TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

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GROUP 2 – EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research question: To what extent is the protagonist's identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* shaped by historical, cultural and political climates in mid 20th century US, and what are the implications of those external forces on the concept of individuality?

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Abstract

This extended essay is an investigation of the extent to which the nameless narrator's identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is shaped by historical, political and cultural climates as well as the implications of those external forces on the concept of individuality. It explores the individuality and the identity of the narrator in terms of his background, his relationships and certain figures of power in his life and their affects on him by conducting a close reading of the novel and integrating relevant secondary resources such as Rika Anzawa's "Narrative, Power Politics, and the Emergence of the Black Mass Sphere in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" and Alan Bourassa's "Affect, History, and Race and Ellison's *Invisible* Man" which were key elements of the investigation.

In a society where certain constraints are lifted, there is a period of adjustment, and the narrator struggles to create his identity within this period as a black man. This essay investigates the nature of the formation of his identity and various setbacks due to the societal structure in 20th century US. In addition to a traditional literary analysis, an inquiry into the philosophical nature of human identity and the process in which it is formed including race in a racially divided society were the two main driving factors of the research.

Despite his efforts, Ellison's nameless narrator fails to attain a respected place in society for himself, thus accepting his invisibility as his identity. He secludes himself, which Ellison seems to suggest represents a failure of a race to establish their equality in a social and political sense. The essay consists of the steps leading to this failure, a black man's relentless struggle to find a place for himself in a white man's world.

Word Count: 288

I. Introduction

During mid 20th century, US was in turmoil of racial discrimination after black people were enslaved for decades, which eventually ended with the Civil War and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, a difficult point in history for a black man to become a part of the society. Although Lincoln freed most slaves, this freedom could not translate into the social lives of blacks because even though they were free by law, they were under heavy societal pressure of kowtowing to the 'white folks.' In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the nameless narrator struggles to create an identity for himself in his community, and, therefore, he is on the brink of losing his existential state, and he, consequently, turns into 'an invisible man' in the white man's world.

II A. Grandfather

Growing up, the nameless narrator is influenced extensively by his grandfather's deathbed words, and they inevitably become a crucial aspect of his life, which is a projection of his ancestor's history on him. His grandfather, whose only presence in the novel is through memory, is considered one of the key characters in the formation of his identity, as his words continue to resonate throughout the narrator's life. Learning to respect, dignify, and live to pleasure the white folks, the narrator is traumatized by his grandfather's speech:

> 'Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to

> death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.' (Ellison 16)

These words perplex his mind when he does something that is appreciated by the white folks that he truly believes in his heart; his grandfather's words follow him and within his subconscious he knows he is going against the wishes of his grandfather. For instance, after Battle Royal, a vastly degrading act, he still wants to give his speech to the white folks and thinks that they are actually interested. He becomes a person that his grandfather would have despised, and he can many times feel that as the memory of his grandfather comes into his mind, he instantly tries to evade it. As portrayed in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls Of Black Folk*, he is in a state of duality as he sees himself looking through eyes of others:

> One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois)

The narrator struggles with this twoness by trying to satisfy the white men while the urge to act naturally continuously battles against this idea. Being on the horns of dilemma, just as the narrator is, can become an obstacle in the way of creating an identity for himself as the narrator eventually becomes invisible. Additionally, the narrator is in a state of mind that is both fearful of getting labeled a liar by white men and guilty because of this twoness and the phony nature of his actions that prevents him from showing his true colors. Nevertheless, he struggles to find a solution in the white man's world to reconcile this guilt; therefore, he's in the midst of an existential crisis.

II B. Battle Royal

Perhaps the first time the narrator is awarded for his academic talents foreshadows the cruelty of the outside world and how he will forcibly lose whatever identity he has already formed. Graduating from high school as a model student, he is asked to deliver a speech to town's leading white citizens; however, a battle royal comes first. In "American Nightmare" Rich explains, the Battle Royal is a representation of "a race stripped of volition and dignity, divided against itself, callously exploited, rendered both invisible and blind." Even after the abolition of slavery, the remarks of such harsh behavior could not be easily removed and the narrator sets a perfect example of the following generation's conflicts and ironies in the process of finding their place within their communities. Battle royal, represented as an analogy of the dichotomies in African-Americans, underscores the vulnerability of black people at the time of fusing into the society. As the former slave-master relationship is dissolved into a society of mixed race and equality, both parties struggle to adapt to the new world order.

II C. College & Golden Day

Later, when he wins a scholarship at the college for Negroes, he finally feels shielded from the words of grandfather. His dream about his grandfather that night portrays the intricacy of his emotional state and also underscores the ironic nature of the letter that his grandfather asked him to read in his dream. That letter reads "'To Whom It May Concern,' I intoned. 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running'" (Ellison 33). As the narrator is desperate to identify himself, he's willing to do anything, and Ellison foreshadows the narrator's struggle in a Sisyphean cycle. After, when the narrator is expelled from the university, he isn't told this fact and the letters from Dr. Bledsoe serve as a tool to

keep him running. For a naïve, young man this is adequate to keep his fire burning, until he realizes this is just flogging a dead horse and even the most intense work will not create a place for him in the white men's world. With a last comment, Ellison stresses the importance his grandfather's deathbed words have on the narrator's life and mindset: "(It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning. I first had to attend college.)" (Ellison 33). As he dreams the same dream multiple times, Ellison accentuates the importance of the comments from one of his ancestors whom the narrator thinks of highly. Foreshadowing the instances in his college, the narrator makes a paramount remark showing a gradual development of his worldview.

In college, the narrator is entrusted with the responsibility of driving a white trustee around the campus, a responsibility he interprets as a leap forward into the acceptance to the white man's world. While the narrator is driving around with Mr. Norton, one of the college's trustees, an unpleasant interaction occurs between Mr. Norton and Jim Trueblood, a villager who raped his own daughter. Falling ill, then, Mr. Norton asks for a drink, which results in going to Golden Day, a place to find liquor and girls. Then, as Mr. Norton faints the narrator is forcibly in close contact with a long-feared white person. The superiority of the white race imposed a damaging mindset amongst the black people, especially in the black youth as Kenneth Clark, an African-American psychologist, deduced from his 1940 Doll Experiments. The doll experiment consisted of presenting two identical dolls to children with one exception: one was white while the other was black. The child was then asked the following questions: Which doll they would play with? Which one is the nice doll? Which one looks bad? Which one has the nicer color? Considering the results, there was a

weighted preference for the white doll in the study (Dweck). As children can subconsciously understand their parents' prejudiced attitudes towards a specific group, even after the abolition of slavery the narrator feels a "nameless horror" because of the centuries-long oppression (Ellison 86). During a child's development, a pressurized environment of such kind will eventually lead to the establishment of an inferiority complex. The narrator has been under such pressure through his upbringing and the elements are still visible: "I felt a shudder of nameless horror. I had never been so close to a white person before" (Ellison 86). Through time white people have become figures of horror even in an environment of ostensible equality because as was clearly the reality in mid-20th century America, some people were more equal than others.

Back at the college, with fear of losing his place in school, he suffers a state of mind that is on the brink of losing his identity. "Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it" (Ellison 99). The idea of being degraded in the eyes of Dr. Bledsoe, whom the narrator aggrandizes and pictures as the black man almost equal to white men, becomes the narrator's inevitable death sentence, at least for him. Ellison portrays the innocence of the narrator as he views the school as his fate for the rest of his life. Driving a respected white trustee to the Golden Day and erroneously showing a side of black community that is looked down at, the narrator is doomed to leave the college and work in the summer to save money supposedly for next year's school fees.

II D. Arrival to New York

The twoness again shows itself as Dr. Bledsoe represents himself as an envoy between the two races; he turns out to be a kowtower to 'control the white folks.' In New York, after learning that Dr. Bledsoe's letters were actually to prevent him from getting a job, by losing what he counted on the most, his scholarly identity, he then becomes obligated to create an identity for himself and this time not based on his past or his education but by his present life. As Ellison pushes the narrator to deal deeply with the issues of individuality and identity, a commonly referenced individualist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, comes to mind, as he views the development of identity an internal action enhanced with external factors. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson explains, "Envy is ignorance, Imitation is Suicide," as he believes one should find himself by himself rather than imitating the characteristics of a leader. The narrator who has seen Dr. Bledsoe as a role model, a mentor and a leader, ultimately realizes he isn't in charge of his life: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan" (Ellison 194). Feeling lost, he seems to have failed to find a place within either society, black or white, and moves on to work at a paint factory.

II E. Factory Explosion

In a strange turn of events on his first day working in the machine room at Liberty Paints, an explosion occurs, and the narrator is in a state of mind that almost resembles a newborn. By breaking the shell of his former identity, he is regenerating himself: "Who am I? I asked myself. But it was like trying to identify one particular cell that coursed through the torpid veins of my body. Maybe I was just this blackness and bewilderment and pain . . ." (Ellison 240). As the narrator is asked some basic questions, he is effectively obliged to question his identity, yet he cannot come to

answer the simplest yet most complex question of all. In *"Affect, History, and Race and Ellison's Invisible Man"* Bourassa explains, in Golden Day and in the Factory hospital, he is about to do something very normal and ordinary yet he is obstructed by certain events. As Bourassa points out the similarity between the two situations, he makes a paramount remark of how both situations involved electricity. In "Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," Johnnie Wilcox asserts, " . . . *Invisible Man* explores how electricity, as an interface between organism and machine, mediates blacks ... into the American system of capital, a body without organs, and that the novel documents the effects this mediation has upon the subjects so transformed." In both interactions, the narrator is left vulnerable and fighting for his life and Ellison, by the use of electricity, illustrates the transformation from a black man to a mass without an identity or a soul. As the narrator struggles again, Ellison underscores the inevitably gloomy side of the narrator, who is in a relentless and unrewarding challenge to exist with an identity: "There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than 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). The narrator feels constrained by this issue of not identifying himself with the society he inhabits in, thus not letting himself be who he actually is. When he is discharged from the hospital, he sees himself as a stranger, a changed person, as Ellison sets out a mood that is rather uncomfortable and out of the ordinary: "Leaving him and going into the paint-fuming air I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me" (Ellison 249). Further exploring Bourassa, he notes:

> In both cases the narrator's perception is a matter of undergoing an

> assault, so it is still not clear that a new kind of perception, an affective perception is awakening, the awareness of energies, of flows, of sensations, of affects. We do know that the narrator's identity, his wish to conform to what has been expected of him is being jarred loose. But this weakening of identity is only a kind of negative afterimage of the new … perception that is only in the embryonic stages at this point. (Bourassa)

With a purely existentialist motive the narrator tries to exist with his blackness without completely assimilating to the white culture and society. Though, as Bourassa writes, he changes, he is altered, and he is not what he was supposed to be, what others expected him to be, but an angry man, a vengeful black man. After years of discrimination and racial prejudice, he has an epiphany regarding his perception of identity itself. His identity, which he both so relentlessly tries to create and also is afraid of, is actually what will bring him the salvation he desires to live a meaningful life. Throughout the novel, the narrator never gives up the struggle to be a part of the white man's world. But, why, despite his endless efforts to serve the white folks, is he still not accepted into the mainstream society?

II F. Eviction

Walking in the streets of New York, he witnesses an eviction, an intensely humiliating experience, of an old black couple, and he almost intuitively stands up in the crowd, creating a paramount turning point of the novel. Channeling his anger and his frustration, the narrator uses his oratory skills to lead the group of spectators: "Let's follow a leader . . . *Organize* . . . . [To the cop:] You heard him, he's the law. He says he'll shoot us down because we are law-abiding people." (Ellison 276). As

the narrator revolts notably perhaps for the first time in his life and he sees that he can control the masses and lead them, Ellison foreshadows his upcoming role as a black leader. He points out the issues that are dehumanizing blacks and are crystal clear to everyone yet is intimidating to talk about because of the oppression and discrimination.

II G. Brotherhood

Getting the attention of the Brotherhood, the narrator is in metamorphosis. He is disposing of his old self to become a leader of the masses, to become a figure of change. Ellison illustrates the naiveté of the narrator as he is in a state of mind that is unaware of his own transformation, yet Brother Jack steers him into the right direction as he talks about how he is nothing like that old couple who got evicted and maybe in the past he was like them but not anymore. As he notes: "You might not recognize it just now, but that part of you is dead! . . . that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it completely and emerge something new. *History* has been born in your brain.' (Ellison 291) Brother Jack's remark is of great importance at this point as it is an illustration of how an external stimulus, like witnessing an eviction, can affect a person and cause him to act in a certain way, just like Emerson's nature apprehension.

In the way of attaining a new place, a more active one in society, the narrator becomes a member of Brotherhood, and as a result, he is given a new name, a clean slate to create his place in history, yet this is just an illusion of establishing a place in the society. The narrator's first speech illustrates his settlement into his identity, a black leader that is to arouse and organize the crowd, as he embraces this chance to make something of himself. Brotherhood's scientific approach to such a social issue

sets out their failure before they begin as it is operating based on the wrong parameters. In “Narrative, Power Politics and the Emergence of the Black Mass Sphere in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” Anzawa notes, “However, the Brotherhood does not offer the protagonist the opportunity to become intimate with the Black masses. His narrative is now controlled by the organization’s “scientific” ideology, with which he is totally unfamiliar” (Anzawa 9). Brotherhood just uses the narrator as a tool and by jamming a committee in between his mind and his words; he is overly controlled and played with by the white society, which he comes to understand far too late. While he is working, he finds Brother Clifton, a compatriot who wished to ‘fall out of Brotherhood’s history,’ selling Sambo dolls, symbolizing the disgusting black stereotype. In further exploration, Anzawa comments, “The grinning, dancing doll without strings ominously symbolizes the protagonist’s position within the politics of Black leadership. Although he struggles to attain his status as a Black leader, his will as an individual has been exploited by the politics of both organizations” (Anzawa 9). Ellison uses this as an analogy of the narrator and his relentless struggles to find and define himself while being abused by people who are drunk on power. The narrator perceives this as an upgrade, though he can only be a leading figure to the extent white people allow, he thinks about how Clifton knows in order to make a name for themselves, they have to act with the Brotherhood and avoid being like ‘empty Sambo dolls’. He fails to grasp the concept of identity as he sees it as a way of being known through the wrong channels and means, like Brotherhood and his ‘scientific’ ideology, rather than embracing who he actually is, a black man living in a world of white supremacy.

As he first by mistake and later on purpose dresses up to look like Rinehart, a known

figure of New York streets, he realizes how easy it is to take up someone's identity and lose your own for that matter. He notes, "What on earth was hiding behind the face of things? If dark glasses and a white hat could blot my identity so quickly, who actually was who?" (Ellison 493). Ellison's take on individualism is apparent at this point as he explores the identity of Rinehart, a chameleon, who wears the guise of many. It is not the feelings or the thoughts of the individual that matter but rather his looks and rind. The narrator is amazed by the power that lies behind Rinehart's transformation: "Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend?" (Ellison 498). Bourassa again comments, "The narrator gradually awakens to this seething world of possibility, and although every plan he formulates fails (for in his formulations, he is still within the mechanistic ideology of the brotherhood) he has been taken up by a pure affective movement" (Bourassa 8). His awakening becomes a call to get himself out of what was consuming him, yet he still fails to abandon his methodology.

II H. Realization & Harlem Riot

After the narrator talks to Hambro about the Brotherhood and how it requires taking advantage of people, he has an epiphany about all his past experiences and he starts to accept: " . . . images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me…. " (Ellison 507-8) He, eventually, recognizes how his identity is to be shaped: his past experiences are undeniable elements in becoming who he is. However, the narrator claims that his identity is not be modified by "blind men, no matter how powerful they became." Yet an ironical part is that this awakening was a result of 'blind men' like Brother Jack. Ellison

emphasizes the powerful nature of identity and the process behind its creation from an individualist angle, thus the complexity behind the narrator's identity.

Clifton's death, a murder, causes a riot in Harlem and eventually leads the narrator to seclude himself in an underground hole. Anzawa adds, "denoting the Black masses' act of inscribing his death into their history as well as rebellion against their invisibility in White-centered America. In the turmoil of the riot, the protagonist falls into a manhole, which physically symbolizes his stepping outside of 'history'" (Anzawa 12). The riot is not about a man's invisibility but a race's invisibility, as Anzawa notes, and the narrator is at a point of accepting that rather than try to fight it. As the narrator hibernates, he eventually goes as far to call himself 'invisible' and with a final illusion of every figure that has had a part in shaping the course of his life, Ellison calls on his narrator to end his hibernation, to end the overstayed hibernation.

III. Conclusion

In the process of creating an identity, a place in society, one must overcome many obstacles, yet in a society that has been attempting to move away from a racially divided class system, like in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, hindrances can become a solid factor that consequently obscures one's development of identity. Ellison's nameless narrator is in a similar state of mind as he tries to become a respected man in a white man's world. His struggle is an ongoing fight as in his many battles, starting with Mr. Norton and Dr. Bledsoe, then his grandfather, and finally ending with Brother Jack and Brotherhood. He is considered a tool in all of his relationships—to Mr. Norton he is his future, his money invested in the right place; for Bledsoe he is a brain washed student to help him serve the whites; in Battle Royal he is an amusement to the

crowd; for Brotherhood he is a speaker meant to lead people in Brotherhood's scientific methodology. As he is used and consumed, he cannot become the person with a soul he strives to be, and his final remark is to accept his failure in achieving that until he resurfaces again. As a black man in a white man's world, the narrator's struggle to create a place for himself comes to nothing; he lives in seclusion and in great terms with his 'invisibility,' a strange characteristic that takes much of his life to come to terms with.

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