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EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM AND BAD FAITH:

EXPLORING THE "INFINITE POSSIBILITIES" IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AND JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *BEING AND NOTHINGNESS*

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J. Saunders Redding comments that "Existentialism is no philosophy to accommodate the reality of Negro life" (209). However, Ralph Ellison's concern in *Invisible Man* to explore his protagonist's freedom and the ways in which he deceives himself about his freedom invites a comparison with the ontological premises of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, particularly his concept of "bad faith," in which individuals accept the identities that existing power structures force upon them. Both writers articulate the nature of selfhood in the modern world, and how easily one's true identity is lost when faced with absolute existential freedom. While Ellison was not a student of existential philosophy, the preoccupation of both writers with the freedom of the individual consciousness and the inability to maintain that freedom suggests that the two were responding to the same historical and cultural milieu.

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MAN AND JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *BEING AND NOTHINGNESS*

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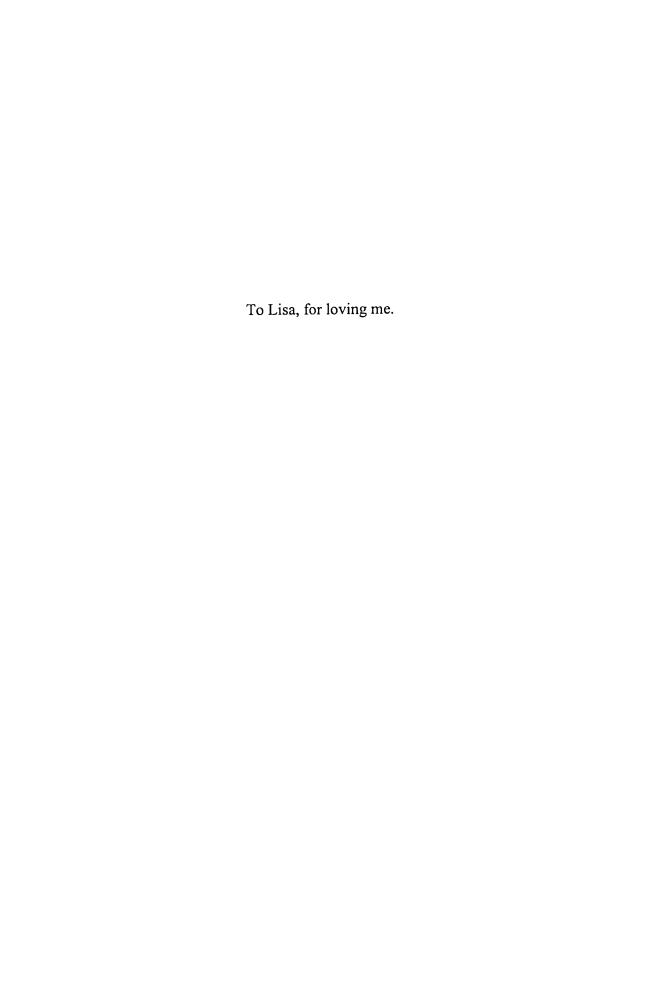
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To Lisa, for loving me.

"When I discover who I am, I'll be free"
--*Invisible Man* (243)

In recent years, the critical approach to works by African Americans has focused

upon those thematic and expressive elements that underscore the "blackness" of the

work. Molefi Kete Asante explains the need for this methodology in "Locating a Text:

Implications of Afrocentrist Theory":

> An inordinate number of African American scholars have become lost
>
> souls trying to negotiate the Eurocentric pathways of mono-culturalism
>
> and mono-historicalism. An equal number of non-African scholars have
>
> floated around ethereally when it came to locating an African American
>
> text. (9)

Afrocentrists like Asante articulate the differences between races in order to inscribe a

critical space in which to discuss particular works in terms of their blackness. A central

approach of this method, then, is to minimize, or de-emphasize, the relationship of

African American art to classical and popular Western tradition and instead highlight the

qualities rooted, however deeply, in African consciousness or sensibility. Similarly,

prominent critics and artists alike, who would not necessarily consider themselves

Afrocentrists, react against the "Eurocentric pathways of mono-culturalism and mono-

historicalism" by accentuating, in various ways, the inability of Western thought and

modes of expression to capture or illustrate the complexities of life in America. In the

introduction to *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* George E. Kent

discusses his personal attitudes toward humanism, which he defines as

the established values implicit in white writers (whether agonized over or promoted), derived from Hebrew, Greek, and Roman traditions: the assumed triumph of the individual, the clarity of truth, the existence of transcendental beauty, the shining virtues of rationality, the glory of democratic freedom, and the range of Christian and Platonic assumptions that tend to form stubborn threads in the warp and woof of white tradition as a systematic and *abstract* universalism. (9)

Kent explicitly notes that humanism and the values associated with it are a product of the white tradition, while certain linguistic choices he makes (e.g., "assumed," "stubborn," "warp and woof") belie an overall sense of uneasiness about the adequacy of humanism truly to capture the breadth of human, not merely Christian or Platonic, experience. Western thought, in other words, which is founded upon Greek, Roman, and Hebrew traditions, is found lacking. Ishmael Reed, on the other hand, is quite a bit more aggressive in his attitudes toward Asante's "mono-cultural" and "mono-historical" pathways of scholarship. In his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed scathingly—and wittily—critiques the Western tradition and its stress on the "achievements of mankind which began in Greece and then sort of wiggled all over the place like a chicken with its neck wrung" (217). Throughout the text he promotes the central premise that white culture has "re-written," or effectively erased, the prominent role of African forms and figures in the development of modern civilization. Reed achieves through satire and farce what can only be described as a repositioning of the historical, cultural, and artistic perspectives that emphasize "whiteness." By identifying these perspectives and poking fun at them, Reed begins the long process of salvaging "blackness."

The same trend can be seen with respect to criticism of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In particular, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explores provocatively the double voiced possibilities of African American expression. In several works—particularly, and most influentially, in *The Signifying Monkey*—Gates delineates a new mode of black literary criticism that focuses upon intertextuality signaled by what he terms Signifyin(g). Signifyin(g) tropes, which include rapping, naming, and playing the dozens, among others, he asserts, operate in African American texts as "figures of rhetorical strategies and of interpretation" (53) which play upon and ultimately revise literary antecedents. Importantly, Gates grounds Signifyin(g) in "an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, and improvised upon in ritual" (5). The Signifyin(g) Monkey, which he maintains is the trope for the rhetorical act itself, originates from the Yoruba trickster figure Esu-Elegbara. Gates returns time and again to Ellison's novel, emphasizing the inherent blackness of its mode of expression.

Clearly, race is a central issue in *Invisible Man*. However, the risk of elevating the unique blackness of the novel is, ultimately, to downplay Ellison's appropriation of various intellectual trends in the early and mid-twentieth century. In other words, one risks the possibility of forever affixing the term "African American" to Ellison's status as writer. William Lyne begins to repair this error in "Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness." He exposes the limitations placed upon the novel by critics like Gates, and, by appropriating the vocabulary of Signifyin(g), explores Ellison's attitudes toward modernism and naturalism:

> An examination of Ellison's largely unnoticed signifying on Anglo-American modernism and his implicit but devastating critique of double voiced strategies of resistance may show *Invisible Man* speaking for us and to us in new ways. (320)

Lyne's argument is twofold: first, he asserts that Ellison never completely abandons the naturalism to which Richard Wright subscribed; second he maintains that figures like the narrator's grandfather, Dr. Bledsoe, and Rinehart use the double-voiced strategy to a negative effect. These characters are "real obstacles, treacherous foes who lead the invisible man down a series of blind alleys" (324). Ellison critiques the very notion of the double voice by representing those who practice it negatively. In the process, Lyne contends, Ellison emphasizes the "material circumstances of oppression" (329) and aligns himself with the social consciousness of naturalism rather than the avant garde sensibilities of modernism.

Lyne re-approaches *Invisible Man* by discussing it not exclusively in terms of race, but also in terms of specific literary and intellectual movements, like modernism and naturalism, to which Ellison might have been sensitive or receptive. The present study wishes to approach the text in a similar manner. While *Invisible Man* is about the reality of racial differences in America, it is also about a man trying to come to terms with himself. Kenneth Burke writes that despite the novel's "involvement with the cultural problems of the Negro in the United States, its 'fixation' on that theme, I would propose to classify it as an example of what Germans would call a *Bildungsroman*" (350). Ellison depicts his main character confronted by identity after identity with seemingly no control over the "he" that he is to become. Yet, Ellison provides his

protagonist with ample opportunities—particularly during his masquerade through the streets of Harlem as Rinehart—to discover that he is completely free from all the external forces that would define him. He learns, in other words, that his identity is fluid and undetermined. By the end of the novel, however, he forsakes this freedom and instead defines himself as others see him, or refuse to see him—as an invisible man.

At a 1964 symposium on Richard Wright transcribed in Herbert Hill's *Anger and Beyond*, J. Saunders Redding commented that "Existentialism is no philosophy to accommodate the reality of Negro life" (209). However, Ellison's concern to explore his protagonist's freedom and the ways in which he deceives himself about his freedom invites a comparison with the ontological premises set forth in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, particularly his concept of bad faith, in which individuals deny their autonomy and accept the identities that society, religion, culture, and other existing power structures force upon them. Both writers, an ocean apart and writing at nearly the same time, articulate the nature of selfhood in the modern world, and the ease with which one's true identity is lost in the face of absolute freedom. While Ellison was not a student of existential philosophy, the preoccupation of both writers with the freedom of the individual consciousness and the inability to maintain that freedom suggests that the two were responding to a similar milieu, in which the individual is valued over the various external pressures exerted upon him.

Although existentialism has as many definitions as proponents, the central premise is the predominance of existence over essence. Essentialism, to which existentialists are opposed, maintains that particular properties, characteristics, or qualities inhere necessarily in the individual to which they belong. A poet, therefore,

possesses the essential qualities of a poet, while a carpenter is endowed inherently with characteristics suited to carpentry.[1] Essentialists, in other words, believe that, as T. Z. Lavine explains, "individual existence is secondary to the concept, essence, or system which defines it" (328). Existentialists deny this ontology and propose instead that essential characteristics have no power over the individual. Moreover, they add, the traditional values that human civilizations hold to be true are illusory and misleading. As Lavine writes:

> Existentialism may thus be seen as the champion and defender of the
>
> human spirit against the oppressive features of mass society, science,
>
> philosophy, politics, and organized religion. Its concerns are narrow.
>
> Existentialism focuses solely upon human existence: It has no philosophy
>
> of nature, of science, or of history, it is a philosophy of concrete human
>
> existence, a philosophy of man as conscious being. (329)

The systematized worlds of politics, religion, history, philosophy, and science, all of which try in some way to define the essence of an individual, are secondary to the primacy of the individual's consciousness.

One becomes aware of his existence during moments of crisis, when he cannot react with the habitual patterns of ordinary life. The individual realizes the impotence of reason, religion, and rationalism to capture the reality of human existence. At this point, say the existentialists, one begins to feel anxiety or dread at the possible meaninglessness of existence. Once traditional essentialist beliefs have been challenged, one begins to see the absurdity of life. Lavine writes, "To exist as a human being is inexplicable, and

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[1] See Plato's *Ion* for an example of an essentialist ontology.

wholly absurd. Each of us is simply here, thrown into this time and place—but why now? Why here? . . . For no reason, without necessary connection, only contingently, and so my life is an absurd contingent fact" (331). Nothing structures the world, and all knowledge, moral values, and relationships are devalued. Finally, existentialists feel a sense of estrangement or alienation from the rest of the world precisely because they have challenged the legitimacy of existing values and beliefs.

A detailed look at Sartre's famous treatise *Being and Nothingness* reveals his contributions to existential philosophy. Sartre's ontology rests upon two categories of being which he terms "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself." Being-in-itself, Sartre maintains, is existence without self-consciousness; it simply *is* what it *is*. In-itself is "itself so completely that the perpetual reflection which constitutes the self is dissolved in an identity" (*Being and Nothingness* 28). In other words, being-in-itself lacks the capacity to reflect upon its own existence, and therefore remains fixed. Its identity, if it can be said to have one, is itself. This mode of being can never become anything else—it is, it is what it is, and it is wholly itself. Joseph Catalano explains,

> In referring to things as *in*-themselves, Sartre wishes to draw our attention
> to the absolute unity that matter has with itself. An apple is an apple; it
> does not have the task of becoming what it should be. The being of an
> apple is not in question for itself. The being of an apple is *in-itself* and
> thus has no relationship with itself. (43)

In-itself, in other words, has no relation to the world outside itself. It is completely unified, and therefore it is static. As a result, according to Lavine, beings-in-themselves are "subject to causal laws and are causally determined to be what they are" (353).

Being-in-itself, then, has no awareness of itself outside itself and is determined by causality.

The second mode of being, called being-for-itself, is opposed to in-itself in Sartre's ontology. Being-for-itself is aware of its self and of the distance between itself and the world of objects. Whereas being-in-itself "has no *within* which is opposed to a *without*" (*Being and Nothingness* 28), being-for-itself possesses a within and can therefore question and judge the without, the world of things. Catalano clarifies:

> Man . . . is said to be a *for-itself* because he is not perfectly one with himself. This lack of identity with himself allows man to reach out beyond and relate all things to himself and for his own purposes. Consciousness is thus a being for itself because it has a natural tendency to relate all beings to its own purposes. (43)

Being-for-itself interacts with the world by relating it back to the self. Man achieves this relation with the world through his capacity to question. By questioning, man characterizes his association with the world of other beings, but he brings nothingness into the world, for each answer could possibly be a negative. Sartre explains that

> at the moment when I ask, "Is there any conduct which can reveal to me the relation of man with the world?" I admit *on principle* the possibility of a negative reply such as, "No, such a conduct does not exist." This means that we admit to being faced with the transcendent fact of non-existence of such conduct. (35)

The individual's ability to bring nothingness into the world by questioning propagates a distance between himself and objects:

> In asking any question about the world, the questioner is detaching, disassociating himself from the causal series of nature, the world of things, of being-in-itself. Only conscious being has this capacity to withdraw from the bare existence of things in the causal order, the capacity not to be part of that order. (Lavine 355)

The ability to question, therefore, and to introduce nothingness into the world, frees being-for-itself from the causal order of nature.

Sartre claims that individuals are free to act; their actions are not determined by thoughts of the future or promises made in the past. He offers two examples to illustrate his point. First, he describes how the future self is completely separate from the present self. Sartre visualizes himself walking along the edge of an abyss and notes, "If *nothing* compels me to save my life, *nothing* prevents me from precipitating myself into the abyss" (69). He realizes that he is completely separated from the "he" that he will become in the future—that the future him is not truly him at all. He accepts, then, that any thought of self-preservation is but one of several possibilities available to him:

> I play with my possibilities. My eyes, rising over the abyss from top to bottom imitate the possible fall and realize it symbolically; at the same time suicide, from the fact that it becomes a *possibility* possible for *me*, now causes to appear possible motives for adopting it. . . . Fortunately, these motives in their turn, from the sole fact that they are motives of a possibility, present themselves as ineffective, as a non-determinant; they can no more *produce* the suicide than my horror of the fall can *determine* *me* to avoid it. (69)

Sartre maintains that his actions are not determined by thoughts of his future. Actions are not motivated by their ramifications, but rather by the possibilities inherent in *choosing* a course of action. Anguish is derived, then, from the awareness of a rupture between the present-self and the future-self. One's future in no way determines the actions and convictions of the present.

Sartre argues also that the present self is free from past resolutions. He describes a man who promises never again to gamble. This man, he says, realizes upon approaching a gaming table that his past resolutions have melted away. When he first promises not to gamble, he believes in the effectiveness of the promise; however, "what he apprehends then in anguish is precisely the total inefficacy of the past resolution" (Sartre 70). Sartre continues: "What the gambler apprehends at this instant is again the permanent rupture in determinism; it is nothingness which separates him from himself" (70). The gambler feels anguish because he understands that his past resolutions do not determine his present actions. He is at each moment completely responsible for his actions. As he stares out over the abyss, Sartre's decision not to jump is free from any idea of his future self, for he realizes that not jumping is only one of several courses of action available to him. Similarly, the gambler makes his decision in complete freedom from his past resolutions because his past self is not his present self. As Sartre explains, taking on the role of the gambler,

> *I must rediscover* the fear of financial ruin or of disappointing my family, *etc.*, I must re-create it as experienced fear. It stands behind me like a boneless phantom. It depends on me alone to lend it flesh. I am alone and naked before temptation as I was the day before. After having patiently

built up barriers and walls, after enclosing myself in the magic circle of a

resolution, I perceive with anguish that *nothing* prevents me from

gambling. (70)

He is not bound by the past, or the future, or, indeed, by causality. He is not bound either

by actions prescribed by religion, society, culture, or history. His only limitations are the

ones he places on himself at each particular moment. The conscious being's capability to

question, and thereby to bring nothingness into the world, affords him the freedom to see

past the determined world of in-itself.

This admittedly technical discussion of Sartre's ontology is crucial to a

comprehensive understanding of his concept of bad faith, for Sartre concludes that in

response to the anguish that life is not determined and that the existing "truths" are not

true at all, the individual denies his freedom. He lies to himself, in other words, about his

relationship to the world. Ronald Aronson writes:

Bad faith is self-deception: specifically, the attempt to *be* something as if

in a thinglike manner, as if I were an in-itself—as when I try to *be* a

writer, or a waiter, or a homosexual, or indeed a sincere person, as if any

of these were a condition I could absorb. (84)

Those who live in bad faith, Sartre argues, accept identities given to them by society,

culture, or personal experience. In bad faith, he writes, "instinct or . . . original drives or

complexes of drives constituted by our individual history make up *reality*" (90). In other

words, the individual instinctively accepts those patterns of behavior that have heretofore

gone unchallenged, that have traditionally defined existence. Such an existence,

however, "is neither *true* nor *false*, since it does not *exist for itself*. It simply *is*, exactly

like this table, which is neither true nor false *in itself* but simply *real*" (90). To live in bad faith is to live as an in-itself. Definitions determine the individual; to live in bad faith is to accept those determinants.

Sartre offers several examples of individuals living in bad faith. Each example better illustrates a fundamental principle of for-itself existence: the ability to be one thing and not to be it at the same time. First, he describes a woman who must decide whether or not she will entertain the sexual advances of her date. This woman, Sartre claims, is well aware of the man's intentions, but she ignores the sexual overtones of certain comments that he makes. She is torn between what she wants and what she thinks is right:

> She is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the desire cruel and naked would humiliate and horrify her. Yet, she would find no charm in a respect which would only be respect. (97)

In other words, this woman understands the nature of the man's desire, and secretly she invites it. However, the woman wants to delay a decision as long as possible; when the man takes her hand, effectively forcing her to confront her conflicting desires, she pretends not to notice what he has done. At this moment, says Sartre, she divorces her mind and her body—she becomes all intellect. She relinquishes control of her actions. She lives in bad faith because she does not accept her freedom to choose, to make a decision. She is paralyzed by the tension between what she wants and what she thinks is right. She becomes inert because of the "contradictory concepts which unite in themselves both an idea and the negative of the idea" (Sartre 98). As a being-for-itself,

her conflicting desires can co-exist and she is free to choose among them; however, she relinquishes this freedom rather than make an uncomfortable decision.

In later examples, Sartre uses bad faith to elucidate the paradoxical nature of being-for-itself, specifically, that being-for-itself simultaneously is and is not. A waiter in a café, writes Sartre, "cannot be immediately a café waiter in the sense that this inkwell *is* an inkwell" (102). However,

> there is no doubt that I *am* in a sense a café waiter—otherwise could I not just as well call myself a diplomat or a reporter? But if I am one, this cannot be in the mode of being-in-itself. I am a waiter in the mode of *being what I am not.* (103)

To define oneself solely as a café waiter is to live in bad faith, for one cannot *be* a café waiter in the same way that an object is merely an object. At the same time, though, one *is* a café waiter in the sense that he occupies his time performing the duties of a waiter. He *is* a café waiter at the very moment that he is not one. Being-for-itself, then, is and is not; bad faith occurs when the individual lies to himself and accepts an in-itself existence.

Sartre illustrates this point further in his discussion of a homosexual. A homosexual would be in good faith, Sartre contends, if he understood the phrase "I am not what I am" (108). Sartre claims that for the homosexual to live in good faith he must make the following admission:

> "To the extent that a pattern of conduct is defined as the conduct of a paederast and to the extent that I have adopted this conduct, I am a paederast. But to the extent that human reality cannot be finally defined by patterns of conduct, I am not one." (108)

Reality is not determined by patterns of conduct or modes of behavior; as such, one is not anything but himself. To the extent that one behaves in a particular manner, however, he accepts the definition of that behavior. Being-for-itself, then, is contradictory—one *is*, but because he is ultimately free from all determinants, he *is not*. One who lives in bad faith refuses to admit that he is not what he is.

An important corollary to Sartre's ontology is the fluidity of identity that it implies. One's identity, or conception of self, is free to recreate itself over and over. Indeed, it must do this or risk becoming a thing, an object, an in-itself. A being-for-itself, then, is one whose identity is indefinite or mercurial, is not determined by causality. Since man is not determined, those traditional external forces like God, nation, or science, which categorize and delimit man's relationship to and place in the world, are not absolute. There is no source from which, and with which, an individual may find his identity, except from himself. To be in bad faith, then, is to accept an identity as static rather than to understand that identities are ultimately fluid and illusory. As Aronson explains:

> It is bad faith to pretend that I am not free, to act as if what is really my
>
> choice is or could be a condition, to *become* a role as if I did not have to
>
> choose and recreate it at every moment. (84)

The woman, the waiter, and the homosexual are in bad faith because they define themselves as the world sees them, or they act as they feel they should, rather than accept the possibility and responsibility of simultaneous being and not being.

Similarly, in *Invisible Man* Ellison reveals how identity is fluid and how it is possible for individuals to be and not be at the same time. The protagonist wrestles with

various identities and definitions that are imposed upon him; however, disguised as the enigmatic Rinehart, he is ultimately shown that he does not need to be determined by these, or any, identities. He is free, in other words, to be himself, wholly and completely. By the end of the novel, though, which is actually the beginning, Invisible Man is in what Michael G. Cooke refers to as "a state of confusedly expectant solitude" (99), having beheld his freedom and resigned himself instead to accepting his life as others see him.

Early in the novel, the narrator struggles to understand the meaning of his grandfather's deathbed confession. The old man's dying words shatter his family's perception of him as a meek artifact from slavery:

> "I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." (16)

The old man reveals that to survive in the South—in the mouth of the lion—he had to play the role of the servile black man while covertly resisting the will of the oppressive white community. This role subsumed so much of his identity and ran so deep within him that even his family has no idea of his true feelings. The narrator remembers that he "was warned emphatically to forget what [his grandfather] had said" (16) but admits that the words "had a tremendous effect upon me" (16). Indeed, the paradoxical implications of the directive haunt the young man, for the old man's lesson flies in the face of everything the narrator had learned about surviving in the South. His family's advice to forget his grandfather's statement implies that he must continue to behave as he has been

taught—he must not put himself in danger by upsetting the established order. One can be "good" while gaining an advantage for himself, but he must not challenge white supremacy. The old man's confession, however, calls this method of survival into question by advocating resistance, no matter how passive or covert. Moreover, the old man occasions a series of troubling questions: How can one be "good" and be a traitor at the same time? Is it possible to be both? How does one know when he is being good or being treacherous?

Invisible Man soon finds himself doubting the motives for his own actions. He recalls how the white members of the community had praised his behavior:

> I was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as *treachery*. When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that that would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. (17)

The revelation about his grandfather effectively forces him to question his own mode of behavior, indeed, his own identity. Perhaps he is not the "example of desirable conduct" that he thought himself. Perhaps his actions have consequences he cannot comprehend. To a certain extent, the role of covert traitor has been forced upon him, for he no longer feels free to act as he sees fit; rather, he is unsure of himself and of his motives for each action. He feels that his actions are beyond his control, as do, initially, the gambler and

the man standing on the cliff in *Being and Nothingness*. As a young man he does not yet comprehend that his actions are free from all determinants.

The narrator characterizes much of his early life as a constant tension between his own desire to play the part of the "good" black man—and thereby advance his own standing in the community and in life—and his consciousness of the possible duplicity of his actions. This tension comes to a head after the famous battle royal scene, when Invisible Man performs his graduation speech. The speech, he explains, argues that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (17). He adds parenthetically: "not that I believed this—how could I, remembering my grandfather?—I only believed that it worked" (17). As he relates his story, Invisible Man emphasizes the tension between the role that he had been taught to play growing up *and* the subversive message that his grandfather delivers. This tension surfaces as the narrator finally is allowed to give his speech after the indignity of the brawl. He is heckled by the drunken men in the audience for using words of three or more syllables; when he comes to the phrase in his speech "social responsibility," the men make him repeat it over and over. Distracted, the narrator utters "social equality," a phrase he "had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private" (31). The men become outraged, and Invisible Man quickly amends his mistake. One man remarks, "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (31). In other words, Invisible Man is "free" to make something of himself, but he must remember constantly his inferiority in society. The duplicity advocated by his grandfather, which would ultimately upset the social order and risk the wrath of powerful white men, becomes a dangerous course of action. The narrator embraces instead the identity of the good, passive black man that

the community would impose upon him. The school superintendent addresses the audience after the narrator's speech: "Gentlemen, you see that I did not overpraise this boy. He makes a good speech and some day he'll lead his people in the proper paths. And I don't have to tell you that that is important in these days and times" (32). In order to "encourage him in the right direction," the superintendent bestows upon Invisible Man a leather briefcase containing "a scholarship to the state college for Negroes" (32). Overjoyed, the narrator admits to feeling safe from his grandfather's "deathbed curse" (32) and begins to prepare for college.

At the university, Invisible Man falls back into the old pattern of pleasing the white folk for his own personal gain. He describes Founder's Day of his junior year, during which he is entrusted with the responsibility of escorting one of the founders, a white Bostonian named Norton, around campus. Not wanting to seem overeager, the narrator feigns ignorance of his guest's importance, but he admits to the reader: "Of course I knew he was a founder, but I knew also that it was advantageous to flatter rich white folks. Perhaps he'd give me a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship next year" (38). This, of course, is the survival mode he had learned growing up in the South, the same mode that his grandfather suggested was actually a form of resistance. As he continues along with Norton, listening to him speak, Invisible Man begins to feel a sense of his own importance, as if his association with the university and the ideals upon which it was founded has secured for him a bright and promising future. "I felt I was sharing in a great work," he says, "and, with the car leaping leisurely beneath the pressure of my foot, I identified with the rich man reminiscing in the rear seat" (39). The narrator harbors no intentions of resisting the existing power structures, of narrowing the gap between the

Nortons of the world and himself. Rather, he hopes merely to advance in the world, to make something of himself. In other words, he does not intend to resist in any manner, let alone in the manner prescribed by his grandfather.

Once again, though, Invisible Man finds himself powerless against the identity that his grandfather forced upon him. His self-consciousness resurfaces, and, as he steers the car down an unfamiliar road, he immediately questions his motivations:

> Now, riding here in the powerful car with the white man who was so
>
> pleased with what he called his fate, I felt a sense of dread. My
>
> grandfather would have called this treachery and I could not understand in
>
> just what way it was. (40)

He struggles between the expectations placed upon him by powerful white men, like those at the battle royal, and his grandfather's example. Indeed, Invisible Man's consciousness of the possible duplicity of his actions, which flies in the face of his desire to behave as he feels he *should*, is the source of his dread. The narrator feels manipulated by a standard of conduct—a way of being—that is not his own, that has, in fact, been suggested by his grandfather. Although he tries to affect a servile demeanor in order to gain advantage for himself, he finds himself questioning his motives.

These early chapters, therefore, establish two conflicting modes of survival, between which Invisible Man must choose. On one hand, he understands the benefits of kowtowing to men of power. He can secure his own safety and, with limitations, perhaps make something of himself. On the other hand, though, he struggles with his grandfather's suggestion that such kowtowing implicitly involves resistance. The university's president, Dr. Bledsoe, offers a corollary to these examples—how to

manipulate in order to maintain power. Bledsoe discovers that the narrator has taken

Norton to visit Trueblood, an incestuous black farmer, and then to the Golden Day, a

local whorehouse patronized by occupants of a nearby insane asylum, seeking respite for

the older man's fainting spell. To Bledsoe's chagrin, Invisible Man protests his

innocence in the matter: Norton had demanded to meet Trueblood, he proclaims, and he

had no choice but to stop at the tavern. Bledsoe responds:

> "Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take the white folk where
>
> we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don't you
>
> know that? I thought you had some sense." (102)

And later:

> "My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how
>
> to lie?"
>
> "Lie sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me?"
>
> . . . .
>
> "Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only
>
> way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are
>
> you getting around here?" (139)

Bledoe underscores the reality of race relations in the South. A black man has to lie, he

claims, because that is what whites really want. The personal motivation for lying,

Bledsoe maintains, is survival, but in the process of playing this role one also resists the

white power. And to resist is to begin reclaiming power. Bledsoe offers the narrator an

example of his own power:

> Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assured, self-
> starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. . . . The only
> ones I even pretend to please are *big* white folk, and even those I control
> more than they control me. (142)

One with power need not flaunt it in order to keep it; however, it must be kept at all costs. Bledsoe exclaims, "I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am" (143). Bledsoe's lesson corresponds to the grandfather's confession, for, he confirms, to get to his station he "had to act the nigger" (143). Thus, Bledsoe exemplifies a duplicitous life lived in the South, where whatever power that is acquired must be held onto, despite the consequences.

Leon Forrest writes that in the character of Bledsoe, Ellison is concerned with "the unquestioned reverence for leadership that still seems to haunt certain groups within the race vulnerable to the cult of personality, especially when touched by the fires of political-religious enterprise" (311). Bledsoe, he argues, is a satirical representation of a black leader *whose* concern lies more for himself than for the race itself. While this interpretation is certainly legitimate—after all, Bledsoe unapologetically protects his own position—one might argue that he looks toward the larger picture of race relations in the South. In other words, he feels that his status at the University is more valuable to the race than is the future livelihood of one, or any, student. Rather, Bledsoe's character functions better as another example of how to get by in the world, of how to keep one's head in the lion's mouth. Just like the grandfather, Bledsoe acknowledges that to play a role is to resist the white power; he takes it one step further by warning that any power one gains from resistance must be held onto at all costs. Both grandfather and Bledsoe,

then, exert a certain amount of existential freedom, for, despite racism, they choose the terms of their existence. Like Sartre's gambler, who realizes upon approaching a gaming table that his past resolutions do not control his actions, Bledsoe and grandfather understand that on some level their existence is not determined by external authorities. However, to the extent that they impose upon the narrator certain modes of behavior, they represent powerful forces that try to define him.

Invisible Man's association with the Brotherhood later in the novel is the most overt example of an identity being thrust upon him. Whereas in earlier examples Invisible Man wrestles with his own consciousness of the possible duplicity of his actions, he willingly accepts the identity that Brother Jack gives him. The process of defining Invisible Man begins during their first meeting in a Harlem café, after the narrator's impromptu oration in defense of an old couple being evicted from their apartment. Invisible Man demurs with regard to his speech, noting a perceived similitude with the older couple. Jack responds confidently, and in the process begins to define the narrator:

> "Oh no brother; you're mistaken and you're sentimental. You're not like them. Perhaps you were, but you're not any longer. Otherwise, you'd never have made that speech. Perhaps you were, but that's all past, dead. You might not recognize it just now, but that part of you is dead! You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new." (291)

Jack tells the narrator that he is no longer a black man in the South whose only method of resistance is cunning. If he were like them, Jack argues, he never would have been

willing or able to incite the crowd. Further, Jack assures him that soon he will emerge

something new, which, the reader discovers, is the kind of black leader that Jack can

manipulate to his own purposes. Later, Jack delineates Invisible Man's new status as

black leader and effectively robs the narrator of any voice in the matter:

> "So it isn't a matter of whether you *wish* to be the new Booker T.
>
> Washington, my friend. Booker Washington was resurrected today at a
>
> certain eviction in Harlem. He came out of the crowd and spoke to the
>
> people. . . . You shall be the new Booker T. Washington but even greater
>
> than he." (307)

The promise of steady employment and the allure of this new role encourage the narrator

to accept Jack's offer of membership in the Brotherhood. He even begins to believe his

own importance, as when he frets over telling Mary, the woman who befriends him and

takes him into her half-way house, that he must move out. "Telling her that I was ·

moving," he admits, "would be a hard proposition. I didn't like to think of it, but one

couldn't be sentimental. As Brother Jack had said, 'History makes harsh demands of us

all'" (316). The narrator's participation in and loyalty to the organization grow, and he is

assigned to the movement in Harlem.

The Brotherhood subsumes the identity of all its members; the leaders demand

loyalty and humility. As one member comments to the narrator, "The Brotherhood is

bigger than all of us. None of us as individuals count when its safety is questioned"

(405). As Invisible Man's role in the group expands, he admits to identifying himself

wholly as one of its members:

> I was dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood. The
> organization had given the world a new shape, and me a vital role. We
> recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science.
> Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it
> works. And it was working very well. (382)

As the narrator becomes more successful and begins to believe in his importance as

spokesman for the organization, he surrenders more and more of his sense of himself to

the group's ideals, particularly its scientific method. Everything, Invisible Man admits,

and most particularly individuals, could be controlled by the Brotherhood's scientific

theories, and no one member transcends the entire movement. Invisible Man believes in

the social good performed by the Brotherhood, and he also embraces his identity as

spokesman for the movement. When, in a political maneuver orchestrated by Brother

Wrestrum, the narrator is forced to abandon his duties in Harlem and speak instead on

"the woman question," he falls back onto his identity as spokesman. Like Sartre's waiter,

he defines himself wholly as a thing. He notes that "despite my anger and disgust, my

ambitions were too great to surrender so easily. And why should I restrict myself,

segregate myself? I was a *spokesman*—why shouldn't I speak about women, or any

other subject?" (407). His ambitions are not personal; as a spokesman for this movement,

he understands that despite his personal feelings, he must speak on any issue relevant to

the cause. He defines himself, in other words, as a speaker and as one member of the

Brotherhood. He comments to a magazine editor requesting an interview, "I'm no hero

and I'm far from the top; I'm a cog in a machine. We here in the Brotherhood work as a

unit" (396-7). Thus, Invisible Man's sense of himself at this point in his life is bound

inextricably to his association with the Brotherhood; while he savors his role as spokesman and rabble rouser, he allows his identity to be dominated by the group's ideals and practices.

Later in the novel, Invisible Man begins to comprehend the insufficiency of definitions from external sources, specifically those definitions asserted by the Brotherhood, for he is shown that identities imposed upon an individual do not adequately capture the reality of his existence. Brother Wrestrum succeeds in usurping Invisible Man from his leadership role in Harlem, and the leaders of the Brotherhood assign Invisible Man to other duties. In his absence, the movement in Harlem suffers. His friend and compatriot, Brother Tod Clifton, disappears from the organization, only to re-surface selling Sambo dolls on the street. Clifton is accosted by the police and is subsequently killed. Invisible Man organizes a funeral in Harlem for Clifton, for which he is castigated by the Brotherhood. Clifton, they argue, was a traitor to the cause and should not be celebrated by Harlem's inhabitants. The narrator's response reveals his understanding of the contradictory nature of being. It is possible, the narrator implies, to be one thing and not be it at the same time. He argues,

> "[Brother Clifton] was a man and a Negro; a man and a brother; a man and
> a traitor, as you say; then he was a dead man, and alive or dead he was
> jam-full of contradictions. So full that he attracted half of Harlem to come
> out and stand in the sun in answer to our call. So what is a traitor?" (467)

To define Clifton only as a traitor, or indeed only as black, as a Brother, as alive or dead is necessarily to limit him, to impose an identity upon him. Clifton's existence was characterized by contradiction, by his capacity to be and not to be at the same time.

While he betrayed the organization, he was not truly a traitor; while he was a Brother, his membership in a group was not an essential element of his selfhood. Similarly, Sartre describes how the homosexual's identity as "homosexual" does not adequately capture the reality of his existence, that it does not truly define him. Indeed, the narrator's comments suggest, Clifton was so "jam-full" of contradiction and paradox that there were no "essential" characteristics with which to define him. His identity, then, was never determined by the circumstances of his life, by his beliefs and associations, or by the decisions he made. Whereas Brother Jack and the other leaders attempt to define and delimit individuals—"Our job," Jack says, "is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them" (473)—Invisible Man finally realizes that the selfhood of people like Clifton cannot ultimately be categorized by ideals or by powerful individuals.

Invisible Man's masquerade through Harlem in the guise of Rinehart emphasizes this lesson with regard to his own identity and selfhood. In disguise, the narrator discovers that his identity is completely fluid. Moreover, he learns that identity, as it is conceived of in the world, never truly corresponds to the individual, and that lived experience supersedes all categories or definitions which become one's "identity." Rinehart's role in the novel has received surprisingly little attention from critics. Indeed, most facilely accept the narrator's judgments of Rinehart and ignore his significant implications on the theme of identity in the text. Any description of Rinehart himself is doomed for failure, for he does not appear physically in the text. Leon Forrest's description of Rinehart as "chaos-loving" (311), for example, mirrors Invisible Man's estimation that his world was the "real chaos" that the Brotherhood hoped to describe with their theories (499), but any conjecture about Rinehart's immediate character cannot

be supported by textual evidence. In other words, to write that Rinehart is "chaos-loving" implies that Rinehart in some way confirms, or even *expresses* this attitude. This critical tendency has led to certain misleading and illogical statements. In "The Iron and the Flesh" Brian K. Reed, for example, argues that "by accepting whatever image the world wants to see in him, [Rinehart] seems opposed to everything about the rigidly defined and categorized world" (271). This argument assumes that Rinehart actually accepts the images imposed upon him, and therefore that his existence should be determined by "the rigidly defined and categorized world." One cannot and does not know what Rinehart accepts or refuses to accept, what he believes or what he does not believe. Rather, a more profitable way of discussing Rinehart is to examine what Invisible Man learns during his time *disguised* as Rinehart. The narrator finds, as he has been shown before, that identity is not fixed or determined, that one can be and not be at the same time.

As Invisible Man describes the riot in Harlem after Tod Clifton's murder and his own wanderings through the streets, he demonstrates how his Rinehart-disguise affords him the power to maintain several different identities at once, in essence, to recreate himself depending upon the situation. He dons a costume of green sunglasses and a large white hat and masks himself as a "hepcat" (482), or hipster, in order to hide from the minions of Ras the Destroyer, a militant activist who incites the riot. He steps back out on the street, where a woman immediately mistakes him for Rinehart. When he passes by Ras and his men unharmed, he notes, "I trembled with excitement; they hadn't recognized me. It works, I thought. They see the hat, not me" (485). In other words, his sunglasses and hat *are* his identity to the people he meets. As Robert E. Fleming observes perceptively in "Ellison's Black Archetypes," "Rinehart *is* the outfit he wears,

the dark green shades and wide-brimmed hat, because he is a hollow man" (431). Later,
Invisible Man comments:

> It was as though by dressing and walking in a certain way I had enlisted in
> a fraternity in which I was recognized at a glance—not by features, but by
> clothes, by uniform, by gait. But this gave rise to another uncertainty. I
> was not a zoot-suiter, but a kind of politician. Or was I? (485)

To be "recognized," implies the narrator, becomes relative, for he is accepted for nothing
other than his clothes or his manner. He affirms that while not a zoot-suiter, he is
identified as one. He begins to understand intuitively that, to the extent that he adopts the
behavior of a zoot-suiter, he *is* a zoot-suiter. But, to *be* one thing or another—for
example, to be a hipster or a politician—has nothing to do with his existence as a
conscious being. Identity is nothing more than a name; it does not concretely represent
him.

Invisible Man's various encounters with people who mistake him for Rinehart
reveal the paradoxical nature of being. Just as Sartre delineates how, as beings-for-
themselves, individuals can be and not be at the same time, Ellison shows how Invisible
Man is and is not Rinehart. For all intents and purposes, Invisible Man *is* Rinehart to the
people he meets, until he reveals himself not to be. To "be" Rinehart, in other words,
becomes relative, for the narrator *is* Rinehart but never stops being himself. Similarly, in
terms of existence, Sartre's waiter *is* a waiter in the sense that he adopts the mannerisms
of a waiter; however, he is only himself, not a thing-like object. Identity loses its hold
upon Invisible Man, for, as he observes, "If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out
my identity so quickly, who actually was who?" (493). He is mistaken by the police for

Rinehart, the numbers runner. Another woman approaches him as Rinehart, the pimp. He passes a store-front church, where two older ladies mistake him for Reverend Rinehart. Rather than reveal his disguise, however, Invisible Man plays along, sending the women off with "Bless you . . . bless you, bless you" (497). If identities are fluid and illusory, and if he can shift from one to the other with such ease, then he is in no way determined by external forces. He later reflects:

> Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverand? . . . It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. . . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie. (498)

The narrator glimpses the possibilities in Rinehart's world, where identity is fluid and without boundary. He notes later that, endowed with such freedom, "[y]ou could actually make yourself anew" (499). Disguised as Rinehart, Invisible Man finally grasps that he is not bound by the identities imposed upon him externally; indeed, he is free to slide from one to the other, to make himself anew. People do not see *him*; rather, they see the identity they would impose upon him. Further, for the first time, the narrator perceives his "invisibility." A pamphlet advertising Rinehart's church exclaims, "BEHOLD THE UNSEEN SEEN / BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE" (496), and Invisible Man realizes the distance between his true self and the selves that are imposed upon him externally. Invisibility, however, is not negative; rather, it signifies the absolute freedom from all

determinants, the freedom and responsibility to be oneself despite what others see, the freedom of being seen and unseen at the same time.

The narrator clearly understands the lessons that have been made available to him. As he hibernates in his hole, he reflects upon his grandfather, his college years, and his experiences as a political activist in Harlem, all of which teach him a lesson about the nature of being. Despite projecting identities upon him, his grandfather and Bledsoe show him that acting or behaving is not *being*. His association with the Brotherhood shows him the futility of defining individuals as one thing or another. Finally, he experiences first-hand as Rinehart that identity is not static or determined, that it is fluid. He demonstrates an awareness that he is free to recreate and re-define himself at every moment. This freedom, Sartre explains in *Being and Nothingness*, is man's burden as a conscious being. The narrator's invisibility signifies the rupture between his true self and the self that people choose to see. The definitions and identities imposed upon him can never fully capture his existence, for he can never truly *be* what they want him to be. Thus, as Kimberly Benston writes, "Ellison affirms not so much one guise or another but the freedom and compulsion to *choose* our 'selves' endlessly" (7). In other words, Ellison illustrates his protagonist's existential freedom.

In "*Verfallen* and Existentiality" M.P. Ramarajan analyzes *Invisible Man* in terms of Martin Heidegger's concepts of *Verfallen* and existentiality. *Verfallen*, explains Ramarajan, is a scattering of one's freedom in the cares of everyday. This "everydayness" distracts man from his existential or transcendent state, which, according to Heidegger, is man's freedom and responsibility for his existence. Ramarajan argues that Invisible Man lives in a *Verfallen* state until the very end of the novel, when he

makes "his situation his own by appropriation" (78). Ramarajan contends that Invisible Man's "stay underground enables [him] to move further towards his mineness by denying all the identities and values he has received above ground" and that he "will no longer aspire for the values of everydayness held by others, especially the whites, but become what he is" (78). Similarly, in "'Not like an arrow but a boomerang,'" Pancho Savery maintains that Invisible Man undergoes "an existential search for his identity" which he accomplishes "through his recognition of the importance of his folk past, especially the blues" (65). He identifies the characters Jim Trueblood and Peter Wheatstraw as existential heroes who take control of their lives through artistic affirmation facilitated by the blues. Savery argues that the narrator, and by extension Ellison, make a similar affirmation by writing a blues novel. By the end of the narrative, Invisible Man finally "has learned not only to live with but to relish the contradiction and ambiguity of life" (74). Both Ramarajan and Savery offer provocative and insightful discussions of existential themes in *Invisible Man*. Both conclude that the narrator achieves and lives the freedom prescribed by existentiality. Indeed, there is much textual evidence to support this conclusion. As Savery contends, Invisible Man does seem to come to terms with the contradiction and ambiguity of life. In the Prologue, for example, the narrator notes that the world moves through contradiction (6). The narrator describes a marijuana-induced reverie, in which a preacher delivers a sermon entitled the "Blackness-of-Blackness." Blackness, the preacher exclaims, is rife with contradiction: *"Now black is . . . an' black ain't . . . Black will git you . . . an' black won't . . . Black will make you . . . or black will un-make you . . ."* (9-10). As Invisible Man observes throughout the novel, *existence* itself is contradictory and ambiguous. As a result, he admits that

> my world has become one of infinite possibilities. What a phrase—still
>
> it's a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn't accept any
>
> other; that much I've learned underground. Until some gang succeeds in
>
> putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. (576)

In other words, with existential freedom come infinite possibility and the freedom to

explore these possibilities. His freedom and his selfhood, he implies, transcend the forces

that would put the world in a strait jacket. Moreover, in the Epilogue Invisible Man

acknowledges his own responsibility regarding his exile:

> I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely
>
> crying *mea culpa*. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within
>
> you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for
>
> a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it
>
> down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. . . . You go along for
>
> years knowing that something is wrong, then suddenly you discover
>
> you're as transparent as air. At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty
>
> joke, or that it's due to the "political situation." But deep down you come
>
> to suspect that you're yourself to blame. (575)

The "sickness" to which he refers is his own tendency to believe what others have told

him about his identity, about his place in the world. A necessary step of living

existentially, then, is to acknowledge the free choices that precipitated his fall into exile.

Finally, the narrator understands that he cannot be defined externally. When he

comments earlier in the novel, after he eats a yam and reconsiders his Southern roots, that

"I yam what I am!" (266), he foreshadows the realization, arrived at in disguise, that his

existence is not bound by the expectations of his grandfather, Bledsoe, Jack, or any other character who would impose a definition upon him.[2] He asks, "What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste!" (266). Thus, as Savery and Ramarajan conclude, there is much to suggest that the narrator lives existentially.

However, while Invisible Man comprehends his freedom from all determinants, he ultimately ignores it and thus exists in what Sartre terms bad faith. His first statement to the reader, "I am an invisible man" (6), suggests his determination once again to define himself in terms of how others see him or refuse to see him, for invisibility no longer represents freedom and possibility, as it did earlier, but rather limitation and constraint. In other words, his assertion of invisibility subjugates his self and selfhood to the perception of others. As Michael G. Cooke writes, "The emphatic repetition of the words 'I am' in the prologue is a confession of desperate need rather than a proof of self knowledge" (99). He admits in the Epilogue, "I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole that I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact" (572). He believes that his invisibility determines his existence, that it has confined him to his present exile, when in truth he has only himself to blame. In Sartre's terminology, Invisible Man defines himself as an in-itself to the extent that he places himself in the world of determinism, of cause and effect. In the Prologue the narrator illustrates this point nicely. He describes accidentally bumping into a man who takes umbrage and shouts insulting names at him. Invisible Man springs at him, grabs his coat

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[2] Other characters who impose identities upon the narrator include Mary, Sybil, and Ras. I have limited the present discussion to those whom I feel are the strongest, most overt, and most influential forces in Invisible Man's life.

lapels, and screams at him to apologize for the insults. They fight and, the narrator explains,

> in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there
> beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with
> one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me
> that the man had not *seen* me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in
> the midst of a walking nightmare! (4)

The narrator refrains from killing the man and later denies his complicity in the matter. "Who was responsible," he asks, "for that near murder—I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. . . . *He* bumped *me, he* insulted *me*" (14). Despite his invisibility, the narrator still allows himself to be acted upon; therefore, he continues to accept a life of determinants, of cause and effect. He knows that he controls his own existence—"even the invisible victim," he admits, "is responsible for the fate of all" (14)—but he ignores that fact: "But I shirked that responsibility; I become too snarled in the incompatible notions that buzzed within my brain. I was a coward . . . " (14). Like the woman that Sartre describes, who relinquishes control of her actions, Invisible Man refuses to accept his responsibility. He admits that he does not want Rinehart's freedom (575), for to live in such a way would be to exist in flux. He forsakes the freedom and responsibility of recreating himself and opts for the determined existence of a *thing*. Thus, when Invisible Man promises at the end of the novel that he is abandoning his hibernation and returning to the surface, there is no guarantee that he will cease feeling pushed and pulled by those around him or that he will live as a free individual. Indeed, he claims, "I'm coming out, no less invisible without it,

but coming out nevertheless" (581). Invisible Man lives in bad faith because, after glimpsing his absolute freedom and responsibility, he denies it.

Thus, Ellison and Sartre, separated by an ocean but writing at nearly the same time, explore similar ideas, for both writers delineate the possibilities inherent in absolute freedom. Ellison depicts how Invisible Man comprehends the fluidity of his identity—that he can be and not be simultaneously—and that his existence ultimately is not determined by external forces. Time and again, Ellison shows how his protagonist is free to act, despite what others tell him or expect of him. Similarly, Sartre, through his examples of the gambler and the man standing on the edge of an abyss, demonstrates how actions are not determined by thoughts of the past or present. An individual is free to make choices, and considerations of right and wrong, or of propriety and impropriety, obscure the incontrovertible fact of existential freedom. Moreover, like Sartre, Ellison reveals how easily one abandons his freedom in favor of the determinants to which he has grown accustomed. When the narrator defines himself as an invisible man and confirms that his invisibility landed him in his hole, he forsakes the seething, fluid world of possibilities he glimpsed as Rinehart. To define himself as an invisible man, then, is to behave like Sartre's waiter or homosexual, that is, as an in-itself, a thing. The narrator of *Invisible Man* lives in bad faith.

Thus, to the extent that he incorporated existentialist themes into his work, Ellison might well deserve the label existential writer. Indeed, Ellison even acknowledged the influence of the philosophy on his intellectual development. In an interview with Ishmael Reed, for example, he admits the presence of "a current of intellectual influence derived from existentialism" and later notes that "such ideas were new to me and very exciting in

that they made me aware of existential elements in the spirituals and the blues" ("The Essential Ellison" 345). Therefore, when Ellison refers to "the secular existentialism of the blues" ("As the Spirit Moves Mahalia" 254), he is not merely employing a philosophical term in a vague or general manner. Rather, he clearly appropriates his understanding of existentialism and applies it to his own experience, specifically, to the blues.

None of this is to suggest, however, that Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* directly influenced Ellison's writing of *Invisible Man*. Indeed, several factors render an assertion of direct influence problematic. First, on more than one occasion Ellison specifically denied Sartre's influence,[3] and while it is not uncommon for writers to remain elusive with regard to their literary antecedents, it is unlikely that Ellison does so. Second, while evidence suggests that Ellison was familiar with some of Sartre's works as early as 1945,[4] there is no proof that Ellison specifically read *Being and Nothingness*. Furthermore, *Being and Nothingness* was not translated into English until 1957 (Fabre 187), five years after the original publication date of *Invisible Man*,[5] and no evidence suggests that Ellison commanded the mastery of French necessary to read Sartre in the original. Thus, a direct influence of *Being and Nothingness* on Ellison is improbable.

The similarity, though, remains provocative, and a discussion of the world in the early twentieth century might begin to explain why both writers approached the issue of

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[3] For Ellison's specific comments on Sartre, see page 159 of Allen Geller's "An Interview with Ralph Ellison," transcribed in C. W. E. Bigsby's *The Black American Writer* and page 345 of Ishmael Reed's "The Essential Ellison," collected in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*.

[4] In "Richard Wright, French Existentialism, and *The Outsider*" Michel Fabre quotes several unpublished letters from Ellison to Wright. In one letter, dated 22 July 1945, Ellison suggests that Wright read Sartre to become better acquainted with the political implications of existentialism.

identity in a similar manner. Lavine provides a succinct discussion of the social genesis

of existentialism. She writes:

> Existentialism developed in the twentieth century within Germany
>
> and France, not as a direct result of any specific set of circumstances or
>
> causes, but as a deeply experienced response to the crumbling of many
>
> structures in the Western world which had previously been regarded as
>
> stable. (236)

She notes that World War One, for example, "destroyed the belief in the continuing

progress of civilization toward truth and freedom, peace and prosperity which the

Enlightenment had fostered" (326). Further, World War One, coupled with the

Communist Revolution of 1917, "shattered the confidence in political stability" and

resulted in the disintegration of the Russian, French, British, Belgian, and Dutch empires

(Lavine 327). Economic catastrophes such as the Great Depression of the Twenties and

Thirties raised doubts about classical economic theories and the adequacy of capitalism.

Finally, according to Lavine, science and philosophy both surrendered their claims to

certitude (327). Within this context, she writes, the existing sources of truth began to lose

their hold upon the individual consciousness:

> With the weakening or collapse of so many external structures of
>
> authority—authoritative economic, political, and intellectual structures—
>
> all these structures began to lose their appearance of legitimacy, and their
>
> constraints upon the individual were soon felt to be intolerable. (327)

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[5] In the Introduction to her translation of *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes refers to selections from
the text that she translated and published in 1953. Even so, these selections could not have impacted
Ellison's novel.

Nation, culture, religion, and science, all of which in some way define man's relation to the world, were revealed to be illegitimate. The individual became the only remaining source of truth. In this milieu, and particularly in the intellectual upheaval of Paris in the early twentieth century, Sartre's existential theories were born. Sartre's ontology endows man with supreme autonomy from external structures of authority. In other words, the individual makes his own meaning. Ellison wrote within a similar context.[6] In addition to the events occurring throughout the world, the history of race relations in America demonstrated the illegitimacy of power structures that attempted to define an individual's place in the world. Ellison notes in an interview that

> human beings cannot live in a situation where violence can be visited upon them without any concern for justice—and in many instances without the possibility of redress—without developing a very intense sense of the precariousness of all human life, not to mention the frailty and the arbitrariness of all human institutions. So you were forced to be existential in your outlook, and this gives a poignancy and added value to the little things and you discover the value of modes and attitudes that are rejected by the larger society. (Hersey 17)

Rather than limit his statement solely to race, though, Ellison explicitly refers to *human beings*. Ellison claims that, in response to the powerful forces exerted by human institutions, the individual begins to endow his world with meaning and poignancy.

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[6] For informative discussions of Ellison's political concerns, not merely with regard to America, see Chapter Three of Robert O'Meally's *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* and Chapter Four of Edith Schor's *Visible Ellison.*

Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness*, then, are in truth similar responses to the crumbling authoritative structures in the Western world. Critics are by no means wrong in exploring the unique "blackness" of *Invisible Man*; indeed, there is so much to learn from Ellison's rich statements about what it means to be black in America. However, when the narrator concludes the novel by asking "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581), one must not ignore the frequencies that speak to and for all human beings. The affinity with Sartre's conceptions of identity and bad faith belies Ellison's concern with more than just race. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* is a young man who, struggling to reconcile the various expectations of him and identities imposed upon him, finally glimpses his freedom and relinquishes it. The novel, it seems, is as jam-full of contradictions as its protagonist's very existence; Ellison offers simultaneously an empowering affirmation of an individual's freedom and a stark reminder of how that freedom is forsaken.

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BIOGRAPHY

Rob Mawyer received his B.A. degree in English from Illinois Wesleyan University, where he met his beautiful wife-to-be, Lisa. In June 2000 they were blessed with Ellen Jane Mawyer, a sparkling little miracle who proves, time and again, the splendor of a life spent exploring and wondering. Nothing that Rob and Lisa do in their professional lives will ever match their accomplishments as parents. The little family resides in Palmyra, Virginia, watched over by two ever-vigilant pug dogs, Atticus and Nora.