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**UNDERGROUND MAN: THE EVER-EVOLVING EXISTENTIALIST IN THE  
FICTION OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, RICHARD WRIGHT, AND  
RALPH ELLISON**

**THESIS**

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School  
of Texas Southern University

By

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Texas Southern University

2022

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OF FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, RICHARD WRIGHT, AND RALPH ELLISON**

By

Joseph Burton, M.A.

Texas Southern University, 2022

Professor, Michael Zeitler, Advisor

Existential philosophers Fyodor Dostoevsky and Jean Paul Sartre sought answers concerning man's placement and subsequent importance in the universe. From a Eurocentric perspective, western man, his being, position, and influence emanate from the center of thought and existence in the western hemisphere. Dostoevsky's existential crisis exhibited in the protagonist from his *Notes from Underground*, and Sartre's concepts of facticity which gives man a direct philosophical link to his freedom, are two popular viewpoints of contemporary existentialism. However, French West Indian Frantz Fanon, counters the European tenets of existential philosophy as it pertains to black people. The conclusions reached in *Black Skin, White Masks* open literary and philosophical pathways to Black Existentialism and Africana Critical Theory. The gulf or great divide between European existentialism and Africana Critical Theory seems mainly uncharted and apparent, especially in the subgenre of existential literature. This paper will attempt to bring forward and narrow the gap by analyzing the works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, and their usage of existential anti-hero characterization within their novels.

This thesis will examine the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and how his meaning of life experiences differ existentially from Fred Daniels, the protagonist in Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, the former being an heir to the Dostoevskian model, and the latter as the precursor to Fanon's ideologies in the afro-centric views on existentialism. A defining of

Africana Critical Theory and Black Existentialism will be given, including similarities and differences. The evolution of existentialism through Ellis and Wright through their works from the philosophical viewpoints of Dostoevsky and Fanon will be explored.

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## VITA

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 1952, Ralph Ellison wrote *Invisible Man*. Eleven years prior in 1941, Richard Wright had written *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Some seventy-seven years before that in 1864, Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky creates a novella called *Notes from Underground*. In Dostoevsky's two-part novella, the first part contemplates human existence in the form of monologue written by an unnamed character who chooses to live underground and detached from society. The second part covers three different plots in which the underground man lives out scenarios involving his interacting with comrades in St. Petersburg, Russia and applying the existential ideas discovered in the first part of the work. In Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Fred Daniels, falsely accused of murder, flees from a forced confession into the sewer system of his city and begins to view his reality in existential terms. Through his isolation, Fred begins to understand his place in the world while living briefly as an outsider. Like Dostoevsky and Wright, Ralph Ellison took up the idea of figuratively living underground as a black man whose lived experiences in the south and later in the north allow him to realize that, to most of America, he is invisible. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an existential novel of a black man, once veiled, seeing the world for what it is as he becomes more and more obscure in it. These three works of literature, *Notes from Underground*, *The Man Who Lived Underground*,

and *Invisible Man* all share the conspicuous theme of man's attempt to live off the grid whether, literally or figuratively, and the existential awareness that accompanies each of the characters as they traverse on their search for the meaning of life. While the novella and the two novels can each be considered as existential in their views of life, they represent distinct philosophies told through the vantage point of authorship. Western existentialism, as exhibited in *Notes from Underground*, with its Danish, Russian and French roots, depicts a contrasting existential comprehension when told from a black and Africana-based perspective in Wright and Ellison.

In the mid-nineteenth century, both Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813- 1855), and Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) shared similar existential views during the same time period, although neither of the two ever became acquainted with the other's writings. The two began to expound on thoughts of the meaning of life and existence through philosophy and literature separately in different parts of the European world. To be an existentialist, even though the phrase itself wasn't officially coined until around a century later by Jean-Paul Sartre, simply encapsulated those who opposed traditional philosophical views, or, as German philosopher Walter Kaufman states, "Existentialism is not a philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy" (11). Kierkegaard's pristine Protestant, Copenhagen upbringing forged a more idealized version of man's perception of the self in regards to his existence, as opposed to the challenged life of Dostoevsky who spent four years in a Siberian prison for his writings, affording him to see differing views of human existence and human suffering from a much more global lens. From Walter Kaufman's perspective, the two question the value of human life but from opposing spectrums:

Kierkegaard confronts us as an individual while Dostoevsky offers us a world.

Both are infinitely disturbing, but there is an overwhelming vastness about Dostoevsky and a strident narrowness about Kierkegaard. If one comes from Kierkegaard and plunges into Dostoevsky, one is lost like a man brought up in a small room who is suddenly placed in a sailboat in the middle of the ocean.

(14)

Both men would find themselves exploring the depths of existentialism's core attributes such as man's attempt to wrestle with living in the midst of anxiety, fear, dread, death, and despair from the perspective of the individual, a westernized, European version. Black existentialism shared some of these identifiable attributes but was yet still a vastly different form of philosophy having equally foreign roots.

From a melanin-based standpoint, existential philosophy, as Lewis R. Gordon exclaims, "is a fundamentally European historical phenomenon" (3). Rather he states that the major premises of the philosophy of existence, to which he often refers, are "philosophical questions premised upon the concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation" (Gordon 3). Ontological studies from Africa and other continents and countries bearing heavily populated peoples of color have produced and compiled a highly developed and historically researched compendium of information of what has become to be known as Black existentialism and Africana Critical Theory. Martinican philosopher Frantz Fanon, African Americans Lucius T. Oulaw and Lewis R. Gordon are a few of many who have not only identified and established these schools of black existential philosophical thought but have been able to show that their origins predate western existentialism as well and will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. Literary giants Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and others write from a continual black existential viewpoint at the heart of their novels and essays. Wright's *The Man Who Lived*

*Underground* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, unlike Dostoevsky and Sartre, come from two very different, yet distinct realms of Black existentialism and representation. Even though Black existentialism and European existentialism share analogous interests and themes, such as existence, consciousness anxiety, meaninglessness, despair and fear (Vereen 75), one is rooted in the experiences of the lived individual; the other has placed in its foci historically, the identity and lived experiences of the Black collective. Another significant difference is that Black existentialism "is grounded in the emancipation of all Black people and addresses the matter of Black struggle and suffering" (Vereen 75).

To better understand Black Existential Philosophy and Africana Critical Theory, one must first delve further into their philosophical origins. Since the focus of European existentialism surrounds itself around the individual's existence emanating from birth, and the individual's subsequent choice in life whether or not to live a life of meaning, freedom is apparent and evident with experience being the end result of the outcome and value of the shared life. Concepts of race, racial identity, and those being marginalized are not built into this model. People of color, whether enslaved or living as indigenous groups of people dwelling in parts outside of the Eurocentric land masses, have been written into history as beings lacking much of the natural humanity to that of their European counterparts. Philosophers have not taken into account the effects of the lived experience in the eyes of those living in these colonized and decolonized territories. What is missing is a dialogue illuminating how the European existentialist suppositions of identity, freedom, free will, and existence do not critically apply to the lived experiences of the Black individual and the Black collective (Vereen 74). In cases of colonizing the African continent, the establishment of slave trade routes in the Americas and European hegemony throughout the Caribbean, the deposited people of color were ripped of their

homeland roots and heritage. The people of melanin races, due to colonization, are in a perpetual state of recreating themselves, as Vereen implies from Fanon, “the removal of language and culture of origin, the Black individual and the Black collective have had to simultaneously define and redefine their identity, culture and existence (74). Living in one’s homeland with one’s own people and culture aids in the creation of the individual self. When forcibly having to undergo the experience of colonization, a fragmented existence emerges with a deteriorating chance of discovery of the authentic self:

From one day to the next, the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference. Their metaphysics or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which refer, were abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization that imposed its own.

(Fanon 90)

The idea of liberation is a central piece to better understanding existentialism from the eyes of the black philosophical perspective. Lewis R. Gordon identifies Africana Philosophy according to Lucius T. Outlaw, Vanderbilt Professor of Philosophy, as:

a gathering notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.), and traditions of African and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the subdiscipline- or field-forming, tradition-defining or tradition-organizing reconstructive efforts, which are (to be) regarded as philosophy.

However, “Africana philosophy” is to include as well the work of those persons who are neither African nor of African descent but who recognize the legitimacy and importance of the issues and endeavors that constitute the disciplinary activities of African or African American philosophy and contribute to the efforts

--persons whose work justifies their being called “Africanists.” Using the qualifier “Africana” is consistent with the practice of naming intellectual traditions and practices in terms of the national, geographic, cultural, racial, and/ or ethnic descriptor or identity of the persons who initiated and were/ are the primary practitioners- and /or are the subjects and objects- of the practices and traditions in question (e.g., “American,” “British,” “French,” “German,” or “continental” philosophy).

(2)

From the earliest notions of imperialistic ambitions of ‘Europe’s exploring, exploiting, and conquest of the western hemisphere’s concept of “unchartered” lands in Africa, to the system of slavery in the American South for capital gain, power, and wealth, the effects of colonization, slavery, apartheid, decolonization and American Jim Crow legislation left many people of color in a fractured psychological state of being and collective identity. The difficulty in trying to determine one’s true authentic self, battled constantly with how the dominating race were determined to view them- as non-human. The double consciousness that W.E.B. DuBois so eloquently and poignantly addressed in *The Souls of Black Folk* could be considered one of the first attempts from a liberated man of color not only to defend his black identity in a white world, but also to decipher the locked, inner psychological dual code found hidden in black people which would become innate as a result of living under forced servitude. To survive during slavery and Jim Crow meant having to understand the necessity of living as the twin- natured existential individual. “One ever feels his twoness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,” (Dubois 3). He writes expressing this subconscious psychosis unique to people who have lived under bondage, even to

this present day. Since racial oppression and strife are attached to the enslaved African and his descendants like an appendage is to the body, severing this cancerous condition becomes futile and the role that oppression plays has affected the psyche of people of color not just in America, but in melanated people around the globe. Oppression in itself is not just a construct internalized by black people, white philosophers sought to understand how one can enslave another and maintain a healthy conscience. Jean-Paul Sartre was able to determine that with slavery in the United States, “the masters must make themselves believe that the designation of property means that the slaves were not really people” (Judaken 159). His existential “mauvaise foi,” or bad faith articulates the concept of the master’s use of self-deception in order to continue living out a lie and hide the truth from themselves. If Sartre’s philosophical premise was built upon the fact that freedom and being are indistinguishable from the other, than his understanding that Black people were indeed *human* people and that their existence equates into freedom.

With the definitions of Black existentialism and Africana Critical Theory having been explored, the two are sometimes interlaced. Their differences, however, bear noting. Both are designed to liberate people of color. The situation of the black man being an existential question (Fanon), what DuBois terms “a problem” is the driving force behind Africana philosophy. Gordon states “Africana philosophy cannot, and should not, be reduced to existential philosophy is paradoxical because of a central dimension of philosophy of existence itself” (4). The two schools of thought address issues and concerns of existence from a black perspective. While Africana philosophy has Africa and the effects of colonization of the continent at its core. Black existential philosophy reaches beyond the boundaries of the African continent, to other people considered of color around the world. Despite geography, feelings of alienation, dread and despair plague indigenous darker skinned races in their homelands, the same as how the



American racial climate has been built around a color code system since slavery. Black existentialism is a pan African ideology, “building on ideas germane to communities designated black, most of which are African and African diaspora communities, and also include indigenous East Indian and Australian aboriginal populations” (Judaken 167). Africana Critical Theory includes a more de-colonizing world view of existentialism. Philosophical anthropology is ineffective when it comes to solving the black situation. Black philosophers conclude that due to sociological and psychological scarring produced by the repeated ostracism of people of color primarily due in part by the negative connotation placed on the *color* black, treatment of various darker people of color around the globe remains basically the same. To see all men as equal, one must first be able to recognize and admit that all humans are the same, as Vereen clarifies, “From a humanistic perspective, Black existentialism is the lens through which one can begin to see where inequity, racialization, and marginalization are situated as Black people search to experience agency in the world” (73). Fighting for an equal opportunity to partake as an unjudged participant of the human lived experience, and for the liberation of all people of color are the common cords which weave throughout Africana philosophy and Black existentialism.

Within the philosophical framework of Black Existential Philosophy and Africana Critical Theory, the history and discovery of the schools of thought will be analyzed, how the two align and how they differ, and why their use by black writers is significant in the shaping of African and African American literature. The main goal or aim of this thesis is to reveal the unique differences in European existentialism such as what is found in the works by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Jean Paul Sartre, identify Black existential connections to them, and charter the paths of Wright and Ellison and how they use these philosophies and theories effectively in their novels. Chapter two will involve a discussion between Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, the

existential revelations derived from his Slavic lineage and its appeal on themes of underground of Wright and Ellison. In the third chapter, Fred Daniels, the existential hero of *The Man Who Lived Underground*, will be examined under a Black existential microscope and his conflict with identity during his journey of finding his authentic self. In the fourth chapter, the unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and his coming of age authenticated self will be matched with the character's existential invisible identity as he transcends through the veil and finally undergoes an enlightened metamorphosis. Conclusively, chapter five encapsulates a phenomenological and philosophical discourse of the effects of Frantz Fanon, and/ or zeitgeist of Africana Critical Theory on Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FYODOR DOSTOEVKSY'S INFLUENCE ON RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON

Fyodor Dostoevsky's inclinations toward social and Christian expression came early and honestly in his childhood upbringing. His father, a physician at the Mariinsky Hospital for the poor in Moscow, often allowed his children to play on the hospital grounds, affording young Fyodor a first glimpse into a lower social class. He comes from a lineage of Russian Orthodox Christian priests on his father's side. Having been sent to military school after his mother's passing, Dostoevsky writes his first novel, *Poor Folk* in 1845. After gaining notoriety from the novel by literary critic and friend Vissarion Belinsky, Dostoevsky left the military and began his focus on writing as a form of social protest with Belinsky introducing him to socialism. During his lifetime, his entire work amassed over forty pieces of literature, ranging from novels and short stories, to essays, notes and letters. *The House of the Dead* (1862), *Notes from Underground* (1864), *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), were a few of the many works by the prolific writer. American writers began to take notice of Dostoevsky's frank, and transparent style of existentialist prose including the burgeoning Richard Wright and his quasi protégé, Ralph Ellison, who also followed the Russian novelist adamantly. Moreover, "There is every reason to believe that, like Ellison, Wright was also familiar with Dostoevsky's *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* {Diary of a Writer}" (Bloshteyn 284). Both

writers mention Dostoevsky early in their literary careers and continued to read and study him closely. Dostoevsky's novels and short stories' social cry to the masses resonated more within the serfdom Russian population, but one novella in particular established him as a writer who understood the suffering of the lower, working class, and could express their plight on a philosophical level:

*Notes from Underground* has been called the prelude to the great novels of Dostoevsky's last period, and it is so partly because here Dostoevsky first perfected the method of tonal distancing that enabled him to present characters and events simultaneously from different points of view to counter empathy intellection.

(Pevear xv, xvi)

To better understand the levels of existential dilemmas found throughout the works of Dostoevsky, one would probably begin with the suffering that he endured and witnessed from fellow inmates as he served a four-year sentence at a Siberian prison camp in 1849. After being found guilty of supporting and reading the works of literary critic and vocal opponent of autocracy and serfdom, Vissarion Belinsky, Dostoevsky, at the age of twenty-eight, experienced intimately close encounters with death, dread, and the meaning of man's existence under extreme, harsh, shackled conditions in the winters of Siberia. While grappling with the daily anxiety of staying alive, he wrestled also with existential philosophical ideas of human existence as it pertains to man's growth and free will, as an individual free to choose a path toward becoming a better, more authentic version of himself. In existentialism, it takes human freedom to dictate how one reaches the fullest of potential, or as Patrick Bourgeois states, "The existing individual is seen to take up his own life personally, as uniquely his own, creating himself from

the depth of his own freedom” (34). Having the natural inclination of empathizing with the serf class since childhood, Dostoevsky’s leanings only intensified after being incarcerated and witnessing the treatment of the prisoners. His novel, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, gives a detailed depiction of the atrocities he encountered in the Siberian prison camp. He fictionalizes the plot but includes the harsh treatments, both physical and psychological, which take place in the prison. In addition, he gives insight to the struggle and triumphs of the convicts and their behaviors as they had to modify and adapt to the camp’s rules. His next work, the novella, *Notes from Underground*, exposes and articulates the existential tenets of dread, despair, death, authenticity, freedom and facticity. This story which has been considered as “a case study of existential psychology” (Peterson, *Up from Bondage* 114), is more of an existential dialogue and confession between the narrator and his own self. This type of conversation, if one is having it alone, can become unending since there is no audience to which to interject ideas or introduce cessation, or as Peterson adds:

Because the initial impulse to confess one’s inner self is motivated by a need for open acknowledgement of an unexpressed identity, but confirmation of that previously invisible self cannot be achieved in solitude. To be sure, a confessional narrative may arise from motives of pride or shame. The speaker could be seeking either affirmation or compassion; he might be struggling to achieve self-justification or self-acceptance.

(114)

To be included in the world while understanding the fact that one’s existence is inescapable, and that one’s lived experiences may be the result of it being because that’s just the way things are, is the philosophical meaning of facticity. This word, coined by German philosopher Martin

Heidegger has a German origin, *Geworfenheit* or simply *being thrown into the world*. To reach one's authentic self or authenticity, is another philosophical term which denotes an individual achieving his most true-to-self nature according to one's own core beliefs, ideals, and values in the midst of fighting against the distractions of a chaotic, unpredictable world into which one has been placed. Many of Dostoevsky's characters and plots include these existential characteristics.

Many critics have argued that Dostoevsky's views on egoism remained constant throughout his life. With the changing, liberal, younger European generation of the mid 1800s finding their own voice, western- influenced nihilism and egoism was at the voice's philosophical core.

Dostoevsky remained a devout Russian Orthodox Christian his entire life and some may see his attacks of egoism carefully woven into his novels as satire, but his shift from nihilistic and egoist views to Christian based existential ideology was constant. Tsarist Russia, which he opposed due to its strict, unforgiving stance on autocracy and serfdom, conflicted with the opposing liberal views of the Russian Westernizers of the time. Dostoevsky's transformation after his four-year sentence did not make him more of a proponent toward Tsarist Russia, nor did he remain a follower of Belinsky and the advance of western ideas imposing on the Russian landscape. Instead, the Russian thinker chose the existential path of least resistance, telling his stories in the form of careful, fictionalized, political lessons. His once-liberal mindset shifted to a conservative one as he relegated back to the Christian ideals of submission, suffering, and the philosophical search for truth of self. Egoism was considered detrimental to the moral fabric of the Byzantine, Christian-backed Russian empire, and Dostoevsky "regarded the spread of egoism in his homeland a direct consequence of the Westernization of Russia and a prime moral, even mortal danger" (Scanlan 553). Nihilism, the philosophical viewpoint of rejecting any preconceived beliefs that values, morals, and meaning have little to do with existence, is exemplified in the

beginning chapter of Dostoevsky's novella. The narrator introduces himself as an egoist as he begins the narration in *Notes from Underground* with a transparent nihilistic statement of dread and self-loathing:

I am a sick man...I am a wicked man. An unattractive man. I think my liver hurts. However, I don't know a fig about my sickness, and am not sure what it is that hurts me. I am not being treated and never have been, though I respect medicine and doctors. What's more, I am also superstitious in the extreme; well, at least enough to respect medicine. (I'm sufficiently educated not to be superstitious, but I am." No, sir, I refuse to be treated out of spite.

(Dostoevsky 3)

More than a nihilist, rather a man in existential angst, the underground narrator is an individual in pain and despair yet enjoys the fact that he has a right and freedom to choose to either live in his condition or to seek medical care. He chooses to dwell in his underground hole, ill, yet content. In order to display vividly the nihilist's thirst for eradicating all laws of men and nature, Dostoevsky creates a nihilistic model, who holds up a mirror to himself for the reader to see and analyze. For Dostoevsky's philosophical example, the existential right to choose is paramount, but the self-deconstructing characteristic of egoism and nihilism, as he will exemplify in parabolic fashion in part two, "Apropos of the Wet Snow", will ultimately bring a collapse in the psyche.

As mentioned earlier, *Notes from Underground* is written in two parts. The first part is entitled, "Underground" and part two is named "Apropos of the Wet Snow." At the time of the writing of this novella, Russia was undergoing a social and political revolution:

The two time periods of the novel represent two stages in the evolution of the

Russian intelligentsia: the sentimental, literary 1840s and the rational and utilitarian 1860s; the time of the liberals and the time of the nihilists.

(Dostoevsky xviii)

In the eleven chapters of “Underground,” the unnamed narrator is the epitome of self-loathing, self-contradiction and spiteful behavior. He is a middle-aged man who has decided to rebel against all systems of authority and order in his native St. Petersburg, Russia. He retreats to a small, underground dwelling referred affectionately as a mouse hole and proudly calls himself a mouse, “There, in its loathsome, stinking underground, our offended, beaten-down, and derided mouse at once immerses itself in cold, venomous, and, above all, everlasting spite” (11). In nihilistic fashion, the narrator abhors all aspects of society, and, due to his inability to change the status of the hypocrisy he sees in his daily living and within his government, decides to turn the hatred toward himself with intentional suffering and abuse. He mentions that he is not a lazy man, but rather prefers inaction, or inertia, over laziness. He has decided to exercise his right to be spiteful since he has determined that all hopes for a utopian society in his home of St.

Petersburg are futile. The narrator of “Underground” is a hyper-conscious individual, he sees and analyzes all things all the time and constantly weighs his decisions against other self-contradicted decisions. He suffers from extreme boredom and malaise, consciously aware of his deteriorating mental and physical state, but out of spite, he refuses to act. This perpetual rationalizing egoism is a western concept; the narrator exemplifies the embodiment of such a tormented caricature, or as Dale Peterson states, “In the first part of the Petersburg diary, we overhear a tirade of self-justifying “philosophizing” against the smug calculations of a Western rationalism that defines mental maturity as “enlightened self-interest” (115). The “crystal palace” or edifice, mentioned in chapter ten, is the narrator’s crystalline, utopian result of an idealized



society. The palace represents the apex of the narrator's egoist interpretation of his personally-built world fully realized. Dostoevsky allows this palace to exist only long enough for the suffering, self-doubting and double-voiced narrator to tear it down through the constant rethinking about the purpose and meaning of the palace itself.

“Apropos of the Wet Snow,” part two of *Notes from Underground*, is layered into a three-part, plot-driven series of events in the life of a young, middle class, obscured (underground) man. He is the Underground Man mentioned in part one actualized and living out his existential life experiences in his own reality. The Underground Man and his disdain for western Romanticism, which is German and French in nature, is contrasted against the zeal he shares for Russian Romanticism, the two being so dissimilar that the narrator continually mocks the western version. His love for the Russian version is pure, but he is secretly a European romantic at heart. He has an encounter in which he is bumped by an officer on the street and decides to take offense. The underground narrator spends a considerable amount of time pandering the idea that the officer's bump and indifference was due in part to his thinking of himself as better than the narrator. This theme of invisibility is repeated in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in which the narrator faces an existential crisis of being unseen by the society at large. The story continues with the narrator's incessant worry of how to confront the officer the next time they should meet. He fantasizes about writing him a note but retreats from doing so. He stares at the officer numerous times in the street after the bump, contemplating to return the rude behavior, but cowardly fails to do so, “What,” If fancied, “what if I meet him and... do not step aside? Deliberately do not step aside, even if I have to shove him” (54). Attempting to impress the officer, the narrator buys an expensive coat after a lengthy deliberation over whether or not to purchase the garment. Again, the narrator shrinks from an opportunity to confront the officer in the new coat. An accidental circumstance

places the two of them in an immediate proximity of one another in which the narrator takes his chance and bumps into the officer's shoulder. The officer never notices him, the same as before and continued on his walk. The narrator, feeling vindicated and caught in his own private web of egoism, never realized that the entire encounter was contrived in his mind. Like the underground narrator in part one, the Underground Man shares his nihilistic, existential dread and anxiety views through the story of a simple bump on the street. The mental suffering during the entire ordeal is welcomed and cherished by the narrator.

Dostoevsky continues his next story as the underground narrator resurfaces temporarily to visit former classmates for one of his friends' going away party. Even though he has detested the four so-called friends since his adolescence, the narrator is sure that they share an equal and mutual disdain for him as well. He spends his time worrying what the comrades think of him as he arrives too early to the party, a trick played on him by one in the group. Like in childhood, still not able to fit in with the group, the Underground Man quarrels with the men and begins to drink, "In my grief I drank Lafite and sherry by the glassful" (Dostoevsky 77). In an alcoholic stupor, and basking in insecurities, the narrator finally goes into an embarrassing rant of hatred toward society and how the comrades represent the worse aspects of it. The four men, mostly engaged in their own conversations, missed the gist of the rant and leave the narrator at the party to venture to a brothel. The misguided and disillusioned narrator follows behind.

The third section of "Apropos in the Wet Snow" involves the Underground Man and his involvement with a prostitute he meets at the brothel by the name of Liza. After following the group of comrades to the familiar establishment, he is apparently less inebriated, and later awakens in bed next to the prostitute. He asks her many questions about her life and tries to convince her to leave such a low profession. He tells her a story of another prostitute he once

knew who died of consumption but continued working until she died. His nihilist story telling draws Liza toward him, and she eventually falls for his sermons on life, death and the ills of prostituting. He gives her his address, she visits, and the two engage in a love/ hate-type of dialogue in the narrator's apartment. His idiosyncrasies confuse Liza, drawing her near one minute and pushing her away the next. He berates and ridicules her, then apologizes. Liza sees the helpless, pathetic soul for who he truly is and leaves. Caught in his own egoism and confused on whether he has feelings for her or not, the Underground Man decides to chase after her remembering that he had forgotten to pay her for her services. He never sees her again.

Thematically, *Notes from Underground* can be regarded as a Russian treatise against western egoism. Fyodor Dostoevsky uses fictional narration to reveal the invading, westernized convention of nihilism and egoism of Western Europe and America and allows the reader to analyze the effects of such attributes once they permeate a conservative society. Existentially, man's quest for an ideal existence, i.e. the *crystal palace*, will always be thwarted because in the end, according to Dostoevsky's underground man, humans prefer suffering more than anything else. The freedom to choose the preconceived and popular path of enlightenment is not freedom at all. The freedom to select the dark, harsh roads of reality is the truer freedom. The easier path has and will always be preconditioned and therefore predetermined rendering it not a choice at all. The underground man believes in his right to exist any way he chooses to as long as it aligns with his own value system and authentic self. He is a character who escapes most Russian romantic stereotypes:

Despite the fact that the underground man constantly writes to assert his autonomy and his belief (for better or worse) in his rebellious individuality, he is presented to us as a socially constructed phenomenon.

(Peterson 115)

The theme of the thinking, always-contemplative man being smarter than the non-cerebral, man-of-action is another existential theme that flows throughout the novella. The man who lives in his mouse crack, full of dread, anguish and despair, bemuses himself over the fact that the man who moves above ground, a slave to the system, is nonetheless, the dull-witted man. Dostoevsky describes this flaw as he details the intelligence of his comrades in part two, “they took the most obvious, glaring reality in a fantastically stupid way, and were already accustomed to worshipping success alone” (68). The westernized, existential, invisible man who lives in the shadows of the world, seeks refuge as a form of rebellion and eventually rebels against himself only to discover that his heightened awareness in all things ensnares him and keeps him locked in his own delusional cycle of psychological inertia.

The literary legacy that Fyodor Dostoevsky creates for his beloved Russia leaves an indomitable impression on the European landscape. His works encompassed neither the traditional political views of his native Tsarist disposition, nor did they lean into the western ideas of egoism and idolatry, except when teaching a moral lesson. They were able, in fact, to remain in a constant middle, where he could craft his stories in an existential backdrop while reminding the reader that Christian orthodoxy still reigned supreme during a time of youthful liberality and change. Joseph Frank reiterates that “His novels really never satisfied nobody’s politics; but they imposed themselves by the sheer power and force of their art and the profundity of their vision” (12). His stories stood for the common laborer, the educated serf who was not permitted to own an individual voice. His beloved Tsarist Russia maintained a substantial serf class of twenty-three million in servitude when their emancipation took effect in 1861 by Alexander II. The system of serfdom was as established and immersed within the Russian culture

as was slavery in the American South at the same time. It is of little wonder why African American writers, once given the chance to develop the craft earnestly, took little time in locating the social and cultural comparisons that existed between the Russian serf and the American Negro. Dostoevsky's defending of basic human rights through literature had a significant influence on Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and W.E.B. DuBois. The daunting task which lay before the great thinkers of the socially changing world of human equality was to figure out how to make the slave, and serf classes gain noticeable acceptance in the western world of noblemen and the elite. According to Peterson, "The solution to that challenge was a literature devoted to demonstrating the humanity and natural rights of an entire population that had been categorized as subhuman" (61). The Underground Man of Russia and the invisible black hero of America are kinsmen, seeing, hearing, and articulating their worlds through cracks in the floor or as the narrator of *Notes from Underground* eloquently states:

To be sure, I myself have just made up all these words of yours. This too, is from underground. I've spent forty years on end there listening to these words of yours through a crack. I thought them up myself, since this was all that would get thought up. No wonder they got learned by heart and assumed a literary form...

(Dostoevsky 38-39)

Although the environment of Russia involved serfdom as a means of economic stability among the noble classes, Dostoevsky connected with the peasant class, but it was the *katorgas* or prison labor camps, based on personal experience, which drew most attention. The Slavs not to be confused with slave, even though many Slavs were made slaves during the Byzantine Empire (Timofeychev), were free and unfree, locked into servanthood. Later, German and Spanish

conquests, enslaved many Slavic peoples, who were comprised of many groups of people bound together by their Slavic languages. The term Slav and slave have been used in the past interchangeably, are actually more or less homonyms, words spelled the same or similarly but having two distinctly different meanings. The serfs, or peasant class, composed of over two-thirds of Russia's population in the 1860s, were sold with land and owned by the rich. Serfdom and slavery bear comparing due to the fact that neither groups were free people: slaves being considered as property, and serfs' freedom was contingent upon years of servitude from working the property of the land owners. Serfs were sold along with owners' property. Dostoevsky's relationships in the Siberian labor camps forced him to see a mixture of Slavic serfs who emanated from many regions of Eastern Europe. Even under incarcerated circumstances, he was able to witness the bonds between Slavs and experience the traditions and rituals which kept them together as a people. Like DuBois in America, Dostoevsky understood that writing about the social ills of his people could be the catalyst needed to institute social change. Slavery and serfdom no longer fit into the narrative of global equality for all, "the claim to some specific virtue inherent in the development of the race had become complicated by the long-delayed emancipation of Russian serfs and American slaves" (Peterson 60).

Like the serfs, Russian Slavs were excluded from Eastern European nobility and due to their large, scattered populations, were left divided and without a national culture. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade also dispersed large groups of indigenous people out of Africa, to the islands of the Caribbean and the Americas. Emancipation brought physical freedom, but culturally, Western Europe did not embrace the Russian Slav or the African American on an intellectual scale comparable to their own, as Dale Peterson accentuates:

...Africans and slavs had become painfully aware of their exclusion from modern

Europe's universal narrative of human civilization. In the developmental spiral of Hegelian World- Spirit, the Negro figured as the very antitype of progress

(225)

Joseph Frank speaks of the need for Europe to intently and systematically eradicate historical Slavic Russia from its cultural identity, "The Russians could once have looked down on their own peasant cultures as whites (and Negroes wishing to conform to white cultural standards) looked down upon the Negro folk culture developed in the slave society of the American South"

(5). The westernization of Europe sparked by the youth- driven, abolitionist, anti-serf, liberal attitudes of Europe, created a rapidly- growing Europeanization of Russia. Any semblance of connections between the historical Russia of Dostoevsky was being replaced and enhanced by the ideals of French and German philosophies. In many ways, this awakening of ending old traditions of bondage, was being mirrored in America, especially in the South. Although the abolitionist movement sprang forth from Emersonian footholds in Massachusetts, it did not take long for its ambitions to reach the southern states led by a growing number of slave revolts, human rights activism, and rhetoric, led by Frederick Douglas. The far-reaching arm of Christian orthodoxy, which was the engine that helped spread Christianity in Europe and in America, failed due to its lack of accountability in trying to justify man's enslavement of other men.

It was the American abolitionists who began the charge of recognizing that all men should be fundamentally free. John Quincy Adams, David Walker, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Tubman, led with one voice that pierced through the Mason- Dixon Line into southern states where slavery was not only profitable, but a proven method of gaining and maintaining wealth on a national and international scale. The writers of the era, such as Ralph

Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglas, who passed on the fervor of true liberty to literary activists such as W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington, cemented the abolitionist movement through speeches and literature. Like Vissarion Belinsky and Nikolay Nekrasov, writers and critics of social reform in Russia, writers like Dostoevsky, his work depicting the realities of Siberian prisoners and serfs, both physical and mental, was well suited for this particular time in history. In Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, Richard Wright "recognizes the plight of the African Americans living in the South in the misery of the Russian prisoners exiled in the North, he is focusing primarily on psychological insight into behavior" (Bloshteyn 282). The prisoners, serfs, slaves, and African Americans, shared a common trait: they were all excluded from their mainstreamed societies. They were forced to live in a land that did not want them and refused to accept them as equals as Bloshteyn poignantly states about Wright's observation:

Wright perceives the position of exiled Russian prisoners in Siberia (many of them former Serfs) as similar to the position of African-Americans crammed in the Black Belts of the South (most of them former slaves), because both groups are outcasts and outsiders of society at large.

(282)

The other significant American writer of this same outcast population would be Ralph Ellison, who also spoke of the effects of being black in a world where the white populace would often choose to not see black people at all, rendering the person of African heritage invisible. Being in denial of a universal truth or Sartre's *mauvais foi*, or having bad faith, is applicable in this instance. Having the privilege of white skin in America was similar to the Russian elite to which Dostoevsky inferred and Joseph Frank points out, "by Dostoevsky's suggestion that, so far as the



Russian educated class is concerned, the Russian peasant is really *invisible*” (6). Like Ellison’s protagonist and the revelations he constantly receives while living as an existential invisible man, other writers such as James Weldon Johnson and his novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man*, details an account of a light-skinned narrator *passing*, or, living literally and existentially as a white man among white people. Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* chronicles Walker’s lineage of three generations of African American’s social and racial oppression, covering slavery, emancipation, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. African American writers began to see themselves not only through the eyes of Dostoevsky’s characters, but as literary activists as well, learning how to express their plight to freedom in a world ignorant of blacks’ double consciousness.

Although Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead*, which brought into awareness the atrocities of the Siberian prison labor camp system and more importantly, the psychological, imprisoned state of mind, it was his *Notes from Underground* that allowed for the exploration into the meaning of existence if society *itself*, would become a threat to freedom. The theme and persona of *the underground man*, how Dostoevsky perceives him, Richard Wright champions him, and his evolution through Ralph Ellison’s work, will be reviewed and analyzed in this thesis. The three writers have reached, in their own unique terms, a conclusion as to how an existentialist interprets his personal world view based upon his conception of society. To find a hidden dwelling place underneath the surface of the mainstream, be forced to live in an actual sewer, or to walk and move about as an apparition in plain sight are how Dostoevsky, Wright, and Ellison expressed the angst in their literature and through their characters in *Notes from Underground*, *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and *Invisible Man* respectively. Going underground metaphorically, into one’s own psyche, symbolized more than just rebelling against the norms of

the times, it included a hibernation period as well- a psychological conservation of energy to be stored and used when the proper time so ordains. The voice of the shadow man was becoming more and more apparent in Russia as well as in America simultaneously during the 1800s. Dale Peterson states in *Up from Bondage*,

Both Russian and African American writing had arrived at a point of psychic crisis when it became imperative to give literary form to the presence of an “underground” self- consciousness. Significantly, these newly representative “native speakers” were giving full voice to the cultural hybridity of Westernized Russians and urbanized American Negroes.

(109)

The antihero in *Notes from Underground* is simply named Underground Man; the one in *The Man Who Lived Underground* is named Fred Daniels; and in *Invisible Man*, the name inferred is simply as the invisible narrator. All three characters share certain undeniable existential traits, but differ in numerous ways as well. Wright’s Fred Daniels and Ellison’s invisible narrator, both have been developed into having more black existentialist ties, sharing views and opinions that are more aligned with black existentialism as mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis than with its European counterpart. What is interesting and provable is the fact that Richard Wright’s Fred Daniels, as will be examined further in chapter three, bears characteristics which are more aligned with pre- Frantz Fanon ideas and lean more into Africana Critical Theory. Ralph Ellison’s invisible narrator, as will be discussed in chapter four, continues in the vein of European existentialism, black existentialism, but continues to evolve into something new. All three characters, nonetheless, stem from Dostoevsky’s Russian egoist existentialist model, but it too, cannot be fully compared to westernized existentialism, in fact, “what Dostoevsky has

placed on exhibit is a symptomatic antihero personality whose every unique word embodies a social pathology” (Peterson 115). His existential underground man has strong Christian underpinnings. In Dostoevsky’s novella, and Wright’s and Ellison’s novels, a Russian and an African-Americanized rendering of an *individual* undergoing an existential crisis, do contribute to existentialism’s core attributes of freedom, dread, anxiety, absurdism, bad faith, and authenticity to name a few of the philosophical traits. Wright and Ellison, however, encompass ideas in reference to the liberation of African Americans *collectively*, embodied agency, sociality, freedom, anguish and responsibility as Lewis Gordon defines in Black Existential Philosophy. They also underscore the significance of the effects of slavery on the psyche of freed black people in the American South, and, consequently how these effects continued to linger even after Emancipation and northern migration. Their usage of African Critical Theory, how colonization plays a pivotal role in shaping the collective identity and consciousness of people of color, is made evident in their novels as well.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE MAN WHO LIVED UNDERGROUND- RICHARD WRIGHT'S TRANSFORMATION FROM DOSTOEVSKY TO BLACK EXISTENTIALISM

The Underground Man of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Wright's subterranean protagonist, Fred Daniels in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, bear similarities worth mentioning, yet one cannot help but attribute the original storyline to its Russian author who created the underground character seventy-seven years before Wright's African American portrayal. To better understand Richard Wright and how he became familiar with Dostoevsky's artistry of delving into the mind of the forgotten peasant, a general awareness of Wright and existentialism should be given first. Perhaps it was the reading of early twentieth century social and literary critic H. L. Mencken and his collection of essays *Book of Prefaces* (1917) that captured the young Wright's attention toward Dostoevsky. Mencken, an outspoken critic of the day, often challenged the literary status quo with thought provoking commentary, this one focused on Joseph Conrad, but mentioned Dostoevsky (Bloshteyn 280). It was enough to spark an interest in the works of Dostoevsky by Wright and in many other writers whom Mencken kept his eye on. It seemed more likely that the existential and nihilist themes of Dostoevsky's works, and their connections between the attitudes of the Russian lower caste resonated with Wright

rather than being caught off guard as if reading something of that nature for the first time. As Kathryn Gines elaborates, “Wright had several philosophical texts in his library” she adds, “including well known existential writings by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Martin Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre” (45). Wright and his younger contemporary, Ralph Ellison consumed much of the French existential fervor which took place a little later in the timeline, but it was the philosophical ideas of the Russian and German thinkers that captured Wright’s mindset in reference to servant and slave caste groups. Maria Bloshteyn continues to point out that Wright relied on Dostoevsky to aid him in navigating through the mental effects of the social conditioning of poverty in greater detail:

If Wright initially read Dostoevsky to better understand the psychology of an oppressed people, he kept returning to Dostoevsky because of his identification with the Russian novelist on a more immediately personal level. Dostoevsky’s humiliation and suffering in prison and exile were likened by Wright to the humiliation and suffering experienced by himself, growing up African American in the segregated American South.

(288)

Wright’s characterization of Fred Daniels, like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, had been developed for a considerable period time before becoming known to the reading public. Richard Wright showed his prowess as a student of existential philosophy before connecting with Dostoevsky, and later with Ellison and Sartre.

The Underground Man’s actual underground sanctuary in *Notes from Underground* was significantly different than Fred Daniel’s underground. The Underground Man lived in nothing more than a crawlspace, likened to a mouse hole, with barely any room to move around. Fred

Daniels retreated to an actual sewer system underneath his city eluding the police for a crime he did not commit. Both characters prefer the underground better than being on the surface, however with the Underground Man, it is by preference, but in Fred's case, he escapes into his underground and discovers to enjoy it later. The Underground Man not only calls himself a mouse, but explains that his satisfaction stems from the insults of others, in which he exercises his right to revenge himself, or, to do nothing at all. As the cynical, self-loathing mouse, the Underground Man is "spitefully taunting and chafing itself with its fantasies" (Dostoevsky 11). Finally getting the manhole cover off, Fred drops into the pitched black putrid darkness, "He waded with taut muscles, his feet slipping over the slimy bottom, his shoes sinking into the spongy slop" (Wright 58). For the angst experienced by the Underground Man concerning the pathetic, aboveground "real, normal men" (Dostoevsky 10) of action, whose stupidity kept them running in mindless circles, Fred's aboveground culture involved men of white supremacy. For him, it was the police, whose blindness and ineptitude only allowed them to see the protagonist as a criminal. Over time, Fred learned to ignore the outside world altogether, "life aboveground was now something less than reality, less than sight or sound, less even than memory" (Wright 105). Both narrators find refuge and enlightenment in their shadowy residences and predict bleak, darkened outcomes for those who live in the mainstream. Gines gives notice to how Wright juxtaposes this state of spiritual existence:

For a writer such as Wright, the traditional opposition between light and darkness, along with that between living in the light *aboveground* and dwelling in darkness *underground*, needs to be deconstructed, turned against itself and questioned precisely from the perspective of a racialized consciousness.

Playing the outsider or outcast in Tsarist Russia mirrored being the innate outcast as a black man living in the white world of Jim Crow in America. Unwelcomed and unwanted, it was easy for Underground Man and Fred Daniels to seek and find refuge in places where no one dared to go. “Against the historical backdrop of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, Dostoevsky is describing a socially patterned neurosis which has an obvious parallel in the psychic life of the American Negro” (Bone 202). Whether peering through cracks in the floor from the underground or piercing through the cracks in the walls leading from the sewers into above ground businesses, the contented outcast begins to see the world the way it truly is. The Underground Man and Fred Daniels both have obtained their vision from living in darkness.

From the European perspective of existential theories, Richard Wright’s Fred exhibited many of the classical nihilistic traits that one may experience involving angst and crisis while living in an underground state. Issues such as his inner conflict with freedom, how he planned to live in the sewer and its effects on his psyche, his newly developed awareness of social protest, and his interpretation of guilt and innocence, all surfaced while Fred succumbed to the city’s hidden, rancid underbelly. *The Man Who Lived Underground* deals with an antihero who escapes prosecution and into a world of sudden unanticipated freedoms. Not only does Fred encounter the literal freedom from his police captives, but a metaphorical freedom is inadvertently obtained from the responsibilities of everyday living. He has the freedom of choice to do, as Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, whatever he chooses. He has options in the muddy deluge underneath the city to roam through its tunnel systems undetected. He occasionally resurfaces to catch a glimpse of the real world, such as in the time in which he peers through a crack in the wall and notices a black church choir singing, or he hides from view to see a man shoveling lumps of coal into a furnace. He even eavesdrops on the same policemen who interrogated him

and witnesses another man being falsely accused. Each time Fred peers into the pre-established, societal norms of the above ground environment, he is able to gain new insight from his old way of thinking. His vision gets clearer and clearer. As he stumbles into the basement of a movie theater, obscured, Fred sees all of the people blindly engaging in the mindless activity of watching a movie. His new nihilistic perceptions revealed to him that the poor souls were programmed into sitting in the theater in a sort of perpetual inertia as they amused themselves by watching the film, "These people were *laughing* at their *lives*, at the animated shadows of themselves" (74). Fred was free to see the world through a different lens while living underground and simultaneously learning from it.

In order to survive, Fred had to steal a few items if he was to continue to exist in his new cavern home. Food and water were the necessities, but items such as diamonds, jewelry, and money, he reasoned, were not taken to be used for their intended purposes, but rather to decorate his living space. Fred's plan to steal money from a man who was stealing money was rationalized as not being one and the same, "He wanted to steal the money merely for the sensation involved, and he had no intention of ever spending a penny of it, perhaps for pleasure" (88). Fred's living in the sewer affected his reasoning as well as his decision making. Living below ground seemed more normal than the absurd world above. The decisions he made underneath the surface were made rational compared to the absurdity of the world above from which he escaped. Like the citizens in *Notes from Underground*, Fred's populace was equally stupid, and he began to realize his own hyper-consciousness, like Underground Man as well. In fact, the more Fred was able to witness from the shadows, the more he felt the tendency to protest. The first thought that enters his mind when seeing and hearing the church choir singing is to protest with a burst of laughter. Watching the moviegoers become mesmerized at the big



screen made the narrator want to jar them from their slumber, “He could not awaken them. He sighed; yes, they were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying” (Wright 75). One of the more glaring themes of protest came in the form of the dead baby which Fred discovered floating in the wastewater of the underground labyrinth. He found the child with his mouth open, his eyes shut tight, and its fists clutched, as if in defiance and anger of being thrust into a world so harsh that it would discard life before being given a chance to bloom. Wright paints this picture of existential death to highlight the sickened, immoral world, whether above or below ground, in which Fred lived:

He straightened and drew in his breath. Some woman’s thrown her baby away...  
 He felt as though he had been standing for all eternity looking at the tan skin  
 lit with ghostly light, white foam blossoming about the head as cascades of  
 veined water skimmed impersonally about it. He flushed with a nameless  
 shame and involuntarily took a step backwards and his lips moved in an effort  
 to utter angry words against the whole configuration of the senseless world.

(65-66)

The theme of guilt and innocence is evidenced throughout *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Fred wrestles with feelings of guilt from his own actions- fleeing from the police, leaving his family behind, and hiding, creating additional inner conflicts with the worry of him being viewed as a coward. As his residency lingers in the underground, Fred begins to see the guilty and the innocent in more existential ways. Richard Wright’s Protestant upbringing is highlighted by Imani Perry as she assesses in Wright’s Seventh Day Adventist rearing of guilt, that “Humans were guilty, and only holiness could save them” (6). Perhaps Fred shared this same sentiment. As the antihero began to become more aware of his own, true existence in the underworld, his

reality of right and wrong took on a new dimension as well. His views of the innocent and the guilty began to morph as his eyes began to open. He felt guilty for the church choir that he secretly observed through the crack in the wall for singing foolishly toward their imagined God. This new awareness after departing from above ground to the underground was splitting him in two. The people he viewed on the surface had different characteristics underneath it, as with the choir, "...he saw a defenseless nakedness in their lives that made him disown them" (Wright 63). As Fred ventured on and stumbled upon the man being accused of a crime he did not commit, it reminded him of his predicament which drove him to the underground in the first place. He has an existential moment of clarity and realizes that man essentially cannot really determine who is innocent and who is guilty in this world. Murphy, one of the policemen who harassed Fred earlier, was now being witnessed in doing the exact same thing to another man, as the narrator proclaims, "...the man did not know anything, that no one knew anything, that no man could explain his innocent guilt" (126). Here, Wright combines and labels the guilt as *innocent guilt*, denoting that even when a man determines himself to be guilty, he is yet still innocent due to the fact that man lives in an absurd world which causes him to behave erratically.

The existentialism that Wright exhibits through sketching his character in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, aligns with the European definition of the term, yet Wright reveals that Fred Daniels bears black existential traits as well. Africana Critical Theory had not yet been recognized as an official school of thought during Wright's writing of this novel, but the spirit of African diaspora literature and the awareness of the double consciousness of DuBois was clearly a working theme in many of the works of young black writers of the early 1900s. Wright's novels reveal that he not only understood the existential crisis of the black individual, but how it also affected the black community and lived experience as well. Darwin Turner states "Actually,

Wright leaned toward existentialism long before the philosophy earned its literary reputation in America and perhaps even before he fully realized the philosophical position which he was articulating” (quoted in Gines 46). As Fred wrestles with the guilt of finding the baby in the waters of the underground sewer system, he recognizes the black collective ramifications of such a discovery. The baby “was his enemy” (66), and its existence made Fred feel guilty, condemning and implicating himself along with the world for allowing this tragedy to occur. Living under the surface gave Fred a chance to visualize the horrific effects of dwelling in a Jim Crow world but from the shadows. The outward evils of prejudice above were often discarded into the covert sewers of the underground and Fred witnessed it firsthand. His blackness as it related to the society in which he lived, as he soon discovered, paled in comparison to the blackness of the heart of man in the above ground. From a phenomenological standpoint, Young explains Wright’s expression of blackness in this moment:

...the blackness in the sewer “reverses the conventional Western stigmatization of blackness delineated in Manichaeism and medieval Christianity, elaborated in neoclassical poetry of the Enlightenment, and fully exploited by pro-slavery imperialists as justification of American slavery” (Young 2001: 73). In Daniels’ underground cave blackness “does not carry the negative, sterile semantic presence that it does aboveground” (Young 2001:73).

(quoted in Gines 50- 51)

Fred became fully conscious of his racial environment as he was able to see for himself, how people lived and behaved when they assumed that no one was watching.

The African Critical Theory of dread differs from Kierkegaard’s European existential version of it. The anxiety and angst that an individual feels from being alienated and alone, paralyzing

the human self, (Gordon, *Existence in Black* 158) is what Fred encounters as an individual. The African based dread, as denoted from a Rastafarian, Jamaican philosophical standpoint, is the condition of non-being as one is faced with when trying to overcome certain existential dilemmas. The concept of dread is connected to the fact that if people of color were never considered to be human enough to have shared a human lived existence, then any solutions worked out by colonized people of color become part of the dread experience. Lewis Gordon describes this African philosophical dread this way:

Rastafarian theology of existence is based upon a dialectical projection of a symbolically mediated presence that negates the specific subjective absences generated by the processes of marginalization and stereotypical redefinition.

(Gordon, *Existence in Black* 159)

As Fred Daniels' understanding of the dread which surrounded him was becoming clearer, so too did his vision grow sharper, the darker it became in the underground. He stumbles surprisingly upon a man shoveling coal into a furnace in the dark basement of a building. Instead of turning on the light, the man shovels autonomously in darkness and Fred realizes that like him, the man could see in the dark, "...he had lived within the narrow grooves of habit so long that he had learned to see in his dark world without the aid of eyes, like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch" (Wright 77).

As Fred continues to evolve underground, as in the Africana Critical Theory's context of liberation, his own liberated self, leads to self-discovery and identity formation. He begins to embrace his freedom, and in doing so, awakens to who he truly is and his place in the world. Fred's new-found emancipation brings new sight. He flees from a world of vivid imagery and into a sunken den of shadows yet now he realizes how blind he had been on the surface and how

keen he has become in the darkness. Apprehended by police, who are essentially slaves to the system and blinded by racism, Fred, “is a prisoner who escapes bondage and whose journey into underground blackness allows him to see what is “real” more clearly and accurately” (Gines 50). His perception on the realities of everyday living was permanently altered. His new subfloor walls were decorated with money he had taken to be used as wallpaper, the floor glistened with diamonds which he procured, a radio to keep him company, and a toolbox for a pillow. He learned to return to the surface world only for necessities. Fred’s newly- realized lair reinforced his personal security and served as a reminder of the fact that the familiar streets that he once knew were actually more hostile than previously perceived, “And that was how the world aboveground now seemed to him, a wild forest filled with death, stalked by blind animals” (Wright 96). As the protagonist rationalizes the double perception of literally living in two worlds, Wright addresses the issue of Fred’s guilt again, but from a black existential vantage point. As he peers again at the church singing, Fred realizes why they sang with so much fervor, “Guilt! That was it! Insight became sight and he knew that they were guilty of something they had not done and they had to die” (120). He concluded that they must have been singing for a wrong committed long ago and that the act aided them in their futile search for happiness. Wright exemplifies the collective nihilistic attitude of a group of people in this part of the plot instead of on just an individual. He uses the scenes that Fred encounters underground to tell a story which predates European existential philosophy- that people who were once enslaved, along with their offspring, still suffer from the existential angst of that barbaric institution. Lewis Gordon raises the question in his book *Existentialia, Africana*:

In my replies to the skeptics, I asked them if slaves did not wonder about freedom; suffer anguish; notice paradoxes of responsibility; have concerns of

agency, tremors of broken sociality, or a burning desire for liberation. Do we not find struggles with these matters in the traditional West African proverbs and folktales that the slaves brought with them to the New World?

(7)

One of the philosophical origins of black existentialism surrounds itself around the idea of W.E.B. DuBois' double consciousness, Double consciousness is the awareness that an oppressed person possesses around his or her master or enslaver involving a behavior which must satisfy the personal ego and identity of self and a dual identity which must satisfy the white world's perception of the enslaved. It is the inner conflict of two personalities residing in one body that the oppressed encounters while having to live and function in an oppressed, colonized society. This concept mentioned in DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* expresses the psychological effects that African Americans faced during slavery and beyond, attempting to function normally in life but always having to look through the eyes of how white people viewed them. Fred's underground odyssey of self-discovery and liberation also introduced an intensified conflict within the psyche of his double consciousness. Like the Underground Man of Dostoevsky, Fred developed a hyperactive awareness of everything around him. He not only battles with his conscience for becoming a fugitive in the eyes of the white world, but now he struggles with the guilt of his crime or *non-crime* and his versions of morality versus the world's view:

The match blaze died and darkness claimed the room. Yes, sooner or later, he would have to go into that obscene sunshine and say something somehow to somebody about all of this. He sat brooding in the dark.

(Wright 119)

Fred's wrestling with his conscience and personal conflict with guilt began early in his descent into the underground world. When he reminisces about the times in which he sang at church with his family, the happiness he felt became deceiving, "He wanted them to assume a heroic attitude even though *he himself* had run away from *his* tormentors, even though he had begged *his* accusers to believe in *his* innocence" (Wright 63). He could no longer trust the above ground as a source of contentment. He wanted his church family to awaken the way in which he had. Similar to Plato's *Republic* in the "Allegory of the Cave," Fred, the "chained" philosopher, sees shadowy images in his cave *above ground*, is released and instead of seeing with clarity on the planet's surface, his vision is made pure and light shines on him *below ground*. The analogous light and dark/ vision and blindness metaphors used by Wright reveal his thorough understanding of the existential mind of the oppressed. He compounds Fred's double consciousness with an extra portion of nihilistic guilt and dread causing the false guilt that many people of color experience when a crisis has reached its summit. His overanalyzing and false guilt bring him to the idea of turning himself in to the police, a thought which plagues him at the end of the novel and ultimately, to his death. After turning himself in, Fred reaches the apex of his existential anguish, "I'm guilty. Everybody's guilty. I'll show you everything in the underground..." (Wright 148). Desiring to bring the guilty/ blind world into the knowledge/ light world, he attempts to take the officers to the hole from which he came. Thinking of Fred as a madman, the police officers only pretend to believe that he has been living in a sewer. They follow him to the manhole cover and as he leans into the hole to show them his private world, they shoot him and he falls back into the underground.

Frantz Fanon, one of the philosophers of Africana Critical Theory, states that ontology and being black are not congruent with one another. Since ontology is the study and understanding of

human existence from a philosophical standpoint, black people have not been considered fully human in the eyes of the Western hemisphere according to Fanon, and therefore discount their existence:

Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some people will argue that the situation has a double meaning. Not at all. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of a white man.

(Fanon 90)

Ironically, the police officers who shot Fred were the same who apprehended him earlier in the story. Since his disappearance, they found another suspect and charged him for the murder of which they had accused Fred. Living underground, the protagonist was able to see the hidden, corrupt deeds performed by the police officers and others through cracks in the floor.

Bewildered, the officers did not know how Fred learned of their actions, which they had performed in secret, and decided to kill him to keep the secret intact. If black people were not considered human, as Fanon suggests, it then becomes relatively easy to take a life that has no ontological or historical value. Richard Wright wrote *The Man Who Lived Underground* having tapped into the black existential zeitgeist of that period before Fanon's philosophical observations. His understanding of the existential attitudes of the serfs and Slavs of Dostoevsky's Russia and how it related to existential experiences that were unique to the American slave and African American of Jim Crow and Reconstruction, reveals how Richard Wright was prolific in the way in which he could tell a story from the vantage point of a people who were voiceless and essentially invisible.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ***INVISIBLE MAN- AN EXISTENTIALLY REVOLUTIONARY NOVEL***

*Ellison is a writer of the first magnitude –one of those original talents who has created a personal idiom to convey his personal vision. It is an idiom compounded of fantasy, distortion, and burlesque, highly imaginative and generally surrealistic in effect. –Robert A. Bone*

Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, makes it clear that he did not craft his multidimensional novel overnight. He reveals in his 1981 anniversary edition of the novel what his job entailed, “So my task was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility” (Ellison Collected Essays 488). Instead of adhering to traditional forms of modernism, naturalism, and surrealism, Ralph Ellison combines in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, many of the standard staples of American literature, continuing through African American literature, and into a realm of prose uniquely his own. His philosophy, existential in nature, cannot be defined by one particular school of thought. Richard Wright, Jean- Paul Sartre, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, however, continued to have a strong influence in his writings.

This thesis will continue in its attempt to prove the extraordinary prowess of Ralph Ellison’s existential expression, which differs from his mentors and contemporaries, and presents itself in full display in *Invisible Man*. Six years his senior, Richard Wright was considered to be an

impactful older brother of letters to the younger Ellison. English professors Michael Harper and Robert Stepto's interview with Ellison in 1977 explained Ellison's stance on literary mentorship and the role that Wright played as an influencer. He dismisses the ideology of the father/ son analogy and related to Wright's presence in more "responsible-mentor" terms, "...sometimes a young writer seeks to place his infant talent in the care of an older writer whom he hopes will nurture, instruct and protect it and himself against the uncertainties that are a necessary phase of his development" (Ellison, "Study and Experience" 418). Ellison understood early on the need to keep his existential views open to more than just the prescribed parameters of the European tradition. As a mentor and challenger, Wright's aim was to make sure that Ellison understood the philosophical impetus which drives a novel. Ellison found Wright's mentorship patronizing, stating in the same interview, "...he assumed that I hadn't read any of Marx... Conrad... Dostoevsky... Hemingway- and so on. I was somewhat chagrined by his apparent condescension..." (420). The seasoned mentor, although impressed with his mentee, still felt it necessary to vet the young writer from Oklahoma City. Nevertheless, Wright's philosophical leanings and world view of oppressed people were being made transparent for Ellison to deduce. He understood how Wright's empathy toward the plight of Russian serfs made it natural for him to connect with them and why he stressed the importance of their correlation to black people in the American South:

Wright entered fully into a dialogue with European currents of existentialism, weighing its insights against his experiences as a black man in America and the world view that he had formed out of those indignities. He never confronted a choice to either existentialism or black life; he sought to bring the two together to speak to the universal problems of human existence and to the specific

realities of African-American oppression.

(Cotkin 167)

Like Wright, Ellison was not a novice to European existentialism, with Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Fyodor Dostoevsky being common favorites of the two. Jean- Paul Sartre, entering philosophical discussions, came later, and was introduced by Ellison to Wright. Ellison adds to the fact that with such apprenticeships and collaborations between advisor and adept, there are nuances to the relationship which need to be placed under consideration. He quotes another literary guide, pragmatist, Kenneth Burke who refers to such a union as a type of “courtship” which Ellison states “is implicit in friendship, which is a relationship between, shall we say, two consenting adults who “woo” one another. In such relationships there are risks for both participants” (Ellison “Study and Experience” 419). Ellison comments on the numerous times in which he desired to correct or amend his mentor Wright, but out of respect, refused to do so. Excited from the introductory encounters with Jean-Paul Sartre, Ellison, according to Kathryn Gines’ discussion about French scholar Michel Fabre, “points out that it is Ellison who presents French existentialism to Wright and he cites a 1945 letter from Ellison to Wright to make the case” (Gines 46). In the letter, he mentions the young Sartre and his ideology on the philosophical conditions of humanity, inferring that he was introducing Sartre to Wright for the first time. Black writers were drawn to French existentialists like Sartre for a myriad of reasons. The Negritude movement of the 1930s, led by Francophone writers such as Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, was not only Afro- French in origin, its Marxist, political aspirations and being-in-the-world existential stance drew African Americans to Paris seeking liberal attitudes in the arts not so accessible at the time in the United States. Sartre’s “existence precedes essence” theory became problematic with Wright, Ellison and other existentialists like Fanon due to the

fundamental ontological questioning of whites understanding of blacks being a part of human existence. Lewis Gordon explains the existential dilemma as such:

This idea refers to a hegemonic white presupposition that people of African descent and other designated black peoples are supposedly effects or imitations of active agents of history who are presumed European or white. These are heavily loaded claims, since they presume Europeanness and whiteness not only as conditions of possibility for all thought but also perspectives that matter.

(Gordon “French and Francophone-Influenced Africana” 119)

Wright could not continue in the same philosophical vein of Sartre because of the French philosopher’s failure to incorporate the full understanding of the ideas of existence of peoples of African descent which stem back to antiquity. Ellison borrows from some of Sartre’s tenets such as bad faith, authenticity, and facticity, yet he too, like Wright, ventures on his own path as Robert Genter examines, “Ellison was quick to dissociate himself from what he saw as the stultifying existentialism of Sartre” (202). Ellison’s invisible narrator more closely aligned to Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man*, remaining true to the existential nihilist model. It was the fascination of the first-person underground narrator speaking of and for his existence with boastful dread that sparked the interest of the creation of a political, social, racial persona of the African American variety that appealed to Ellison. His brilliance, however, took the Wright and Dostoevsky’s underground cynic and turned him into an invisible, pluralist in search for meaning:

As Ellison indicates, he (and Wright as well) is not content to claim a single precursor or tradition. Each has supped too fully at the table of humanistic existentialism and political reality to be satisfied with despair: Each must hold

out for himself, and his readers, a sense of transcendence, a possibility of hope.

(Cotkin 166)

The ever-evolving Ellison was beginning to forge his own literary path apart from his philosophical Russian, German, and French roots, and the intellectual rivalry between his literary sibling was taking on a more mutually respectful tone. Ellison was always a self-made artist and writer- mentoring came by choice, not by necessity. Having been reared by a biological father and later, a stepfather, he wasn't looking for a replacement as he earnestly states, "I was quite touchy about those who'd inherited my father's position as head of my family and I had no desire, or need, to cast Wright or anyone else, even symbolically, in such a role" (Ellison "Study and Experience" 421). Ellison had his own style and it was reflected in his writing. His first love was music, entering Tuskegee to study music theory. Ellison could read and write it. This love aided him in the development of style and nuance. Modernism was the driving force for young writers at the time, serving both "philosophical and political purposes" (Gines 192). It was also the catalyst that propelled young writers to express themselves during a time of social change. The post war philosophical movement allowed artists to express themselves in unchallenged modes concerning traditional ideas and values during and after World War II. Marxist ideology and Communism introduced John Reed Clubs of which Wright was a member. Wright also joined the Federal Writers' Project, a government- funded program for struggling artists and writers, and introduced Ellison to the national project during the 1930s and 1940s. With this amount of exposure, both personally and professionally in literature, Ellison still remained true to his authentic self:

But Ellison never completely committed to the political imperatives of the Communist Party. His early short stories of the 1940s, the "Buster and Riley"

stories, focused on the distinctiveness of Ellison's Oklahoma background, on Southern dialect, Southern traditions, and Southern culture; and he was already attracted to modernism as a way out of the confines of social realism...

(Genter 194)

Another reason Ellison found it organically easy to develop his own uniqueness was his natural disdain for what he called the "Bourgeois Negroes." He felt that the preoccupation with color and race by the "Black Aesthetic" crowd was stifling the authentic black voice rather than propelling it. It seemed to rob them of their originality and forced them to lump any and all considerations connected to the African American struggle with "blackness." In discussing his views of the Black Aestheticians, his passion rings true during his interview with Stepto and Harper:

They find it easier to issue militant slogans while remaining safely in the straight-jacket of racist ideology- the ideology that has been made of what they call "Blackness"- than to deal with either the beautiful and confounding complexities of Afro-American culture or the difficulties that must be faced by those who would convert experience into the forms of the novel. If they can't grasp the meaning of what they live and read because their obsession with the mysticism of race and color has incapacitated their ability to see, then they certainly can't subject themselves to the discipline demanded by the novel.

(424)

He was beginning to see the world through an existential lens and to apply authenticity and bad faith even within his own community. *Invisible Man*, the unapologetic novel of self-reflection, was the product of this vision.

Ellison's unnamed *Invisible Man* narrator and Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground's* Underground Man are closely aligned. They are both outcasts of society, electing to leave rather than being driven out by the social ills which plague society. They both remain true to their authentic selves as they encounter the ugly truth in other personalities they encounter. Both of their works share the same anger and angst, "in both the narrator is filled with rage and indignation because of the humiliations he is forced to endure..." (Frank 2) causing them to seek refuge within the storylines. Like the Underground Man, Ellison's invisible narrator interacts with the outside world for validation of his assumptions that the world in which he lives is truly absurd, but also because for the invisible protagonist, he knows that he must prepare for a life aboveground as Cotkins elaborates, "Ellison's Invisible Man may exist on the periphery, may retreat to his underground lair, but he learns at the end of the novel that his existence will take on meaning only when he climbs up from below into the human family" (166). As the invisible protagonist is chased into a manhole and lands in the darkness on top of a mound of coal, he realizes that he has been invisible his entire life. His overthinking, like the hyper-analysis of the Underground Man, refuses to keep him in the hole:

I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the mind, the mind. It wouldn't let me rest. Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough. Books were not enough. My belated appreciation of the crude joke that had kept me running, was not enough.

(Ellison 573)

Dostoevsky's man did not have the existential conundrum of living as a black man in America while dealing with race along with issues of existence. Living above ground or below, visible or

unseen, the social and racial climate remained as unchanging as the air. Genter describes it as such:

While Invisible Man is able to more or less remove himself bodily from the world he is unable to escape the social “frame of acceptance” that he uses to order his experience, and thus he cannot remove himself from social reality.

(201)

Moreover, Ralph Ellison exhibits and understands European existentialism and the history of psychological oppression on the serfs and the Slavs. He was perceptive enough to infer the magnitude of Dostoevsky’s nihilistic antihero with being part of a more specified, intellectually-elite class in Russia and how he understood his place in society to be. This Russian intelligentsia, as mentioned by Joseph Frank, was being manipulated by the incoming flux of ideas from Europe. Frank asserts that such an intelligentsia exists for the black educational elite in the United States as well. Ellison picks up on this elitism and the effects that the indoctrinating white supremacist ideology had on his narrator, “The invisible man too is a member of the American Negro intelligentsia, or has at least been chosen to be educated as one; and his adventures reveal the bankruptcy of all doctrines that this intelligentsia has accepted up to the present from the hands of the whites” (Frank 3). Dr. Bledsoe, president of the black college, Ras the Destroyer whose extreme militancy mirrored white supremacy, Mr. Norton, the millionaire backer of the black university, even the Brotherhood being a politically organized concoction of siphoning young black leaders into misguided propagandist tools, all played a role in the manipulation of this intelligentsia, which kept the African American community divided. Ellison’s modernist *Invisible Man* was not popular at the time within the black intellectual community when it was first published, and yet Ellison remained loyal to his lineage in literature



despite race or ethnicity, and regardless of its European origins. Before his embracing of black existentialist themes, Ellison taps into the minds of the European literary world and its European existential thoughts of individuality, existence and being. “His right to choose Euro- American literary ancestors (especially against those who would have him replicate Richard Wright), and by explicitly identifying T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Fyodor Dostoevsky as direct influences on *Invisible Man*” (Lynn 321). Existentialism and dread, for the musical Ellison, was synonymous with the black nihilist attitude of the American South in the form of the blues, differing only that this existential dread was put into folk song. He is able to comprehend existentialism innately and without effort, and *Invisible Man* exemplifies this fact, “Ellison does not flaunt his existentialism. It is deeply enmeshed in the blues ideology that informs the novel” (Cotkin 167).

Ellison’s use of an anti-hero who is experiencing levels of existence while coexisting within a culture which considers him essentially nonexistent to the societal mainstream, allows the narrator to walk the earth in search of meaning, learning from diverse events and multifaceted people. “*Invisible Man* is a negative *Bildungsroman*, in which the narrator-hero learns that everything he has been taught to believe by his various mentors is actually false and treacherous” (Frank 4), a coming-of-age story that despite being designed to deceive and confuse, gives clarity and insight to the narrator as he travels from blindness of self to full introspection. The journey aids in the narrator’s understanding of self and why he exists in such a world of deception. It begins with the narrator receiving the final words from his dying grandfather. Living a submissive life caused the grandfather to confess that he had always felt like “a traitor and a spy” (16) by doing so. His words haunted the narrator and their ambiguity. It created a double-minded guiltiness in the psyche of the young narrator. “The old man’s words were like a curse. On my graduation day I delivered an oration in which I showed that humility was the

secret, indeed the very essence of progress” (17). Ellison shows how the plague of double consciousness is introduced in the life of the African American at an early age. Before being given the opportunity to present his speech, the adolescent narrator is blindfolded, placed in a ring with other blindfolded boys, and forced to fight until the last man stands. His journey of self thus begins, and Ellison takes the idea of Booker T. Washington’s “Talented Tenth” concept (disdained by DuBois) and displays the ridicule that top students must endure to be chosen to receive a higher education. Black Existentialism and black struggle are synonymous with one another. The narrator serves only three years of college, and gets kicked out his junior year due to chauffeuring one of the school’s rich, white financiers, Mr. Norton, into the poor, black part of town, to a black juke joint called the Golden Day. Ellison describes the anger of the black college president during his rant, yelling at the naive narrator how blacks should conduct themselves around white people:

“Boy, you are a fool,” he said. “Your white folk didn’t teach you anything and your mother-wit has left you cold. What has happened to you young Negroes? I thought you had caught on to how things are done down here. But you don’t even know the difference between the way things are and the way they’re supposed to be. My God,” he gasped, “what is the race coming to?”

(142)

Again, the narrator receives a lesson in double consciousness, the dual nature of an oppressed people and how they are to project themselves around their oppressors. He is sent to Harlem, New York on a fool’s errand by Dr. Bledsoe to look for work and deliver a secret letter which, instead of bearing promising news, was written in an effort to keep the young naïve narrator barred from the school forever. He ends up working at the Liberty Paint Company in Long Island

and has a scuffle with the older, black factory manager, Lucius Brockway who distrusts the narrator, thinking that he was sent to replace him by the union. ““That damn union,” he cried, almost in tears. “That damn union! They after my job! I know they after my job!”” (228). Ellison uses this scene to show several existential issues that plagued the black community; animosity between blacks due to lack of employment, the fear and dread of unions, and ageism, the youth replacing the elderly. After the fight and subsequent explosion, the narrator is sent to the “factory hospital” for injuries where an attempted lobotomy is performed on him. The absurd world of the narrator took little pity on him and even less on people of color. Later, walking the streets of Harlem, the invisible narrator witnesses an elderly couple getting evicted on the streets. As the crowd forms and becomes hostile, the narrator, “seemed to totter on the edge of a great dark hole,” (275). The metaphor of the sensation of suddenly slipping into the underground occurs right before the narrator makes his speech. This is a foreshadowing of the speeches he makes in the future and how speaking against injustice eventually leads him into the underworld. Finding his passion for rhetoric, the invisible narrator calms the crowd by giving a moving speech. His identity as political activist is born. Collective agency, or group action in order to achieve justice, highlighted later in Africana Critical Theory, was already being played out by Ellison’s black existential awareness. The invisible narrator’s speech is overheard by white admirers, one of them, Brother Jack, who are members of *The Brotherhood*, Ellison’s symbolic moniker for the Communist party. “We’re friends of *all* the common people” (282) one of the members exclaimed. Immediately, The Brotherhood begins to indoctrinate the invisible narrator, by presenting him with party literature, changing his name, and paying the rent for an apartment. Ellison does a unique turn with the introduction of the Brotherhood. The invisible narrator suddenly becomes *visible* only for others to change his identity for their benefit. His isolation

and angst are suspended temporarily, and his sense of belonging occurs but is only a deception within the political group to be discovered later. The Brotherhood introduces the narrator to Todd Clifton, the organization's preeminent black leader. As he rises within the organization, he is met by a black nationalist's group and their Jamaican leader, Ras the Exhorter, who continues to oppose and distrust the white-based political organization, continuing his efforts in trying to win over the blacks who are loyal to the organization's cause. Ellison's use of the characters of Clifton and Ras both share the author's understanding of existential authenticity. Clifton, due to his dealings with the Brotherhood, eventually loses his identity and his grasp on reality. The narrator finds him selling Sambo dolls on a street corner. Ras' zeal for black nationalism turns extreme as he begins looting his own community in retaliation of the white's presence in his part of the city. He loses his sense of self as well and the hatred felt from oppression consumes him. Ellison shows the importance of finding one's true self and its outcomes if this is not achieved. Running for safety during a riot, the narrator, disguised in sunglasses and a large hat, is mistaken for a mystical figure by the name of Rinehart which puts him in even more peril. He continues in his disguise only to be recognized by Ras and ordered to be killed by the black nationalists group. Fleeing from them only to run into the police, the bewildered, obscured, multi-identified narrator escapes into a manhole. His *Bildungsroman* finally ended, but his new identity and hibernation only just beginning.

The continued progression the narrator makes as he encounters the different personalities on his travels and the awareness of his clearer perceptions of reality are contrasted against the narrator's incessant need to become more and more validated- either by the people in his own community, or by the whites in which he seems destined in his attempts to impress. The invisible narrator, until sinking into the underground, suffers a series of deceptions from both

sides until he finally escapes underground and discovers his liberated self. Ellison uses the different speeches of the narrator to reinforce the conditions of the African Americans in the North and the South and reverberate the state of racism in the country after Reconstruction and the government's overcorrecting of Jim Crow. In his reference toward migrating blacks' hopes materializing in the North, "The Great Constitutional Dream Book," (280), a fictionalized reference of a book of numbers that blacks played as a form of urban lottery in the inner city. This book, however, contained the promises and dreams of blacks living as equal citizens and in better conditions. In another speech, the narrator cries to the crowd, the existential statement of "I have become more human" (346), reminding his audience that their dispossession is a condition of their invisibility, but when unified as a collective, they can overcome societal and racial ills. The invisible narrator continues to draw from the theme of being dispossessed from the eviction and dispossession of the elderly couple, who were being kicked out on the streets, rendering them invisible to the police and white society. Ellison, the gifted pluralist, encapsulated philosophical ideals, the racial climate, as well as the popular and unpopular political agenda of the post-war period, and strategically supplanted these themes into one novel.

The similarities and differences between Richard Wright's character Fred Daniels and Ralph Ellison's invisible narrator are apparent but come from different realities. Fred Daniels, the underground protagonist of Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, and the invisible narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, both had to grapple within their own psyches in how each related to the veil, double consciousness, and their philosophies on oppression and humanity. The *Veil*, W.E.B. DuBois' thematic *magnum opus* in his 1903 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, is one of the core philosophical revelations in the book which drives the spirit of the African American in determining how better to understand oneself while living under

oppressed situations. He likens the birthright of the descendants of the black race in America to the primordial, providence-created seventh son, gifted or cursed with a special vision:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world, -a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.

(DuBois 3)

The veil is existential because it involves the concept of seeing oneself in relation to others and that image relates to one's existence. DuBois' veil remains omnipresent in the lives of Daniels and the invisible narrator as they sojourn through their respective existential missions. Both characters use cloaking, rendering themselves visible and invisible, when the particular circumstance dictates. Daniels travels aboveground from the sewer to get food, is seen and mistaken as a store clerk, and is ignored and unbothered. The invisible narrator moves in a world of cloaking, disguising himself literally and figuratively at will as political speech giver and as the ominous figure Rinehart. They have developed an innate ability to maneuver while wearing the veil at all times. Both understand that while focusing on survival, they must also continue their search for meaning, and it ultimately depends upon how well they assimilate in white society. As the invisible narrator observes the statue adorning the entrance of his college, he analyzes its metaphoric meaning:

...I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered

more firmly in place, whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.

(Ellison 36)

Consequently, at the forbidden juke joint, the Golden Day, the narrator along with Mr. Norton encounter a significant number of war veterans lingering around the establishment. Ellison writes about how many of the former soldiers were at one time, prominent black men in civilian life, before the war. Some were preachers, teachers, lawyers and doctors. After the war, the psychological effects proved too great for many of them to bear after experiencing a vastly different racial climate in Europe. He uses their stories to reveal what happens when the veil is lifted, even during a traumatic event such as war, the effects that ensue from the lifting of the veil could be more traumatizing than the war-torn event itself.

They suffer not from the shell shock of war but from the shock of coming home. they are modeled on the black soldiers who tasted freedom and dignity in France during World War I and returned less willing to tolerate the institutionalized oppression prevalent in America.

(Lynn 327)

Dubois' living with a veil produces, as a result, the double mindedness and "second sight" of the African American, which is elaborated in *The Souls of Black Folk* as well, "...a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3). Ellison's use of rhetoric in the form of *signifying*, is the manifestation of double consciousness through speech, and is designed to introduce colloquial patterns of speech in order to disguise certain intended meanings in a given dialogue. Ellison uses this form throughout his

novel. Henry Louis Gates describes signifying or signification as “a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture; learning how “to signify” is often part of our adolescent education” (686). Misconstrued as a base form of “shucking and jiving,” signifying carries a deeper, significantly more effective method of confusing thought or ideas in conversation through clever puns, witty sayings and indirect lessons. Again, Gates clarifies, “The black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include “marking,” “loud-talking,” “specifying,” “testifying,” “calling out” (of one’s name), “sounding,” “rapping,” and “playing the dozens.” The banter between the vets at the Golden Day with the sickened Mr. Norton is an example. As they drag the rich white college supporter into the juke joint, they began to jest:

“Gentleman, this is my grandfather!”

“But he’s *white*, his name’s Norton.”

“I should know my own grandfather -on the ‘field-nigger’ side,” the tall man said.

“Sylvester, I do believe you’re right. I certainly do,” he said, staring at Mr.

Norton. “Look at those features. Exactly like yours -from the identical mold.

Are you sure he didn’t spit you upon the earth, fully clothed?”

(Ellison 78)

Ellison uses the signifying technique in its traditional fashion, at times creating an otherwise tragic moment into one of hilarity using the teasing of the vets to lighten the seriousness of scene. The exchange between the narrator and Ras the Exhorter contains another example. After an intense fight with the narrator, Ras is confused by his decision to be with the brotherhood and begins to “loud talk” the narrator:

Why *you* fight against us? You *young* fellows. You young black men with plenty



education; I been hearing your rabble rousing. Why you go over to the enslaver?  
What kind of education is that? What kind of black mahn is that who betray his  
own mama?

(Ellison 371)

Ras is dealing with his own conceptions of identity and visibility, from his existential perspective, the only way to fight against white oppression is to distance from them altogether. The rhetorical artistry of signifying can be traced, according to Gates, as far back as historical Yoruba mythology. The Signifying Monkey is the clown or trickster character of Nigerian folklore and is known by his tricks which are used to reveal truths and teach morals. "Ellison, of course, is our Great Signifier, naming things by indirection and troping throughout his works" (Gates 695), the master folklorist uses this style of language manipulation to not only show his proficiency in his use of double consciousness, but also exhibiting existential points during the narrator's speeches.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PASSING OF THE EXISTENTIAL TORCH AND THE FUTURE OF AFRICANA CRITICAL THEORY

Several historical occurrences took place during the rise of the African American novelist, which not only changed his perception of existence, but created in him a new literary art form. Emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow legislation, the Great Migration, and the transitioning of the black, southern lifestyle of the pastoral, into the northern one of the big cities and factory towns helped to mold the African American's identity of self. The world wars and the Great Depression also contributed in changing the mindset of the African American writer. Richard Wright's protest novels, the standard and staple of expression for many black novelists during this period, with Marxist ideologies and Communist support, were beginning to fade as Modernism began to replace naturalism and realism. Robert Bone categorizes literature into three phases during the period of Wright and Ellison, "escapist literature- pulp fiction.... the assimilationist novel proper... the third is the novel of the Negro life" (166). It wasn't until Wright's existentialist's underground man came to the realization that in order to be seen, *mauvaise foi*, also known as bad faith, or denial would have to occur, and death by a bullet in the back of the head would be the end result as depicted in *The Man Who Lived Underground*. The harsh realities of African American life, transitioning from living in shacks and sharecropping in

the South, to living in tenements and starving with rats in the North, painted a bleak picture by Wright. Ellison, although a few years his junior, was essentially arriving on to the literary landscape from another generation. Bone adds:

Ellison's break with the Wright school is all the more interesting because of this background, and not least of all because it illustrates the so strikingly the historic shift... in this instance the revolt against protest was extended to include a revolt against the naturalistic novel as such.

(198)

Ellison's invisible hero understood his existence in the world but was a man of hope and ambition, an existentialist with an idealized dream for humanity. His seizing of the black hero having the existential awareness to depart from all forms of social protest moves him into his own modernist's identity and further away from Wright's naturalist protest themes. Ellison starts to build a new persona of the black character which differs from victimhood and into one who truly alienates himself in order to better himself:

It is precisely his vision of the possibilities of Negro life that has burst the bonds of the naturalist novel. His style, like that of any good writer, flows from his view of reality, but this in turn flows from his experience as a Negro. His unique experience, Ellison insists, requires unique literary forms, and these he tries to provide from the raw material of Negro culture. It is a major contribution to the evolution of the Negro novel.

(Bone 198-199)

Like a big brother growing up during a turbulent time period trying to protect his sibling, Wright's desire to grind the ugly realities of his upbringing into the conscience of his protégé

was done out of protection and love. His existential dread was not the same existential dread of Ellison, who possessed a more global, and Dostoevskian perspective of nihilism than his older, literary brother. Unbeknownst to Wright, as the times were changing for blacks in America, and Ellison became receptive to its call, the process of passing the existential literary torch to Ellison had already begun.

It seemed the two theoretical sides of the spectrum for Wright, politically and philosophically, were clearly empathetic to the oppressed. Marxism and Communism gave him official platforms in which to stand in solidarity with those oppressed in the U.S. and abroad, and existentialism from Fyodor Dostoevsky, provided him with correlating examples of how to deal with existence, in Wright's case, Negro existence and state-of-being in the world. According to Ellison, Wright seemed to allow his political entanglements interfere with his ties to black liberation, "I think that Wright was actually trying to deal with the confusion between race and culture within the limitations of communist theory" (Ellison, "Study and Experience" 421). It is clear that this ideology may have had a bigger influence on Wright's other novels such as *Native Son* and *Black Boy* which had Communism written into their plots. *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Wright's third novel, unpublished for years, shares Wright's thoughts of a black man being forced into living as a man incognito, hidden from the legal system and social reality. Like Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, Wright's Fred Daniels' psychological and existential stance is displayed for the reader to render judgement or empathy. Mentally shackled, Fred, like the *Underground Man*, cannot escape his reality nor his ever-searching mind. The underground hero of St. Petersburg in the 1850s and Fred in an overrun, American city eighty-eight years later, represented the dread that the oppressed shared, feelings of hopelessness and despair from their never-ending fate. Despite the narrator's intelligence, the world above is a world of regression and darkness.

The humanity interwoven in *Invisible Man* is a sharp contrast to Wright's pain and protest in *The Man Who Lived Underground*. Ellison carefully and respectfully gives the similar account of an existential outsider but having a different purpose. Living underground and living invisibly are synonymous in theme, but slightly dissimilar from an existential perspective. Ellison's choice to depict a man who desires to be seen but is purposefully unseen due to the color of skin sets the tone for the narrator's plea for humanity in the opening chapters of *Invisible Man*:

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves.

(3)

The existential paradox is heightened due to the narrator's problem of not being noticed, not just for being human, but for being a *black* human being. He is unapologetic, refusing sympathy, yet allows the reader to know the state of his invisible condition is accepted. The invisible narrator takes the reader on an exploration into the black experience from naivety to worldliness, exposing how racism affects the human condition of not just black people, but white people as well. He uses rhetoric and folklore cleverly in his storytelling, adding to the authenticity of the characters and events. For example, the narrator's fight with Lucius Broadway, the older employee at the paint factory, and the conversation which ensues is a classic portrayal of the

realities of the competitiveness between blacks fighting for employment during that period when jobs were scarce. The eating and saving of the yams by the narrator as he arrives in Harlem, and how it reminds him of the South is another example of folk storytelling. The soliloquy between the invisible narrator and Brother Tobitt, a white member of the Brotherhood who is married to a black woman, being educated by the narrator on black culture, is another scene rich in folk rhetoric and expression:

Ask your wife to take you around the gin mills and the barber shops and the juke joints and the churches, Brother. Yes, and the beauty parlors on Saturdays when they're frying hair. A whole unrecorded history is spoken then, Brother. You wouldn't believe it but it's true. Tell her to take you to stand in the areaway of a cheap tenement at night and listen to what is said.

(471)

Whether accidentally or contrived, Ellison mirrors the folk aesthetic the same way in which Dostoevsky uses it as he wins his readers' sense of humanity in the lives of the Slavs and serfs of Tsarist Russia.

It is evident that Dostoevsky left an indelible impression on both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, not just his contributions to existentialism, but on how that particular philosophy became the cry of the oppressed and the search for freedom and meaning for those living in bondage. Reading the works of the masterful Russian novelist by two of the most transcending figures in American literature must have had a tremendous effect on Wright and Ellison for them to draw from and connect with Dostoevsky's themes of underground, alienation and invisibility. In one scene, the Underground Man is bumped on the street and the man who bumps him never acknowledges him. Ellison had to have understood, from a caste standpoint, how the narrator of

*Invisible Man* must have felt as one being discarded in his own homeland. The internal conflict that Wright writes of with Fred Daniels as he contemplated his next plan of action in the sewers of his underground, is classically from the Dostoevskian psyche. In his collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison, as noted by Joseph Frank, comments on the Russian novelist's passion for the oppressed, "Dostoevsky's profound study of the humanity of Russian criminals" (Frank 4) was noteworthy enough to be mentioned by Ellison. In Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, in which he details the savagery and humanity of the Siberian prison labor camps, Frank denotes how the novel exposed hidden truths of the conditions of the prisoners, bringing to light the prejudices and preconceived hatred toward those sentenced there:

Dostoevsky not only depicts for the first time the "humanity" of "criminals" (the men he wrote about were criminals technically, but a good many had landed in Siberia only because they had reacted violently to the prevailing injustice and ill-treatment of their class), but also uncovers the hidden treasures of Russian peasant culture.

(Frank 5)

The "hidden treasures" of this culture lie embedded in its rich, historical Slav history. As Ellison weaves his coming-of-age existential saga, he sprinkles the plot with numerous tales of Negro folk culture, which in many instances, are traceable to slavery and out of Africa. Dostoevsky exposes the inhumane conditions of Siberian prisons while simultaneously reminding the reader of the pride and regality of the lowest class of Russians. This bottom caste, as Dostoevsky elaborates in studying the folklore of the prisoners, embodies the true essence of their cultural motherland and the seat of their Christian orthodoxy. Ellison senses this spiritual connection and duplicates it with the encumbered, migrated black people of the American South, and reminds

them through the folklore of their heritage depicted in *Invisible Man*, that their lineage was once regal as well.

The evolution of Ellison continues with his rearrangement of conceptions of dread and angst. Understanding the nuances of music, he incorporated the same tone, grief, and pain induced from the blues. The blues played a significant role for him and Wright due to their familiarity with the style and the way to effectively create its sensation within their writing. Ellison explains it as such:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

(Ellison *The Collected Essays* 129)

The blues is used as the vehicle to transport Ellison's nihilist message in a new and refreshing way. Instead of its classic, European existential finality, Ellison's version has notes of black existentialism- tragedy mixed with comedy, but hope lurks in its shadows for the collective of the race. He also changes the outcome of the invisible narrator as he ends the novel by allowing the narrator to escape the above ground absurd world, not just because of the complexities of racial bias, but also due to the political instability of the Brotherhood. Genter states, "The ending of Ellison's one completed novel *Invisible Man*- the moment when the unnamed protagonist retreats from the social protests in the streets to his "residence underground" (*Invisible Man* 571) -has been the general impetus of the modernist label" (193-194). Metaphorically, the invisible



narrator's withdrawal from society embodied the overall attitude of the post-war intellectual sentiment of social change dictating the political climate at the time.

Not only did the blues play its part in Ellison's toolbox, but pragmatism is also evidenced in the text as well. The use of symbols to explain situations and events is more from the Burkean school of pragmatism and rhetoric than the science-based, practical school of John Dewey. Signifying and pragmatic rhetoric are effectively established in the narrator's speeches in *Invisible Man*. The existential pragmatism of Ellison was the precursor to the modern existentialist as his feelings of dread, hope despair, and disillusionment were derived from living in a modern world of social, political, and racial unrest. Ellison's invisible narrator wasn't hiding; he was conserving his energy for the emergence of his new persona. His search for meaning and enlightened state of being called for him to go into a hibernated, subterranean state, as Ellison states in the Prologue of *Invisible Man*, "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). The invisible narrator represents all men, who, after walking the earth searching exhaustedly for truth, finally finds it, and realizes that upon its discovery, action must ensue. "The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (580), states Ellison. In the end, his message is universal, "Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (Ellison 581). As he states, his end is only the beginning. He concludes his novel with a rhetorical question for those listening to his "disembodied voice" (581). The existentialist, who uses rhetorical signifying to reveal the moral of the plot addresses the

audiences of the oppressed, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581). Ralph Ellison, like so many who fought for human rights through the form of literature, reminds the reader that he fights not just for one group of people, but for all of mankind’s invisible populations.

The double consciousness of DuBois is an Emersonian derivative of the double consciousness in which Emerson admonishes what drives every man. The public and private face of the individual keeps him at constant odds with himself. He finds himself in an internal battle with what he wants in the present moment with what he desires to accomplish in his future. DuBois uses this phrase to express the dual nature of the double standard of the Negro’s existence. For him to be cursed with the anxiety of having to worry how he feels about himself coupled with the worry of how white society also views him, has robbed the African living in America a freedom of consciousness and created an inferiority complex within his own identity. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is a discourse in a man's journey of the discovery of self while simultaneously and relentlessly dealing with his double consciousness along that expedition. The narrator’s progression is perpetually stilted due to him having to quell the trappings of having to please others. He finds solace only when he finally dives into the underground basement. In *Africana Critical Theory*, Frantz Fanon looks at the concept of living-for-acceptance, but from a Pan- African scale, recognizing the fact that Europe has failed to acknowledge the ontology of the African people, even before reaching the Americas. He states in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

In the United States, Blacks are segregated. In South America, they are whipped in the streets and black strikers are gunned down. In

West Africa, the black man is a beast of burden. And just beside me there is this student colleague of mine from Algeria who tells me, “as long as the Arab is treated like a man, like one of us, there will be no viable answer.”

(93)

Earlier in this thesis, it was discussed how W.E.B. DuBois’ post slavery diagnosis of Black America’s double consciousness and living in a veiled state of vision was not only made applicable after emancipation but could be traced when the first slave stepped foot on American soil. It has been discussed, from a philosophical viewpoint, that Frantz Fanon was receptive to the awakening of oppressed people of color in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa. Lewis Gordon has explored this zeitgeist and expounded on its influence on America and the world. Fyodor Dostoevsky, his novella, *Notes from Underground*, and his many literary and philosophical contributions on the oppression of Russian Slavs, serfs, and the counter-effects of Western ideology on Eastern Europe, bridged the gap between bringing into the world consciousness, oppression occurring across hemispheres. Resonating further, literary giant Richard Wright and his *The Man Who Lived Underground* explored the existential concepts of Europe and gave voice to the black southern and northern identity. It was Ralph Ellison and his *Invisible Man*, however, which brought many of the theories, literary and philosophical, to the post-modern forefront.

Post-modern essayist and novelist, Norman Mailer wrote in his essay, “The White Negro” (1957), that the black man was a natural existentialist but that the white hipster

and beatnik generation of the 1950s and 1960s had adopted the new contemporary existential, carefree, rebellious attitude from the Negro experience. This half-truth is riddled with fallacies and cleverly disguises the contemporary mentality of the technological age by introducing new ideas give to an old “problem.” The existential question that DuBois raises in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (1), is studied theoretically by Fanon, Mailer and Gordon, and narratively by both Wright and Ellison. With *Invisible Man* being seventy years old this year, the existential questions of today should reflect the timeless, blame-identifying and finger-pointing indicative of the past and try to answer them without bias. If we are to learn from history, the questions should include *which oppressed group is considered the problems of today?* Who will be rendered invisible based upon this identification, and can we afford the fallout of their existential angst? Most importantly, *why is the human race still in the business of oppression?* Although Critical Africana Theory and black existentialism were magnified by Frantz Fanon, Ralph Ellison had clearly incorporated black existentialist ideas in America before the Martinican born philosopher’s influence made its way to western shores. Both works were published in 1952, but the reflections drawn from *Invisible Man*, with elements of European existential examples as well as Africanized ones, made Ellison not only a precursor of many of the ideals of Africana Critical Theory, but also afforded him an unidentified, new place in American literature. The beauty of the novel is that it is as transcendent as it is multicultural. Like its African American protagonist, it takes the reader along on an *American* journey of a search for *American* meaning through the search for *American* identity of the *American* self. Ellison created a timeless work from which blacks and whites can learn, reflect, and continue to examine. *Invisible Man* begins with a blindfolded black boy fighting to give a speech and to be seen and ends with an American man who goes into hibernation after finally seeing what he’s been fighting all along.

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