journey for self-realization" (05). The hero is imprisoned by his transparency, and he will be freed only after he discovers his identity and realizes his self-realization. "I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 487), said the protagonist.

Another researcher Amari states that the protagonist transformed from his state of invisibility to his final version of himself as an aware and mature individual. As she stated,

“From underground to manhood; the protagonist built his identity from a naïve person to a mature one. The invisible man’s adventure in the racist American society aids him to discover his real African American identity” (49). After several incidents which helped the protagonist discover himself, for instance, in the accident of Tod Clifton’s death, the protagonist realizes that the organization of the Brotherhood did not act after this hideous crime against one of its black members. To his frustration, the hero uncovers the insignificance of the Brotherhood. He then realizes that it is an organization built to oppress black people. The protagonist reacts to the death of his friend as follows: “A brother, a leading member, shot down by a policeman. We had lost our prestige in the community” (Ralph 374). Thomas A. Vulgar said about the protagonist's reaction: “His reflections on Tod's death are a turning point from which he intensifies the exploration of his own identity and begins to recognize more fully the possible identities of others” (68).

Another event that prompts the protagonist for his self-enlightenment condition and the need to find his true purpose in life is when he discovers that the envelopes made by Dr Bledsoe are meant to keep him from finding a job and force him to be in the shadow of his obscurity “To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 34). Because of the hero’s innocence and lack of awareness, he idolised everything about Dr Bledsoe, thinking he was a true leader and loyal to the black cause. On the contrary, he realizes that Dr Bledsoe is just a puppet in the hands of the white people. Although he was a director of a prestigious black institution, in the letters he sent with the protagonist to the leaders of the whites, he signed as follows: ‘your humble servant’, which indicates his humiliation only to please the leaders of the whites. These experiences changed his perspective towards the world he lives in and the people

he knows. His invisibility transformed into maturity and self-realization, making him mature and capable of facing the world.

Terghini Djemea, in his thesis entitled “Racism and Self-Realization in Post-World War II African-American Literature: A Special Reference to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”, states:

The novel's protagonist discovers that his invisibility might be beneficial at times, so he refuses to complain or resist. The protagonist is calmer and wiser after realizing and accepting the fact that all through his struggles throughout the novel, he has been invisible and unappreciated. Therefore it is true that invisibility is the key to self-discovery and freedom. (Terghini 74)

The novel *Invisible Man*, in its depth, reflects the broader aspects of African American people's struggles for justice and equality. It reflects the search for identity and self-realization ingrained in American culture when the novel was set. The novel presents topics related to blacks' identity and self-discovery, as well as the protagonist's journey to escape his ignorance and find himself in a chaotic society.

I. 5 . Conclusion

In short, this chapter examined and analyzed various literary theories. We learned how race interferes with the analyses of the novel through Critical Race Theory, and we analysed the protagonist through the Freudian Theory. As for the themes of invisibility and self-enlightenment that were examined and analyzed by many researchers, draw a more profound explanation and thorough interpretation of these themes, which helps to understand profoundly the deeper

meaning and the hidden messages of the story, as well as knowing the historical context in which the novel was written. Furthermore, the coming chapter analyses the layers of invisibility, starting from racism, blindness, alienation and isolation, psychological impact on the protagonist and last but not least, invisibility. The next chapter tackles how these layers of invisibility affected the protagonist in his journey and how he embraced it to pave the way for his final version of himself.

Chapter Two: Exploring the Layers of Invisibility

II. 1 . Introduction

Ellison's motivation to write his novel lies in the protagonist's reflection on his social alienation and his endeavour to find his identity in a racist society that fails to recognise him as an individual. The novel's main concern is the hero's journey from invisibility to self-enlightenment by repressing his suffering and creating a self-identity. The novel also sheds light on how the protagonist's determination transformed him to challenge and defy the oppressive system of his society.

Ralph Ellison assembled important concepts to support his acclaim. For example, his novel *Invisible Man* powerfully reflects the notion of invisibility. Furthermore, he successfully creates a connection between the invisibility state of his protagonist and the ignorance of other characters, mostly about his own people's oblivion towards their humiliation by white people. As a result, this chapter aims to study some of the notions that Ellison employed in his novel *Invisible Man*. Beginning with the concepts of invisibility and blindness and how these two notions shaped the story and mirrored social facts, this chapter sheds light on the transformation of the protagonist's perspective, depicting how these two notions shifted the narrator from a state of naivety at the beginning of the novel to maturation and awareness by the end of the story. By the end of this chapter it will examine other important notions in the novel, such as isolation and alienation. These two concepts illustrate how they affected the protagonist and how he was isolated from his society because of his skin colour. Finally, this chapter examines to what extent the notion of psychology impacts the protagonist's course throughout the novel, how it shifts his perspective and, most importantly, his psyche.

II. 2 . Racism: The Roots of the Protagonist's Struggle

Racism is thought to be the action of dividing humans according to biological characteristics called race. "Racist individuals think that there is a direct link between inherited physical traits and other traits of personality and that some races are innately superior to others" (Wade et al.). Race can be exercised in politics, the economy, and legal institutions. The scholars of Critical Race Theory focus their efforts against any institution's racist system. Critical Race Theory argues that race is no longer a biological factor in a human being. It is, however, constructed and invented by society and culture to exploit people of colour.

After a long toil between African American people to stop slavery, on the 1st of January, 1863, slavery was officially abolished; however, other racist creeds remained. This freedom was just an illusion for African Americans because slavery was another definition of racism, two sides of the same coin, which means racial struggle remains, and the dream of freedom and liberty is just a mirage. Since white people held great power over other races, they established rules to control other minority groups. Some of these racial laws were the separate but equal doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Jim Crow laws. These laws prohibited coloured people from accessing certain places, like public areas, including parks, libraries, restaurants, and, most importantly, public schools. "Whites define themselves as "The Self" and assign the non-white as "The Other". White is influential because they have the advantage to define people of different skin colours as a result of the construction of their whiteness; they exercise their power to discriminate against the non-white" (Zulfikar 02). Therefore, by establishing such racially segregated laws, white people wanted to keep control and dominate society.

According to Critical Race theory, institutional oppression can be applied to the organisation of the Brotherhood. In *Invisible Man*, The Brotherhood is run by influential white

individuals, such as Jack, the leader of this organization. These white leaders are the ones who dictate the direction of the organization, and in doing so, they neglect black members' rights. Ellison's portrayal of this oppressive organisation mirrors real-world institutional racism, where influential white individuals entrench their dominance in institutions and society, leading them to keep control over black individuals. This systemic structure perpetuates racial inequalities by favouring the interests of dominant racial groups.

One prominent example from the novel is when the protagonist is invited to speak for a massive gathering of powerful white people. Before the hero's speech, he is forced to fight in a racist show to entertain a group of drunken white people. The protagonist and a dozen coloured people were forced to fight each other blindfolded, and the fact that they blinded them with white sheets determined the symbol of white power over other minority groups. Glasgow states that "the racism derives from disregard, more generally, as a form of ill will towards the other races. Thus, racist actions will be hostile and disrespectful for the victims (64–93)".

After the fight, a drunken white man tosses some false dollar bills on an electric rug. The protagonist and his fellows rush to pick as much as possible, thinking the money is real. Instead, they are met with a painful electric shock and a massive boost of laughter in the section of white people mocking them and insulting them with racial expressions. This passage highlights the suffering and humiliation of black people by whites and how, ironically, it is believed that coloured people are savages while the truth is the opposite. Later, his speech comes after a humiliating moment for the story's main character. The protagonist was renowned for his oratory skills. As the narrator delivered his speech, no one cared about what he was saying, but miraculously, everyone jumped out of their seats and confronted the narrator as soon as he said

"Social equality" instead of responsibility. It is clear that for white people, there is no social equality; whites are the superiors, and blacks are the inferiors.

"You weren't being smart, were you, boy?" he said, not unkindly.

"No, sir!"

"You sure about 'equality' was a mistake?"

"Oh, yes, sir," I said. "I was swallowing blood" (Ellison 31).

In the novel, African Americans believe that white people have the power to dominate them as their masters. So, in order to survive, coloured people have to obey and serve the whites without any words or rejection. The thing that made them blind towards their social freedom is, as Ralph David Abernathy states, "They... have forgotten the struggle and the hardships and the blood, sweat, and tears... and they have forgotten the road over which we have come, and they are not teaching it to their children. They are failing to teach their children. To tell their children and to tell their children's children" (qtd. in Columbus 176).

Abernathy believed that black people should fight against white supremacy and racist ideologies to remember and rediscover the struggle and the hardships that they have faced and are still facing.

A prominent example of this ignorance and the forgottenness to fight against the white lies in the characterization of Dr. Bledsoe. In the earliest chapters of the novel, this character is a leading member of the black community; he is an administrator and holds a powerful place in the University of Tuskegee. However, this character has no intention of bettering the lives of his coloured members and students; instead, he is a self-serving man, a manipulator, and above all, a

servant to the white people, the ones who put him in that position in the first place. In chapter three, the protagonist is a fresh student at Tuskegee University. While everything is new to him, he is determined to satisfy his superiors, including Dr. Bledsoe, whom the narrator admires deeply. When he is assigned to drive Mr. Norton, a white member and one of the university's founders, the protagonist is astonished and becomes even more blind towards his self-dignity, thinking that Mr. Norton, as he claims himself, is a coloured people helper and an admirer. At the same time, in truth, he was just another self-serving man with the intention to destroy the black community from the inside and spread propaganda about African American people.

During their tour in town, Mr. Norton demands the protagonist to drive him into a black ghetto, a slave quarter section, where he meets Jim Trueblood, a cunning man looking for easy money. Trueblood and the way he lives with his family remind the readers that in segregation, black people, particularly men, ought to be separated from white people because they are dangerous. These laws reinforced the idea that black people are savages with an animalistic nature living outside civilised society. When Trueblood finishes telling his made-up story, Mr. Norton gives him \$100, not because he sympathises with his story but because he wants to keep him where he belongs, isolated from civilised society.

According to Critical Race Theory, racism is an integral part of society's structures and institutions. CRT can be applied to the novel, specifically in the college's chapters. For instance, the protagonist's experiences in the college are characterized by the relationship between Mr. Norton, a wealthy white man and one of the founders of Tuskegee College, and the protagonist, a coloured man with no status. Through the lenses of CRT, racism can be interpreted through the relationship between these two characters.

CRT argues that racism is deeply ingrained in institutions; in the novel, the college is owned by white trustees, and among them, Mr. Norton holds power over marginalized people, among them the nameless protagonist. The invisible man's relationship with Mr. Norton exhibits the unequal power holdings between white trustees and black students. According to CRT, Mr. Norton's proud attitudes and expectations over other powerless black students demonstrate how white individuals hold power at the expense of black individuals within institutions, in this case, the College of Tuskegee. Through the use of power and wealth by white individuals, they are able to maintain and hold influence and control over marginalized individuals.

The characterization of Mr Norton is that of a typical racist white man hiding behind the idea that he is the black race's knight when, in fact, he is seeking to build his heritage so that he could be regarded as a generous man saving the black race from the darkness. After this, Mr Norton feels a bit unwell and demands the protagonist drive him to a nightclub called the Golden Day at a nearby bar so he can have a strong drink called "whisky" to shake his dizziness. A skirmish goes on when they enter the bar, and the chaos hits Mr. Norton. The protagonist immediately dives into the university while thinking about himself and what will happen to him. "What would happen now? "What would the school officials say? In my mind, I visualised Dr. Bledsoe's face when he saw Mr. Norton" (Ellison 98). When they reached the university, Dr. Bledsoe immediately sent for the narrator. Although it is not the protagonist's fault, Dr. Bledsoe blames him for everything that happened to Mr. Norton. The invisible young man pleads for forgiveness, knowing it is not his fault. However, Dr. Bledsoe's evil, selfish nature prevents him from seeing that the protagonist and himself share the same race. "Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man." (Ellison 139). Despite all the efforts made by the invisible young man, he was unfairly expelled from the university so that Dr Bledsoe could please Mr Norton and ask his

forgiveness because it was he who assigned the protagonist to drive Mr Norton. Instead of fighting and defending his fellow race, Dr. Bledsoe cared only for himself to please the white men. This chapter highlights the existence of what is called intra-racial racism, which means the encounter of racism or discriminatory behaviours from the same racial group.

In postcolonial theory and specifically from Edward Said's concept of Othering, he stresses how a dominant group can maintain their identity against other marginalized people or what it refers to them as the Others (Burney 07). Said's principles about the struggle between whites and blacks can be described as a racial hierarchy where whiteness is superior and prosperous while blacks are inferior and downgraded.

For decades, white supremacy used exploitation, oppression, and marginalization against black people under the pretext of being superior and powerful. This ideology of othering adopted by whites is a process to maintain power and dominance over marginalized people and to keep them powerless and unable. This othering theory can be applied to the relationship between the protagonist and the white trustees. The white founders care only about maintaining their power over others, and since the protagonist is a coloured man with no title or a legacy to hold on to, he has no chance against those who hold power over him; therefore, he is unjustly expelled from the college. This shows how the othering system applies almost everywhere and that the idea of dominion will always be human nature.

II. 3 . Invisibility: The Invisible Man's Burden

The term invisibility was expended by psychologist Anderson J. Franklin, which he called the "Invisible Syndrome". According to his theory, "invisibility occurs when someone, particularly a black person, is disregarded because of others' prejudice and discrimination and the

perpetrators' presumptions about Blacks are filled with all types of social and personal stereotypes, leaving the real person invisible" (Hayes 353). Thomas Gibson gives another definition of invisibility as he states: "Modernist conceptions of black 'Invisibility' can be broadly construed as the rejection or elision of Black subjects by white social and cultural hegemonies" (354). As for Ralph Ellison, he describes invisibility "as a separation from society where people do not recognize black individuals" (Meaning of Invisibility).

Ralph Ellison began in his prologue that the protagonist is invisible, not because he possesses supernatural powers or biochemical imbalance but because the society he lives in rejects acknowledging his existence as an individual who shares the same rights and responsibilities simply because of the colour of his skin and, in general, because of his race. "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 03). The effects of racism and segregation prevalent in America during the novel's time contribute significantly to the narrator's character. Throughout the novel, the protagonist encounters many challenges, suffering, struggles, and even losses in understanding and finding his true identity and re-realising his invisibility in order to overcome the whites' stereotypical ideas and gain a new perspective.

The unnamed hero's simple wish is to be recognised as an individual in his society that is full of racist ideologies which dominate him before he can defend himself, the thing that makes him invisible and unseen. In his first tryouts to end his invisibility, the narrator decided to neglect and deny his heritage and culture, which are part of his identity; by doing so, he was able to create an identity not for himself but for others, thinking that would make them proud. The first thing he did was suppress his Southern heritage. By doing so, he thought he would achieve success and, most importantly, recognition in Harlem.

Through this suppression of his Southern origins, the protagonist hopes to be part of the urban North to gain acceptance within the white society and hope to be seen as an individual. Later on, in another struggle with his invisibility, he tries to take on another identity that does not belong to him: the identity of a notorious man named Rinehart. This latter is a lover, a hipster, and considered a brave man; all people wish to be him. The invisible man took on this identity by wearing dark glasses and a white hat. Ellison says, “They see the hat, not me. There is magic in it. It hides me right in front of their eyes” (557). This gives the protagonist a new identity that he thinks will become part of him and gain recognition from others.

Ellison describes the character of Rinehart as a personification of chaos; he gets used to it to the point that he becomes part of it. Ellison also, through this character, intended to represent America and change through protests, demonstrations, and even marches, whether violent or peaceful, as long as they made progress like the peaceful marches of Dr Luther King or the violent approaches of Malcolm X. Rinehart in the novel is also perceived as a manipulator and a cunning man. Through his way of living, he does nothing good to the world and expects to use it to his advantage. This identity of Rinehart is just a brief cover for the invisible man because it is not his true identity; he has to get rid of it if he has to find his real and final identity. “I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart’s multiple personalities and turned away. It was too vast and confusing to contemplate” (Ellison 562).

The invisibility theme also suggests other hidden meanings. For instance, through his invisibility, the invisible man was able to discover hidden things that might be impossible to uncover if he were seen as an average individual. Early in the novel, The invisible man finds a job at a paint factory called Liberty Paints. Since he is invisible, he is sent to the lower section, nine metres below ground level. Through this chapter, the readers will understand that Liberty

Paints is like a metaphor that reflects race relations and racial expectations. Ellison describes the factory's logo as follows "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINT" (198). He discovers that the factory produces only white paint. The factory claims that their Optic White is pure enough to completely cover a dark piece of coal; this statement symbolically covers black people from society and keeps them as far as possible from white people, representing them as inferior or the other.

The paint produced in the factory was sent to the government specifically to the national monument; however, this suggests the whitewashing regime practised by white people to suppress coloured people from claiming their rights. Even though African American people are considered the vast majority of the working class, this ideology of whitewashing failed to acknowledge black contribution. Again, after acquiring the ability to become unseen, the unnamed narrator reveals that the mastermind and the creator of the paint's formula is Lucius Brockway, another black man who is blind and invisible, the same as the protagonist. Although Lucius Brockway might be a genius after his formula, he is blind and oblivious to the truth that lies in front of him. His ignorance prevents him from gaining any credit for creating his formula, and although he spent 26 years in this job, he seems lost and forgotten as time passes. He transforms him into an insufferable person despised by his coworkers and a constant conflict with fears of losing his job.

Meanwhile, the white owners of the factory, who do not have even the slightest idea about how the paint is this good and well produced, admittedly do not care how it is made or who is producing it; what is important for them is the money, while the black people in the factory do not have even the right conditions to work, risking their lives for the white people to get even richer (Course Hero).

The invisible man had an accident in the paint factory. He was sent to the hospital, where the case of racism appeared. He was directed to a specialized room where scientific experiments were conducted on him without his approval. Since black people have no rights or a voice to speak for themselves, especially if the victim is invisible like the protagonist, the upper hand is with the white people, in this case, the white doctors. Ellison was trying to depict the characteristics of American racist society under the concept of invisibility. For instance, the invisible man in the hospital realised his obliviousness when asked for his name; however, he could not answer such a simple question. He states, “Who am I? I asked myself; maybe I was just this blackness, bewilderment, and pain” (Ellison 240). At the end of the novel, after years of struggle with his invisibility, the narrator comes to a conclusion that will change his perspective for the rest of the narration. He finally understands his naiveté and uses it to his advantage as a weapon instead of a weakness. For example, during his time at the Brotherhood’s organisation, they always perceived him as an invisible man, and he took this advantage for himself since they did not pay him any attention. He decided to organise a rally in which he delivered a powerful speech urging his fellow members to fight for their rights and equality as citizens of the United States and, most importantly, to challenge the norms and ideologies of the Brotherhood. This realisation of his obliviousness promoted him to outwit social expectations and racial norms.

II. 4 . Blindness and the Invisible Man

Blindness can be defined according to the context of the novel as a form of ignorance, lack of knowledge, or intentional neglect, as in the case of the protagonist, who suffers from a metaphorical blindness of his society members. This concept can also be defined as the inability to acknowledge or recognize what lies beyond the surface and the expectations of society.

The theme of blindness is a significant concept in Ellison's *Invisible Man* that shapes the novel's events. It is the inability to recognise someone or himself as a unique individual. Through his narration, Ellison demonstrates that this concept is not limited to blacks; only blacks and whites are blind altogether. While whites are blind because they do not recognise blacks as individuals, blacks are also oblivion because they are allowing themselves to be controlled and submissive to their inferiority.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* presents the concept of blindness in various ways; through this term, he shows how cultural racism affects African American people. Many events and examples from the novel demonstrate the idea of blindness, for instance, when the protagonist receives an invitation to a hotel ballroom owned by white representatives to give a speech because of his oratory skills. When he arrived, he noticed something strange. At a distance, he glimpsed a boxing ring where chairs and tables were gathered in an organised way. On the other side of the room, many black students from his university stood in a dark, tight corner. Then he realised that a fight would take place, and it is them who are going to fight. He was given a pair of gloves and ordered to stand in the ring. The protagonist, as well as the other boys' ignorance towards their indirect enslavement, prevents them from seeing the humiliation that they are about to suffer. Each one has a reason for bowing to their whites' demands. For the protagonist, he said, "I visualised myself as a potential Booker T. Washington" (Ellison 18); all that matters is giving his speech to satisfy the white audience. As we already mentioned before, black people are blind to their inferiority.

The fight between the boys shows how they are blind to the truth in front of them. Instead of fighting against the white people's supremacy, they are still fighting among themselves. Lopez commented on the fight between the boys as follows: "The boys are blind because they do not

realise that they have to fight against the whites and not against the people of their own race” (Lopez Miralles 61). When the boys entered the room, they were blindfolded in white clothes. Ellison here depicts how black people are blind because they allow themselves to be insulted and humiliated. He represents blindness in a powerful way when he says, “ Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, and four fought one, then turned to fight each other and were themselves attacked” (23).

The symbol of white cloth represents the oblivion imposed on African Americans. By depriving the boys of their sight, the whites can control them as they please, transforming them into objects of entertainment and exploitation. The blindness theme here showcased the dehumanising effects of racial oppression and how African Americans are invisible and powerless in a society ruled by white supremacy. After the protagonist leaves Mr. Norton’s room, he goes to an evening chapel at his request.

The chapel is full of people mostly black people. When the protagonist arrives, he sees Bledsoe from a distance, standing with a group of white trustees. These trustees always inform coloured people how lucky they are. The protagonist adds that these trustees came to save black people from ignorance, as they claim. A few moments later, an elderly black man wearing dark glasses called him Reverend Barbee. This man seems to possess remarkable oratory skills, and he delivers a powerful and emotional speech that puts the audience in awe. Even the narrator starts to cry. In this outstanding speech, Barbee praised the university’s white founders and gave them much credit for their efforts towards black people. He then specifically praised Bledsoe and thought that the job should be passed on to him so that he could continue in the footsteps of the white founders. As he states, “Take on the burden. Lead them the rest of the way” (Ellison 121).

Before he could conclude his speech, he fell on the ground, and his dark glasses broke, unveiling his disguise as a blind man.

Ellison portrayed the character of Barbee as a blind man to reflect his inability to recognise the truth behind the false ideologies he embraces and the realities of social expectations. Barbee depends on Bledsoe to guide his students from ignorance to realisation. However, Barbee's literary and metaphorical blindness hinders him from seeing the cunning nature of Bledsoe. This latter is a self-serving man who prefers his interests above others, which makes him untrustworthy.

As opposed to Bledsoe, Barbee fails to hide his physical blindness. Bledsoe is sharp towards his selfish desires by disguising himself as a benevolent leader to his fellow people. This, however, does not hide the real blindness of Bledsoe. Similar to both the invisible man and Barbee, he shares with them the metaphor of blindness because he's unable to see his own race. Bledsoe's obsession with power will lead to the degradation of his fellow people, which makes him no different from any white man. The novel *Invisible Man* is rich with symbols and hidden meanings. One must read between the lines to uncover the hidden truth that reflects the beauty of this novel. Ellison successfully uses symbolism through his characters to understand the meaning of inequality, and one major example lies in the Brotherhood chapters.

When the invisible man was roaming in the streets of Harlem ([Appendix 1](#)) with no goals, he met a man called Jack. Because the protagonist possesses good oratory skills, this man Jack is interested in recruiting him into the Brotherhood organisation. The protagonist accepts his offer with a little bit of concern; however, since he is paid, he ignores his doubts. The Brotherhood claims to uplift the black race and their lives, while the real truth is completely opposed to what

this organisation claims. It sought to destroy the black race and bring it to its knees by asserting racial oppression and spreading racist propaganda about coloured people.

The blindness theme occurs once again through the character of Brother Jack, the leader of the organisation. This character possesses an artificial eye, and he sacrifices it in exchange for power. The artificial eye represents Jack's literary blindness and his inability to see the truth and perceive reality correctly. He is blind towards the struggles that the black community faces as well as the complexities of racial identity, which he promises to find a solution for it. Jack's artificial eye represents his superficial understanding of the world around him and the sufferings of the people he vows to represent. An example of his unawareness is in the treatment of the protagonist. When the invisible man gets acquainted and spends several weeks in the organisation, things start to become clear to him. The negative effects of Jack's ignorance start to reach the protagonist. For instance, the organisation starts to dictate orders to him, forbids him from doing anything each time he rises among his people, and starts to get attention. The Brotherhood would express dissatisfaction each time the protagonist got closer to making a difference, and Jack would displace him. "You mustn't waste your emotion on individuals; they don't count how history has passed them by" (Ellison 473). For example, when the narrator delivers an acceptable speech on the streets of Harlem, Jack sends him to the women's department as a punishment without revealing his true intention, saying that his mission is to learn more about our organisation. Here, the invisible man starts to question the true purpose behind this organisation, especially Jack's intention towards coloured people.

Jack's oblivion prevents the invisible man from creating any progress among his people because both men have different goals and mindsets. One is ready to do everything to keep his power, and the other is looking to make a change towards his race, which is so desperate for

actual progress for their cause. Ultimately, Jack's blindness is rooted in his obsession with power and control. He likes to think of himself as a visionary leader and a hero for social change; however, his obsession prevents him from recognising the limitations of his own beliefs. Ultimately, his narrow-mindedness leads to his eventual downfall and tragic fate.

II. 5. The Protagonist's Alienation and Isolation

The problem of alienation has become a serious struggle for the African American people; it comes as a consequence of the abuses and violations made by the whites during the slavery period. Amid the slave trade, when it was at its height of prosperity, black people were suffering from alienation and isolation as a result of shipment from their homeland and landing in foreign lands to be sold and work as slaves. After the Emancipation Proclamation attempted to end slavery, African Americans were still experiencing alienation and isolation; they were still abused through white supremacy. Therefore, the concept of alienation has become the central concern in African American literature. This phenomenon prompted Ellison's *Invisible Man* and defined his central image of invisibility.

In the novel *Invisible Man*, alienation is a continuing dilemma for the protagonist. The alienation that occurred due to his society's ignorance and the failure to recognise him as an individual contributes significantly to the protagonist's psyche. When he discovers that his society rejects him, he decides to remain invisible in a country where racism is the prevalent force that has tormented black people since they stepped foot in the United States. Ellison states about his condition, "When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination; indeed, everything and anything except me" (03). This quote is evidence of how white people neglect blacks' rights after experiencing years of oppression and

since they were living in a community that was dominated by whites, which contributed to developing a sense of alienation for black people. This means that the terms blindness, invisibility, and alienation are all connected to each other, which raises the scale of challenges and irritation required to be recognised as an individual due to the confinement of social aspects as opposed to black people.

The protagonist's alienation extends beyond racial boundaries; it reaches the social aspects. For instance, he feels disconnected from everyone, whether white or black. The moment he decided to migrate to the North, he was unaware of the risks because his naivety prevented him from doing so. As a result, he struggles to belong to any particular group, feeling like an outsider in his own country. An example that illustrates this more is at the protagonist's university, where he was expelled from it at the order of Bledsoe. This latter sought to destroy the narrator's future. Here, the protagonist feels a sense of alienation as his race betrays him. Instead of protecting and defending him, although it was not the protagonist's fault, Bledsoe blamed him for everything that happened and expelled him, destroying the narrator's dream of becoming a successful man in a cruel world. However, this does not end here. As the story progresses, the protagonist realises that the cunning Bledsoe not only expelled him from the university but sought to destroy his future. He sent recommendation letters that he believed to be a source of great help; instead, the letters were a warning from Bledsoe to white people to prevent the protagonist from gaining any job or influence in the future. When the narrator discovers this, he falls again into the trap of alienation, leading him into a deep void of conflict between himself and his society as each race betrays and neglects him.

Another form of alienation from the novel is when the narrator hears about the tragic death of his dear friend, Tod Clifton. The protagonist witnessed the lynching of his best friend

with his own eyes; this latter was the protagonist's reflection. They were dreaming of being successful men in the organisation of the Brotherhood; however, he was killed, leaving the protagonist alone in this cruel world. This event contributed significantly to the protagonist's personality, making him more alienated and isolated. He had a small hope in the Brotherhood and sought the help of its founder; however, this latter met him with cold feelings and was utterly uninterested in the case, leading to another deep dive into an alienated world.

The protagonist witnessed many events throughout his journey, from his invisibility to his self-enlightenment phase. His experiences changed his personality and perspectives, leading him to be more aware; however, this intellectualism comes with a price. For instance, his time at the paint factory they had made him realise the unjust treatment of black people in the workshops when he confronted Brockway about his unjust treatment and that he had been exploited since his first day in the factory. Brockway's blindness and ignorance prevent him from seeing the obvious truth that lies in front of him. Instead of reclaiming his rights as a worker, he was afraid to lose his job and the satisfaction of his white bosses.

The problem of black people is internal; they need to fight against the quest for the whites' satisfaction. They need to know that the fight is against the whites and not among their race. Also, to gain respect, they would have to forget the idea that white people are superior and that "white is right" (Course Hero). It was these perspectives and beliefs that made African American people oppressed and abused, preventing them from gaining their social rights as citizens of the United States. When the protagonist fails to reason with Brockway, the latter, afraid of losing his job, plans a cunning scheme to get rid of the protagonist. He manipulates some electric cables, which leads to a massive explosion inside the factory and sends him straight to the hospital. This event made the protagonist realise that his intellectualism contributes to his

alienation; he finds it incredibly difficult to connect with others who do not share the same perspectives or insights.

Another similar event about intellectual alienation occurred during the Brotherhood chapters. The invisible man gained so much wisdom about his people and the way they are treated, especially in the streets of Harlem and, more specifically, at the heart of the Brotherhood. He witnessed racial conflicts between its members during his first years at the organisation. However, since he was still new and unable to understand the true nature of this organisation, he decided to remain silent and not speak about it to anyone. Later on, as the story progresses, he starts to question the desires of the Brotherhood. Still, one event transformed him completely, and he knows that this organisation is just a mere image and a false one that pretends to uplift the black race and save it from its ordeal. In contrast, the organisation's intentions were the opposite of their claims; it sought to destroy the black race and spread destruction and ignorance by prompting propaganda and violent acclaims to seek and distort their image.

From a psychoanalytic theory, the protagonist's silence about what is happening inside the Brotherhood's organization can be interpreted as a form of repression. The concept of repression is an automatic defence mechanism that operates without our conscious awareness. Its role in the human psyche is to protect the mind from thoughts, feelings, and memories that are somehow bad or negative, which can cause anxiety and discomfort (Parker 116). The protagonist repressed his feelings and thoughts because he desperately needed recognition and saw the Brotherhood as a source of belonging.

In psychoanalytic analysis, the concept of consciousness holds an essential role from the novel's perspective. We can uncover deep meanings by relating psychoanalytic analysis and the

term consciousness with the novel events. For instance, the protagonist's repression does not last long; as the story progresses, his consciousness starts to awaken, and he begins to question and doubt the Brotherhood's ideology, which leads the protagonist to a scene of awareness and pushes him to start differentiating their stated goals and their actual actions. This stage of realization for the protagonist through the lenses of psychoanalytic theory can be interpreted as a breakthrough in his consciousness. This critical phase in his life enabled him to transform from the ignorance of his surroundings and send him to a new state, which is a state of awareness.

When the protagonist decided to challenge the organisation and sought to destroy its intention, he met resistance among the members. People of his race prevented him from making any progress. Instead of fighting by his side against the whites' evil intentions, they decided to fight him to keep their temporary position in the organisation. Some challenged him for their jealousy, others were afraid for their jobs, and others supported the whites because they thought they were superior and better than them. Ultimately, the protagonist finds himself fighting a losing battle alone, with no support from anyone. His intellectualism led him into a continuous conflict between himself and his society, which made it difficult to trust people, and his fear of being betrayed further isolated him from developing any relationships.

II. 6. Psychological Impact on the Protagonist

Without a doubt, all the traumatic events that happened to the protagonist badly affected his personality and psyche, which made it difficult for him to maintain a stable image of his society and his people as well. The unnamed narrator, throughout the whole story, was in a conflict of navigating a complex and oppressive society that repeatedly denied his humanity and exposed him to different types of discrimination and racial expectations. The first racial

encounters occur in his college days when the narrator is on a quest to get recognition from others, so he tries to obey the laws of the college. In the underground white hotel, he was forced to fight in a racist show; later, he was awarded an electric shock, and to finish the night, he was humiliated because of a spelling mistake. When the narrator is officially accepted into the college, he idolises everything about the president, Bledsoe; however, this latter betrays him by destroying his future and expelling him from college. These traumatic events negatively affected his journey, knowing that he was still 19 years old.

Scientifically speaking, when someone experiences such traumatic events, Herman, a psychological scientist, states that “after a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go on permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment” (35). After witnessing such a traumatic experience, the narrator no longer perceives reality as he thought it would be, adding a sense of powerlessness and disillusionment. This is a small step into his maturation and self-enlightenment journey that he will take soon.

This quote exhibits another traumatic event, this time with the white trustee, Mr. Norton. According to Herman, “long after the danger is past, traumatised people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present” (37). It happens when the narrator drives Mr. Norton into black slums, and when they enter a local bar, Mr. Norton is injured, and his face turns pale. Ellison describes him as follows: “His face was still chalk white” (69). The narrator enters into strange episodes of stress and fear, leaving him extremely nervous and afraid. “Something cold formed within my chest,” Ellison said (69). In the past, according to African American beliefs, they had to obey white people to gain recognition and satisfaction from the whites. Since the narrator never came this far to a white face, he felt extremely strange to come so close to Mr. Norton’s pale face. The invisibility state of the unnamed narrator has deeply

affected his psyche, leading to shifts in his perception towards his people. Since he is metaphorically invisible, people fail to see him as an individual, and he feels isolated and alienated, which adds to his psychological struggles and conflicts.

Also, several events contributed significantly to the deterioration of his psychological condition, including the shocking incident with Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood. After he was uninterested in hearing about the death of one of his members, Tod Clifton, and the narrator's best friend, the protagonist finally knew Jack's hidden intentions and how he betrayed his co-workers, so he decided to revolt and destroy the organisation that claims to uplift the black race while being the opposite. However, the protagonist finds himself fighting collective denial, ignorance, and lack of unity. No one shares the same insights, and nobody believes him, either because they see him as too young and new or because they are jealous of him, although the author does not elaborate further on this idea. These events deeply wounded the protagonist psychologically; the experiences he had made him question and doubt his trust in others. This, however, contributes to a growing sense of alienation and psychological turmoil.

II. 7. Conclusion

Ellison's *Invisible Man* is regarded as one of the most important pieces of literature because it deals with complex themes such as invisibility, blindness, alienation, and the impact of racism on the psychological side of any human being. Ralph Ellison managed to employ rich metaphors about the themes that this chapter covered; he was able to describe his protagonist's struggle to be invisible and unseen by his surroundings simply because of the colour of his skin. Later, Ellison describes the condition of both black people and whites as blind to each other. He creates fascinating metaphors about this blindness issue, showing how African Americans are

blind to their suffering and humiliation by ignoring the truth about their submissiveness and powerlessness towards the whites. On the other side, white people's oblivion is described as intended and inherited behaviour that causes them to neglect and marginalise people of colour under the cloak of being uncivilised and savages, which should remain far from white people's sphere of influence.

This chapter analyses the theme of alienation and isolation that negatively affected the protagonist: how society neglects him and fails to recognise him as an individual. The invisible man falls into the net of alienation, which contributes significantly to his progress in his quest for self-enlightenment. Lastly, Ellison combined all these four themes into the psychological impact on the protagonist. In this chapter, Ellison showcases how such themes negatively affected the lives of coloured people throughout the years, from slavery until the modern day, with racism as the central tool for oppression. Through his protagonist's turmoil with these themes, he questions his place in society, which can lead to internal troubles and suffering. In the end, Ellison was able to describe and highlight the suffering of his people through his character in the novel *Invisible Man* and how black people are bearing and still experiencing the effects of racism and social discrimination.

The protagonist's quest for self-discovery and identity formation is going to be explored in the next chapter. The reader can comprehend the protagonist's long struggle for recognition through several events, accidents, and other traumatic experiences. The protagonist finally develops a sense of maturation as these experiences shape his perspective and motivate him to write his life story.

Chapter Three:
The Quest for Self-
Enlightenment in
Ellison's *Invisible Man*

III. 1. Introduction

The novel *Invisible Man* is regarded as one of the most important modernist works of the twenty-first century. In 1952, after it was published, it won the National Book Award for fiction because it employed modernist techniques that enriched the narration. Ralph Ellison, the author of the book, manages to draw links between his fictional story and actual historical events that happened in the United States during the novel's time. Through the journey of his African American protagonist, he demonstrates the unjust treatment of black people and how they are regarded as invisible and unseen in the American community. Therefore, African American people, through the characterization of the unnamed protagonist, demonstrate the dehumanising effects of racial prejudice and racism and how they are suffering to establish one unified identity in the face of white domination.

This chapter examines the final journey of the protagonist, in other words, his maturation journey throughout the story. We are going to study the symbols that contribute to changing his perspectives and how these symbols are the starting points for his self-discovery. This chapter studies how the protagonist manages to discover his self-realization through multiple events and factors. Lastly, we will delve into the protagonist's quest for self-discovery despite the challenges he encounters, enabling the hero to discover his obliviousness and gain many experiences that make him aware and mature enough to face any racial obstacles or racist treatment after his transformational journey.

III. 2 . Symbolism and the Self-Enlightenment

Ellison filled his novel with symbols that enriched the narration, making it more profound and, most importantly, substantial to the novel. He uses symbols to highlight complex themes, such as invisibility, identity, racial prejudice, and sometimes social commentary, to readers. The reader can comprehend and delve deeper into the text by employing such rich symbols. The use of symbols comes in various shapes, and each shape affects the protagonist either positively or negatively.

The symbol of the cast-iron figure ([Appendix 02](#)) serves as a powerful symbol of racial depiction; this racist object was designed to minimise the African American people and to depict them as marginalised without any rights to claim. The encounter between the cast-iron figure and the protagonist takes place in chapter fifteen at Mary's place. This kind of black woman guided and supported the narrator during his period of confusion in Harlem. After several weeks in her place, the cast-iron figure was at his nightstand, but he did not notice it until his deep involvement with the organisation of the Brotherhood. The fact that he notices it now shows how he changes throughout his journey; he starts to see things clearly around him. One day, the protagonist wakes up to a loud sound coming from downstairs. The sound became even louder, so he started to look for something heavy to silence whatever was downstairs, and then he saw the cast-iron figure lying on the nightstand, looking directly into his eyes.

The cast-iron figure of a very black, red lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. (Ellison 319)

The cast-iron figure was designed as a black figure extending the palm of his hand near his mouth so the coin would be placed in his palm, and then it would swallow the coin. When the narrator saw it, he was filled with anger. Enraged by the look of it, he grabbed it and destroyed it on the floor, shattered it into pieces. "I stooped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around" (Ellison 319). By destroying the figure, the protagonist demonstrates how much he evolved throughout his time at the Brotherhood and in Harlem's streets. The cast-iron figure represents the protagonist's naïve thinking when he was in the Brotherhood when he decided to join the organisation and accepted Jack's offer, though unaware he was selling his dignity and true identity to this organisation's ideology. Just like the cast-iron figure, the narrator agrees willingly to do everything the Brotherhood says without any question, making him a slave to Jack, the leader of the organization.

There were specific reasons behind the protagonist's acceptance to be part of the organisation, and the main reason was money. The protagonist was in dire need of money during his time in Harlem, and Jack somehow knew the narrator's needs, so he offered him a large sum of money to persuade him to join the organisation, which he accepted. The Brotherhood's ideology towards the narrator is to act and not to think; by doing so, he is restrained by their demands and orders, which applies to the example of the cast-iron figure. Flipping the money to his mouth and suffocating with greed blinds him to the true nature of the Brotherhood. After years of experience within the organisation, he sees the cast-iron figure and uncovers the hidden intentions of the Brotherhood, which he fights at the end of the story. This symbol of the cast-iron figure represents a powerful image of the harsh journey that the protagonist took, which changed

him and made him realise his place in his society and the knowledge that white people's treatment towards black people will never change.

The Sambo doll ([Appendix 03](#)) is another important symbol that helped the narrator in his self-enlightenment endeavour; similar to the cast-iron figure, it serves the same racial images for African American culture. During the invisible man's time in the Brotherhood, he befriended a man called Tod Clifton. Together with similar hopes, they were dreaming of being successful men and becoming prominent members of their black community to help their fellow people; however, the dream is shattered as the narrator witnesses the lynching of his best friend in the streets of Harlem in broad daylight. However, before the police arrive, the narrator witnesses something strange: he sees Tod selling racist dolls. He is shocked by what he sees, and he blames his friend for being a traitor to their cause.

I'd seen nothing like it before grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper with thin flat cardboard disks forming its head and feet and which some mysterious mechanism was causing it to move up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face. (Ellison 431)

Later, as the story progresses, the narrator realises that Tod's actions were for good reason. He discovers that they were both puppets for the Brotherhood; just like the Sambo doll, they could not move or think of their own will; they were put on strings like marionettes fully controlled by the Brotherhood. When the narrator knew about this, he was determined to fight and expose the organisation for its heinous actions, which had done nothing to defend the lynching of one of its members, Todd Clifton. This act of courage by the narrator demonstrates the full maturation and

self-realisation that he achieved. The symbol of the Sambo doll represents the protagonist's torch for his self-enlightenment situation.

Tarp's chains ([Appendix 04](#)) are considered another important symbol of the protagonist's awareness. When he was in the organisation, he knew a man called Tarp. Tarp was an old black man who witnessed slavery when he was a kid. When the protagonist spends several days with him, Tarp seems to like him and starts giving him lessons and advice about life, especially dealing with white people. One day, when the protagonist is in Tarp's office, the latter shares a secret with the narrator. He told him about his time in bondage and slavery, and to straighten his words, he gave the narrator his chains of slavery, which he broke to flee from the South to Harlem in the North. "A thick, dark, oily piece of filed steel that had been twisted open and forced partly back into place, on which I saw marks that might have been made by the blade of a hatchet" (Ellison 389). He offered his chains to the narrator as a symbol of not giving up on the fight for freedom and identity.

Tarp teaches the protagonist about the importance of determining your own identity instead of letting others do it. For Tarp, his chains remind him of the oppression that he faced during his time in slavery, which prevented him from discovering his identity. He gave him his chains so he could learn from his mistakes when he was enchained. He also tries to teach the protagonist that if the past is holding him from discovering himself, he should break any connection that might hold him from realising his true identity.

The last and probably most significant symbol is the protagonist's briefcase ([Appendix 05](#)), which he won in the book's first chapter at the Battle Royale. This symbol represents the commitment that the narrator has for his briefcase, and as the story progresses, he encounters all

the symbols that we mentioned before. Although these symbols remind the narrator of his painful past, they still hold greater importance in his heart, for they make him realise his ignorance and naivety and learn from his mistakes and the mistakes of others. He then puts them all in his briefcase, such as the letters from Dr. Bledsoe, the Sambo doll, the cast-iron figure, and Tarp's leg chains. Each of these symbols indeed helps and contributes in making the narrator more aware and getting him closer to his self-enlightenment version; however, the fact that he still holds on to them and keeps them in his briefcase determines that he still has one more obstacle to pass, and that obstacle was in the last act of the novel, it was the last act that will determine the full maturation and awareness of the narrator when he went underground to rethink about his place in the society.

The protagonist grabs the briefcase ([Appendix 06](#)), which contains all the symbols from the letters from Dr Bledsoe, the Sambo doll, the cast-iron figure and Tarp's leg chains, and then he throws his briefcase in the fire that he made to have some light in his dark underground section. The author here tries to tell the reader that burning the briefcase and what it contains will enlighten his dark path. This final act showcases the protagonist's full maturation and self-realisation. He was ready to get rid of all the previous symbols that he thought to be a source of inspiration and burn them so he could have light to guide him throughout his journey.

III. 3 . Self-Realisation in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

The protagonist witnessed many events throughout his journey, which also changed his perspectives on society and the people around him. Each event contributes to the maturation of the narrator, making him so much closer to his final self-enlightenment state. Specific incidents showcase how much the protagonist is evolving and starts to see things clearly, and he starts to

act according to his own will instead of being unquestioningly guided by others. For instance, the death of Tod Clifton was a shock for the narrator, igniting something in him. Later, he discovers that the Brotherhood enslaved Tod and him. After that, the narrator confronts Jack, the leader of the organisation, which tells the reader that this confrontation is the climax in the protagonist's story of self-enlightenment quest. Through the courage and the experiences that the narrator developed, he was able to uncover the real intentions of the Brotherhood, especially Jack; they have zero interest in making blacks' lives better; instead, they seek to destroy the black community from the inside out through deception and propaganda.

In psychoanalytic theory, the concept of confrontation is an essential term that can be studied in many ways; the confrontation comes as a means of building the narrator's self-consciousness. In psychoanalytic criticism, confrontation and the unconscious mind are linked together through the protagonist's actions. The invisible man, through confronting his unconscious mind, allowed him to challenge and escape the oppressed social order in which he lived. These confrontations are uncovered over the course of the narration. Each time he tries to confront someone, he becomes more aware of himself and less repressed, ultimately leading him to discover his awareness by the novel's end.

According to the disciplines of Freudian psychology, the unconscious is memories buried deep inside the mind; it is only through certain stimuli or behaviours like Freudian slips or dreams that the unconscious mind stands out. If we applied these Freudian disciplines to the novel and specifically to the protagonist, the readers would uncover the emergent aspects of the protagonist's unconscious mind. The narrator's repressed memories include his Southern heritage, his time at the Brotherhood, and the mistreatments he faced at college. Also, in Freudian psychology, these repressed memories can only heal through confronting the unconscious;

fortunately, the narrator has already done this; he confronted his oppressors, which made him achieve a great triumph and led him to his awareness of his unconscious mind. “In his ulterior stance as narrator, the invisible man has already undergone this confrontation and so possesses the ability to reconstruct elements of his unconsciousness for readers to decode” (The Unconscious Mind).

Another event that shows the protagonist’s maturation is the riot in Harlem. In these chapters, the narrator tries to escape from a gangster called Ras, the destroyer. The narrator finds dark glasses and a hat that he wears to hide from the gangsters; this disguise makes people mistakenly name him Rinehart. The Rinehart character has multiple identities since he is famous for his personality and identity. It seems that everyone knows him and actually likes him. According to the narrator, this was a significant step in his journey. He had been struggling with his identity, and he finally found an identity that was loved and known by everyone, which he could embrace. The character of Rinehart is the visibility that the invisible man seeks throughout his journey. When he puts on the glasses and the hat, he feels the power of Rinehart’s multiple identities; however, his maturation prevents him from neglecting his true identity, and at some point, his glasses break, and he loses his identity disguise, which makes him realise that this Rinehart identity is no good for him and neglecting his true identity is no option for his self-realisation, so he decided to get rid of his Rinehart identity despite all the advantages it has. “I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart’s multiple personalities and turned away. It was too vast and confusing to contemplate” (Ellison 562).

Another form of confronting the unconscious mind is in the identity of Rinehart, which gives the protagonist multiple identities to take. In psychoanalytic criticism, this identity transformation can be interpreted in many forms, one of which is the Other. In psychoanalytic

theory, the concept of Other is regarded as a form of the self that takes on many identities, but at the same time, they are different from one's conscious identity; they can include repressed desires, dreams, or hopes. This can be applied to the protagonist's quest to choose to be one of Rinehart's many identities. For the narrator, Rinehart's identities are his unconscious desires and hopes, like being popular among people or recognising them. Through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, we interpret the protagonist's decision to take Rinehart's identity as a desperate act for recognition based on his unconscious mind's desires and hopes.

Through the narrator's quest for his identity, he meets with a man selling yams in the streets of Harlem. When the narrator saw him, a wave of nostalgia suddenly hit him. The smell of the yams reminds him of his heritage and origins, and he thinks that he should not be ashamed of his culture but instead be proud of his origins. The yams themselves hold significant symbolic meaning. In African American culture, yams express sustenance, resilience, and cultural identity; they represent resilience and African culture for black people. The first bite by the narrator sends him years back in time to his African culture; his expression serves as a powerful symbol of his heritage. The act of eating the yams made the narrator realise and assert his cultural identity, as it reminded him of the importance of his origins and the collective experiences of his people. This feeling of eating yams, which the narrator enjoyed, involves a range of strong emotions, including nostalgia, pride, and love. Although eating yams is a simple act, it is also significant because it made him shrewd about his unawareness and the struggle faced by his people. This yam's experience serves as a catalyst for his journey to self-enlightenment and realisation.

These symbols mentioned before are powerful metaphors Ellison uses to enrich his novel. Each symbol represents either whites' oppression or the meaning of heritage and the importance of recognising African American origins. In any case, all of them were regarded as integral parts

of the story and helped shape the protagonist's path towards self-realisation and his quest for self-enlightenment.

III. 4. Identity Formation in Ellison's Narrative

One of the most important themes that the novel *Invisible Man* addresses is the search for the protagonist's individual identity. Throughout the story, he is seen struggling and lost, not knowing where he belongs, and it seems that he is rejected by everyone, including his race. Parr and Savery commented on his condition as follows: "Ellison believed that true identity could be revealed by experiencing certain endeavours and overcoming them" (86). Although the protagonist did suffer physically and emotionally through his embracement of several identities, in the end, he was able to discover his identity against all odds.

In the prologue, Ellison demonstrates the state of his protagonist as a lost man without an actual identity. He states, "All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned, somebody tried to tell me what it was" (07). Through this quotation, the reader will understand that the protagonist is searching for his lost identity in a society that refuses to recognise him as an individual because it treats him as if his blackness is his identity. As a result, he is seen as an invisible man with an invisible identity. However, as the story progresses, the reader will also see the protagonist's transformation from his naivety and ignorance to his final version of himself as a mature and knowledgeable man due to his experiences and the challenges he encounters with different people throughout his quest to find his identity.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist witnesses many events that prevent him from defining himself and distort his inner vision because the dominant white society keeps control of other minority groups. John Callahan says, "his experiences teach him that the act of 40 meaning

is linked inextricably to issues of power and control” (191). Therefore, the protagonist cannot assert his identity due to the restraints and the concepts of identity imposed upon him by those who hold power over him. Erich Fromm comments on this obsession with controlling others as “the black man has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts, but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys” (120). The fatal mistake that the narrator makes in his quest for identity is looking at himself as a victim. He tries to create an image of himself based on the eyes of other people; as John Callahan states, “When he attempts to live according to the dictates of others, he loses his autonomy and suffers repeated betrayals, he discovers the true meaning of his life only after he assumes responsibility for naming himself by telling his own story” (191).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the protagonist’s acceptance of other people’s perspectives on his authenticity or individuality can be linked to the superego, which is related to societal norms and interactions. According to psychoanalytic theory, the superego may compel the protagonist to conform to societal expectations, thinking this could gain him recognition, respect, and acceptance.

The protagonist, during his final stages, admits to being foolish and naïve as he was blind toward his own identity that he decided to overlook during the early stages of his life, as he commented, “And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So, after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others, I finally rebelled. I am invisible man” (Ellison 05).

The theme of identity in this novel can take various shapes, and one of these shapes is voice. If we mention identity, we can also relate to voice because, without a voice to defend and proclaim one's identity, there will be no individuality in the first place. Therefore, the protagonist must raise his voice against those who oppose him. The protagonist possesses a particular skill; he is a powerful orator, and throughout the novel, he executes this skill perfectly. The evidence for this lay in the first chapters when he was invited to deliver his speech to a vast white gathering, which impressed the white audience, and the next show was at the funeral of his friend, where he delivered a powerful speech to the extent that it made the crowd emotional. However, the irony lies in the personality of the protagonist. Although he possesses this rare skill, he does not use it to his advantage and speaks up for himself in order to oppose or challenge the people who oppress him.

During the first chapters, readers may wonder why the protagonist fails to stand up for himself even though he is not to blame; these incidents happened multiple times. For instance, during his time at Tuskegee University, he was expelled due to his naivety and lack of experience. The voiceless dilemma occurred when the university's president expelled him and offered no time for the narrator to explain. The president commented, "Your poor judgement has caused this school uncalculated damage. Instead of uplifting the race, you've torn it down," he added once more. "Boy, I'm getting rid of you!" (Ellison 139).

A similar accident happened during the narrator's time in the Brotherhood organisation; once more, he was fired from the organisation, but this time, he was expelled due to his oratory skill. After the death of his friend and the rejection of the brotherhood for not investigating the murder of one of its members, the narrator decided to bring justice by himself. He then delivered a powerful speech at the funeral of his friend, in which he somehow incited his people against the

brotherhood's ideology. When the organisation knew about this, it accused the narrator of being too big for himself as well as deviating from the Brotherhood's path. This treason made him realise it was time to take responsibility for his future and societal position. These betrayals brought him closer to self-discovery and his identity.

The first signs of his awareness lie in the incidents that he witnessed on the streets of Harlem. Two black couples were evicted from their home in the presence of the whole street, including whites and blacks. This couple was illegally evicted from their house because of segregation laws. By using force, their belongings were thrown outside. Despite the black gathering, not even one moved to protest or defend the couple about this prejudice act. Here, the protagonist, and according to the experiences he encountered, something woke up in him. When he sees this mistreatment and this violation of their rights, he remembers his experiences as if he were in their place. By overcoming his fears and using his anger towards racism, he protests and defends the couple. He screams loudly, bringing out everything inside him, releasing every opportunity that he missed to defend himself, ignoring what others think about him, and forgetting the idea of satisfying the whites. He pushed the couple inside their house and carried their belongings inside. Nevertheless, this does not end here; after this confrontation between the two police officers, he delivered a powerful speech using his oratory skills as a weapon to incite the black gathering so that they could speak up for their rights against white domination. The protagonist's victory was not just against the two officers; it was a win over himself, as he just made a successful jump in his quest for identity reconstruction. This will mark his first steps towards self-enlightenment and asserting his final version of himself.

During the narrator's experiences with different people, he discovered that no matter what he did or how long he lived, he would always be perceived as an invisible man and no longer

invisible to himself; he finally knew what he indeed was. Kate Prudchenko commented on the protagonist's realisation as follows: "Our identities continue to evolve throughout our lives, and the people we are at old age are probably not the people we were as children. Nevertheless, even if that identity remains, it has been challenged over and over by different aspects of life so that the identity that remains is the true one" (55).

The theme of identity has been a debatable topic in shaping the history of African Americans. Black people were always in a constant challenge against the dominant white people. In this novel, the theme of identity is a central topic of the story, as the protagonist is in an endless chase for his individual identity, which started in the early chapters as a naïve young man all the way from the South to the North in an effort to locate his identity, which he will find after years of suffering and struggles. Historically speaking, during the 1940s, African Americans like the protagonist sought to recognise their identity struggle because their concerns were ignored, their demands were refused, and their rights were violated, as society had promised to visualise them as outsiders due to cultural differences, even though both races share the same nationality. As Ellison noted, "Blacks are desperately searching for a black person. By refusing to give them second-class status, they feel alienated and have been searching for answers all their lives: who am I, what am I, and where am I?" (Howard & Chester).

Ellison showed the reader the protagonist's transformation from a simple-minded, inexperienced young man at his Southern black school to his bold move to the North, where he will continue his quest for his lost identity. This journey reflects his transformation from ignorance to knowledge. A person's identity is related to his self-perception of his own identity and the world around him, which makes him unique and distinctive from others; therefore, through this truth, a person defines or prescribes himself (Weissmann 461). Throughout the story,

the narrator is in a constant struggle to find his lost identity and to gain recognition from his white members; however, this endeavour for the satisfaction of others transformed into a disappointment after he realised and embraced his invisibility form, which marked his transformation into his self-enlightenment state. During his first years in college, he was an ignorant student; he was blind to the truth in front of him due to his lack of experience and the need for knowledge about his society. The big mistake that the protagonist committed was believing that he would get help and support through blind obedience; however, it was this belief that made him lost and in a constant search for his identity.

As an African American writer, Ellison is no stranger to his people's suffering. He was able to assert the struggle for his people to find their lost identity in a world where one feels worthless or displaced, which builds upon certain ideologies and stereotypes that were deeply rooted for hundreds of years. Therefore, the central theme of the novel is the search for identity. After years of searching, the narrator describes his identity as follows "All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was I was looking for me and asking everyone except myself the question which I, and only I, could answer my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first, I had to discover that I am an invisible man!" (Ellison 05). The narrator finally decides to be himself; all the experiences he witnessed, the traumatic events, and the betrayals he encounters instil a sense of awareness in him. He decides to forget about any event from the past that held him back from being in his true nature. He was entirely convinced to embrace himself and his existing identity and ignore what society told him to be.

In the prologue, the narrator retreats literally in the bowels of the city in a basement underground, where he will recollect all his experiences and the events that happened to him and

reexamine his place or position in his society and among his people. Through this crawl underground, he will not only embrace his metaphorical invisibility form but also emerge once again as an aware man filled with enough experiences to make him compete against white domination. As he describes himself, “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 towards which I originally aspired” (Ellison 11).

At some point in the story, the protagonist links himself with the paint machines, specifically after the paint factory chapter. He saw these machines being circulated and commanded by their superiors, so he thought his body was circulated and commanded just like those machines. He had no wish to destroy himself; he quits the opposite and wants freedom. He expresses the situation in the following way:

I fell to plotting ways of short circulating the machine. Perhaps if I shifted my body about so that the two nodes would come together- no, not only was there no room but it might electrocute me. I shuddered. Whoever else I was, I was not Samson. I had not desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction. I was exhausting, for no matter what the scheme I conceived, there was one constant foe-myself. There was no getting round it. I could not move escape then I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free. (Ellison 243)

Overall, the main struggle for the narrator is his actions and intentions. Whatever he chooses to do seems to put him in another crisis; he is in a crisis of existence.

Ellison displays the question of existence throughout the story through his protagonist's journey. He works in different jobs, visits different places, and encounters many people, but this does not give him a sense of satisfaction about himself; he is still searching for his authentic self. The main question of who I am is the main question for the protagonist because, throughout the story, no passage shows his name; therefore, he is, as Ellison named him, *Invisible Man*. However, he manages to discover an important step that will change his life forever. At the end of the novel, he goes underground in an attempt to hide from Ras and his crew, but during his time there, he discovers that he can hibernate to refresh his memory and recollect what happened to him during the past twenty-two years of his life.

In the prologue, the reader would think that the protagonist was going to stay underground in his hibernation because it seemed like a permanent situation; however, in the epilogue, things start to get clear for the reader as he discovers that this hibernation was an essential stage towards his journey of identity. This hibernation was an integral part of the protagonist as it gave him a new life or birth; it was his salvation towards the new endeavour he was about to take when he rejoined society once again. Due to his hibernation, he is ready to accept the invisibility state that tormented him for years. After embracing it, he is ready to rise among those who underestimated him, as he confesses, "I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (313).

According to the lenses of psychoanalytic theory, the underground can be a symbol to highlight the protagonist's subconscious mind. This withdrawal to the boils of the city can be

escapism from the oppression and the chaos of his society; it was a necessary move for the protagonist for recollection and self-reflection. This hibernation can also be associated with symbols of death and rebirth. When the protagonist chooses to stay underground, leaving everything behind him, he experiences psychological transformation as if he were reborn again.

In another psychoanalytic study, the confrontation with his unconscious mind can be linked to his hibernation phase. This decision to hide underground was a pivotal step in the protagonist's identity formation. This was due to his subconscious desires and repressed memories. Through this hibernation, he could confront the deep desires inside his psyche. However, the protagonist cannot become what is known in psychoanalysis, a hyperconscious character with a high level of self-awareness. This facilitates the narrative, enabling readers to understand the main character and his outer world deeply. Tzvetan Todorov comments on this reading facilitation: "Readers encounter a logic within the text that enables them to construct imaginary worlds. Through clues embedded in sentence structure, point of view, mode, or timing, readers accrue familiarity with characters and the worlds in which they operate, often gaining the ability to predict characters' actions, known as "psychological determinism" (77). Ellison's *Invisible Man* presents a unique model where the narrator takes control of character construction and determinism. Unlike traditional models where readers dictate these factors, the invisible man, from his underground position, reclaims his narrative agency and unconscious mind, allowing him to tell his life story.

Now that the protagonist is ready to cast aside his old self or his old identities that once were his only hope, he is ready to invent a new identity that belongs to him. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is ready with his new self, identity, and purpose; he wants to face his racist

society and impose his identity; his blackness has ceased to exist because he is now fully aware of the true nature of his society and the people around him as well.

During the prologue, the protagonist begins to understand the meaning of his life. At this stage, he has witnessed and survived multiple traumatic experiences, including the riot in Harlem. This change in his life allowed him to learn what he could not achieve previously. He has realized that embracing his invisibility gives him the power to transcend reality. As a result, he now has a vision of clarity that enables him to observe things differently. During the final parts of the last chapter, we now know the protagonist on a more personal level and not just as a nameless African American man, so the reason behind his struggles becomes understandable. Remembering the protagonist's encounter with the veterans on the Golden Days, it is evident that his experiences in life have made him more aware and empathic of their situation than in his naive young college student days. Although his society has not changed significantly, the protagonist's perspective towards life behaviour has changed dramatically because he is now a veteran like the others in the Golden Day.

During the epilogue, Ellison reunites the protagonist with Mr. Norton once more. Mr. Norton is in a completely different shape, and even the protagonist cannot recognize him as the man he once identified as the keeper of his destiny. Due to the narrator's long quest for his true identity, the protagonist's awareness allows him to speak for his triumph as he states, "if you don't know where you are, you probably don't know who you are" (Ellison 580). Life is truly ironic in the novel, as Mr Norton starts the story in a high position as one of the founders of the University of Tuskegee, while the protagonist is a nameless man with no status or legacy to hold on to. This reversal of fortune highlights the treacherous nature of life. However, Mr Norton's

incapacity to find his way serves as a metaphor for his existential plight, while he not only loses his physical direction but goes through a crisis of disorientation in his life.

Examining the protagonist's reasons for writing his life story, the narrator understands that writing helps him through the pain of his past and forgets the hate. In the final chapters, the reader will understand that even though the protagonist's experiences as a black man in white America are unique, his ventures are so familiar with the experiences of all human beings. Ellison, through his protagonist, suggests that he speaks on his behalf; perhaps, at some point, he might speak for all of us. The narrator's perception as a hero or victim depends on whether the reader interprets his situation literally as living underground or metaphorically as living in his subconscious mind. It also depends on whether the reader believes he is in hibernation or simply hiding.

III. 5. Conclusion

The conclusion that can be drawn from this chapter entitled The Quest for Self-Enlightenment in Ellison's *Invisible Man* is that the protagonist constantly struggled to find his identity in a society that kept ignoring him and refusing to recognise him as an individual. However, the genuine mistake that the protagonist committed was his foolish thinking in searching for a definition according to others and specifically in the eyes of white people. He continued searching for his identity in the wrong places with the wrong people; therefore, all the efforts that he thinks he made led him far away from finding his desirable needs and made him invisible to himself and everyone else. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, he discovers the secret to his salvation, looking for his existence within himself. His last stage, hibernation, was the ultimate step to solving his identity riddle. There, he learned and discovered his invisibility,

blackness, heritage, and origins, which he once sought to neglect and ignore as if they were obstacles to his quest, while they were the keys to finding his lost identity and personality. Ellison was able to describe his protagonist's journey from invisibility to self-enlightenment breathtakingly; the author's unique way of describing the protagonist's experiences and emotions makes the novel an exceptional modernist work that touches the heart and soul of the reader.

General Conclusion

The discussion about Ellison's *Invisible Man* has revealed a thorough investigation of the protagonist's transformation from invisibility to self-enlightenment through social commentary, self-growth, and personal discovery. Ellison engaged the reader in an epic journey to find the true meaning of cultural identity and social recognition. Throughout the protagonist's search for recognition and visibility, Ellison once again describes and portrays the complexities of American society and the condition of African American people in the mid-twentieth century.

This analysis highlights the protagonist's commitment to shake off the invisibility state imposed by a corrupted system and oppressive institutions and elevate him to enlightenment and awareness. This journey follows a road of troubles and challenges, like being expelled from college, surviving a lethal accident, witnessing the lynching of his best friend, and facing imminent death. By traversing these landscapes of troubles, the protagonist emerges as an example of resilience and commitment and urges the readers to confront societal norms or imposed ideas.

During the protagonist's odyssey within Ellison's *Invisible Man*, it has become clear that the concept of invisibility serves as an unprecedented force for the narrator; it has shaped his trajectory, revealing the truth about his society as well as his path towards his self-enlightenment and awareness. Through our analysis of the novel's chapters, we have delved into the layers of invisibility's literal and metaphorical meaning and showcased how it affected the protagonist, both as a barrier and sometimes as an advantage. We have also stressed the protagonist's journey and how it reflects a great determination and relentless endeavour for his visibility and self-enlightenment amidst the struggles against societal marginalization and oppressive institutions. Our analysis has also shown the strong relationship between invisibility and identity, underscoring how both concepts affect the protagonist and pushing him further to link between

the two concepts to find his true purpose against all odds. Through our involvement with Ellison's *Invisible Man*, we have unfolded the protagonist's journey and come to a crossroads with fundamental questions of personal visibility and racial identity.

Therefore, the main question of this study is to what extent does the concept of invisibility impact the protagonist's journey throughout the novel *Invisible Man*? The analysis showed that invisibility tremendously shapes the protagonist's journey, influencing his decisions, interactions, and perceptions throughout the novel. Based on this analysis, the hypothesis was confirmed, which means that invisibility is a central theme in the novel. Through his invisibility, the unnamed narrator learns to embrace it and use it to his advantage; ultimately, this ability leads him to achieve his desire to form an identity of his own.

Speaking about the journey tackled by the protagonist in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the effects of the antagonist figure on the protagonist in building the way for his metaphorical invisibility and the acceptance of it is noticeable. During the story, these characters stimulate the protagonist's growth and development, urging him to confront, challenge, and fight his way out through social expectations, racial prejudices, and the difficulties of an identity crisis.

Throughout the protagonist's development from an invisibility state to a self-awareness form, it becomes evident that the antagonist figures played a pivotal role in the evolution of the protagonist's transformative road. The profound influence of external powers impacted the protagonist's quest for identity discovery, making him more aware and hungry for self-recognition and realization.

The second question was how the antagonistic figures contribute to shaping the protagonist's awareness and self-enlightenment in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The analysis

provided that these antagonist characters significantly shape the protagonist's journey, contributing to his self-awareness and enlightenment through his interactions with them throughout the story. Therefore, the proposed hypothesis was confirmed. Through the experiences gained from these characters, he was able to transform his state of invisibility into a state of maturity and enlightenment.

This extended essay has shed light on the strong relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist figures, stressing the pivotal role of the protagonist's development due to the antagonist figures' impacts. Also, this essay has showcased how adversity can lead to personal growth and self-realisation. As a result, this extended essay has conducted essential themes and symbols that strengthened the significance of the protagonist and the antagonist figures and how this helped shape the hero's journey for his self-discovery, allowing him to realize his place in society and his personality's development.

During the last chapters of the novel, the readers will be able to recognize the protagonist's metamorphosis phase. First, in the earliest chapters, the protagonist can be portrayed as a naïve, inexperienced young student who is unable to defend himself step by step through the encounters with different characters. The readers will notice the slight change in the protagonist's personality as if he learned and observed each character throughout the story to develop his character. Therefore, in the novel's last chapters, the protagonist is fully matured and aware of the experiences and treatments of each antagonist figure.

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Appendices

Appendix 01: Harlem Street (Canva AI)



Appendix 02: The Cast Iron Figure (Canva AI)



Appendix 03: The Sambo Doll (Google Images)



Appendix 04: Tarp's Chain (Google Images)



Appendix 05: The Briefcase and the Recommendation Letters (Canva AI)



Appendix 06: The *Invisible Man* with his Briefcase (Created by Canva AI)

