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## MASTER THESIS

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*Symbolism as a protesting tool in Ralph Waldo  
Ellison's Invisible Man*

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## **Declaration**

I hereby proclaim that the substance and the findings reported in this thesis are the result of my examination, and that due reference or affirmation is made, at whatever point necessary, to the work of different specialists.

## **Dedication**

I express my gratitude to Allah for giving me the power and the ability to finish this dissertation.

To the memory of my father Mostefa

To my beloved mother Fatema, for pushing me forward and encouraging me to keep striving for success.

To my dear sisters and brother for always supporting me, and being there for me.

To my dear teachers in the University of Mohamed Khider in Biskra, for their unwavering support, their generosity, and for being the role models that my classmates and I admire and aspire to emulate.

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## **Abstract**

Authors use literary devices and techniques in a unique way to exemplify their mastery in writing. In African American literature, Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a highly symbolic novel. Each item of this novel has a significant symbolic meaning. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison strives to highlight certain themes and issues that faced African Americans at that time. Ellison concentrates mainly on the themes of racism, invisibility, identity, and blindness to portray and to protest against the oppressions that black people suffered from during the 1940s and 1950s. Hence, the main objective behind this work is to investigate the symbols used by the author and their various interpretations that enables him to communicate his messages and to introduce his views. At last, Ralph Ellison through symbolism portrays the hardships and confusion that colored people went through during the Jim Crow era.

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*, racism, invisibility, identity, blindness.

## الملخص

يستخدم المؤلفون البرعاء الادوات و التقنيات الادبية بطريقة فريدة لتجسيد مهارتهم. في الادب الافريقي تعد رواية الرجل الخفي لرالف ايليسون رواية رمزية للغاية كل عنصر في هذه الرواية له معنا رمزيا الامريكي مهما يسعى اليسون الى تسليط الضوء على المواضيع والقضايا التي واجهها الامريكيون الافارقة في ذلك الوقت يركز اليسون بشكل اساسي على مواضيع العنصرية اللامرئية الهوية و العمى من اجل الاحتجاج على الاضطهاد الذي ساد السود خلال الاربعينيات و الخمسينيات و بالتالي فان الهدف الرئيسي وراء هذا العمل هو تقصي الرموز المستخدمة من قبل المؤلف و تفسيراتها المختلفة التي تمكنه من إيصال رسائله و تقديم وجهات نظره في النهاية يصور اليسون من خلال الرمزية المصاعب التي مر بها الافارقة خلال جيم كرو

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## General Introduction

Literature is described as pieces of writing in which the writer can expose his beliefs, ideas and emotions. It is the mirror that reflects social, political and cultural values of a certain community. Literature is arranged in accordance with major forms and works that are classified according to historical periods or their devotion to certain aesthetic features or expectations. American literature is a fertile land for its rich topics and talented authors. African American literature, as a sub category of the American one, is a sensitive body of literature that portrays the social and cultural background as well as the history of African Americans at that time. Therefore, one can see their dilemma, their compromises and struggles when facing slavery and discrimination.

The twentieth century modernist literature is known for its split from traditional writing. The topics, the narrative techniques and the way writers wanted readers to see the world is the focus of many studies around the world today. Modernist writers sought to portray what they call the “Truth” through the use of fragmentation, symbolism and metaphors. Ralph Waldo Ellison is one of those modernist writers who helped shape the African American literature. He wrote his only and acknowledged novel when Jim Crow laws and racial discrimination were in their peak. While reading *Invisible Man*, readers feel that the author draws upon his personal experience and cultural history. He strives to investigate the depths of racism as well as the cloaks of invisibility that is placed in the white dominated society on black people.

Hence, this dissertation gives rise to a number of questions: Does Ralph Ellison rely on the use of symbolism in his work? Is it omnipresent in his novel? If yes: what are these symbols? And do these symbols shed light on the major themes in the novel?

The present study attempts to identify the utilization of symbolism in the sphere of literature. Furthermore, to shed light on how symbolism can better convey themes about the African American experience in America. The researcher tries to find out if there is a special use of particular symbols that are related to African culture and heritage, thus to prove that Ralph Ellison is trying to come back to his origins and retain his identity.

The present study is mainly a descriptive, qualitative and analytical in nature in which the thematic approach will be followed. Since *Invisible Man* is written by an African American writer, and the researcher will investigate the main themes in the work, thus the thematic approach is needed in this case. Of course, these themes will be further explored via the use of symbols.

In similar works on *Invisible Man*, many famous critics have been founded. For instance, Lena M. Hill studied the visual art of *Invisible Man* and focused on the portrait of blackness. In addition, Emenyi Abang and Dr Kalu Obasithere published an article that is entitled *Vision Versus Illusion: A symbol of reality in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. In this article the authors examine plot and characterization and the role of these elements to dissect the American society showing the conditions and plights of Negro living among the Whites in America. Moreover, Zena Kamal Ibrahim wrote an article under the title, *Blindness and Sight in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, in which she examines two key-concepts of the black literature: blindness and sight in racism. Furthermore, Iva Malinová studied the remaining key concepts of invisibility and Identity depending on the interpretation of some symbols that highlight the before

mentioned concepts. Besides these works, there are other writers who tackled *Invisible Man* from many perspectives. Yet, the focal point and core subject of this study is the examination of symbolism in Ellison's work *Invisible Man*.

This study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is mainly theoretical in which an overview will be provided about symbolism, the main concerns, and the main theories. The second chapter is devoted to give a historical overview of the period in which *Invisible Man* was written; in addition to a survey about the use of symbolism in African American literature. The last chapter in particular is a practical one. The researcher will try to search for the symbols in the novel and what they stand for.

# **Chapter One**

## **Symbolism and Literature**

## **Outline**

- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.2 Definition of symbolism
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## 1.1 Introduction

Symbolism is described as an effective stylistic device in literature. It allows authors to display their brilliancy and to provide readers with works of pleasure far from the conventionality of literature. Critics have tackled studies on symbolism and have generated different theories that help readers to grasp the meanings behind the use of certain symbols in either literary work. Hence, this chapter endeavors to provide an overview about symbolism its main concerns, origins and theories. In addition, it attempts to introduce some examples of literary works of symbolism.

## 1.2 Definition of symbolism / symbol

According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, "symbolism is the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations."(Merriam Webster's Dictionary)

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary provides two definitions for symbolism. The first is:"the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, especially in art and literature" .The second is:" an artistic and poetic movement or style originated in France in the nineteenth century by using symbolic images and indirect allusions to express mystical ideas, emotions and states of mind" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

Yet, the interpretation of symbolism differs from one critic to another .For instance, Cuddon notes that: "The word symbol derives from the Greek verb "symballein", "to throw together", and its noun "symbolon", "mark" or "sign". It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else". (884-885)



Northrop Frye in his book, *Anatomy of Criticism*, explains symbolism as “Any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention. A word, a phrase, or an image used with some kind of special reference (which is what a symbol is usually taken to mean) are all symbols when they are distinguishable element in critical analysis” (71).

To sum up, symbolism includes using an object, a person, or a situation that portrays an abstract idea besides its literal meaning in the text , as Perrine claims that “a literary symbol is something that means more than what it is. It is an object, a person, a situation, an action, or some other item that has a literal meaning in the story, but suggests or represents other meanings as well”.(qtd in Fadaee 20)Hence, many writers adopt symbolism in literature because it provides a kind of aesthetic and ambiguity to the text. People are attracted by mystery. They like to read and to go through unknown worlds, in which they become able to live new experiences. Symbolism contains different ways to express ideas. Those ways cannot be grasped by all readers. As a result, symbolism is an interesting literary direction and a subject of many studies. This work, as well, tries to shed light on one of the famous novels in which symbolism is very predominant. “*Invisible Man*” by Ralph Waldo Ellison is the core subject of this dissertation.

### **1.3 Origins of symbolism**

The Symbolist movement has emerged first in France in the middle of the 19th century as an aesthetic school. It has appeared as a reaction against world’s materialism and industrialization. Symbolism has encouraged imagination as one of its principals to escape the world’s disappointing realities. Consequently, it was considered as a “decadent movement”. Charles Baudelaire (1851-1867) along with Stéphane Mallarmé

(1842-1898) were the founding fathers of the French symbolist school. They were highly influenced and absorbed by the bizarre and the unconventionality of Edgar Allen Poe's works. (Habib 498)

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, symbolism lost its attractiveness in France. (498) .Yet, it prospered again throughout Western and Eastern Europe, in the English, French, and Spanish-speaking Americas, and even in Turkey. (Neginsky2).The symbolists' experimental methods appealed to many English, Irish and American poets such as William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), T.S Eliot (1888-1965), and Wallace Stevens (1879-1955).(Habib 489-490)

#### **1.4 Concept of symbolism**

Schlesinger in his book, *Symbols and Symbolism in Literature*, maintains that symbolism is a movement in the literary history rather than a simple concept in literature. It is equivalent to the western schools of literature. He notes: "what I want to discuss is something much more specific; not even symbol and symbolism in literature but the concept and the term as period in a literary history, it can. I suggest be conveniently used as a general term for literature". (qtd in Awadasid 14)

Schlesinger's endeavor is not to link symbolism to the different schools of literature but to relate them by the symbolism. He states that "I suggest be conveniently used as a general term for literature, in all Western countries following the decline of 19th century realism and naturalism, expressionism, surrealism existentialism or whatever else, how has it come about".(qtd in Awadasid 15)

Furthermore, symbolism emerges from the human willingness just as his everyday practices like consuming; shifting and thinking do. Langer explains: "symbolism is essential act of thought and the symbol-making function is one of the main major

actions like eating, looking, or moving about. It is a functional process of his mind and goes on all time”. (91)

## **1.5 Theories of symbolism**

Numerous theorists such as Ferdinand De Saussure, North Whitehead, Susanne Langer, Sigmund Freud, Northrop Frye and others have contributed in building a body of theories which supplies deep insights on symbolism.

### **1.5.1 Ferdinand De Saussure’s Theory**

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure is the founding father of “semiotics”. The latter is the scientific study of signs and symbols and their meaning. For De Saussure, the comprehension of signs and symbols is determined by two key concepts: signifier and signified. The signifier is the sound image in the human mind, whereas, the signified is the concept. De Saussure, in his book, *Course in General Linguistics* argues that “the signified is the intellectual concept represented by the signifier (verbal or non-verbal); the signifier is the visible form that represents the signified; the object is the observed form that is being represented by the signs” (89). As an example, the English word dog has a particular form (a sequence of three meaningless phonemes) and also a particular meaning (a specific kind of animal).The two together make up a single linguistic sign in English. (Sandamali 126)

### **1.5.2 Alfred North Whitehead’s theory**

The English mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), is one of the notable philosophers who have examined symbolism. Whitehead claims that symbolism monopolizes men’s contemplation and creativity. He also argues that the manifestation of symbolism is associated with men’s life experiences. (2)

Whitehead notes that “Symbolism is very fallible in the sense that it may induce actions, feelings, emotions and beliefs about things which are only notions without exemplification in the world which the symbolism leads us to presuppose.”(6) Whitehead in this quotation asserts that contrary to direct language which is accurate, symbolism is very fallible. The symbolic reference of any symbol varies from one community to another consequently; it would not be immune from making errors. In short, while direct language is exact, symbolism is exposed to mistakes and wrong interpretations.

### **1.5.3 Sigmund Freud’s Theory**

Freud suggests two fundamental theories for symbolism: the FN (Freudian Narrow position) and FB (Freudian barrowed position).

In the FN theory, the application of the symbol as a term transmits close interpretations that can be agreed on by a particular group of people from the same culture. It is prevalent and sometimes inherited from the preceding generations. Petocz states that “The first, which may be referred to as the 'Freudian Narrow' position, restricts the use of the term "symbol" to a special technical sense, in which symbols are the elements of unconscious, universal, phylogenetically inherited code”. (24)

The FB theory contextualizes the use of symbol in the literary work. It is a specific device that can change from one situation to another. Petocz explains that “The second may be referred to as 'Freudian Broad'(FB) position is a much less restricted view, in which the term "symbol" usually refers to any unconsciously produced defensive substitute, while nevertheless retaining certain specifiable conscious, non-defensive production.”(24).

### **1.5.4 Northrop Frye's Theory**

Herman Northrop Frye (1912- 1991) is a Canadian literary critic and literary theorist in 20th century. In his book, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Frye asserts that the art of literature is explained throughout contextual readings where phases are considered as contexts. They are intended to be “valid critical methods” in the analysis of symbolic references. (72)

To Frye, “symbol” refers to “any unit of literary structure which can be isolated for critical attention” (65). This definition enables him to create five phases and to classify every type of symbolism within the suitable phase, as Denham states: “The symbol used as a sign results in the descriptive phase; as motif, in the literal phase; as image, in the formal phase; as archetype, in the mythical phase; and as monad, in the anagogic phase”. (2)

Frye claims that while reading, readers discover that their “attention is moving in two directions at once.” (73). First, an outward direction, in which the reader goes outside with his reading from the authors to the things they want to embody in the text. As Frye states:” One direction is outward or centrifugal, in which we keep going outside our reading, from the individual words to the things they mean, or, in practice, to our memory of the conventional association between them.”(73) Second, an inward direction in which the reader analyze the meaning from the word itself.

### **1.5.5 Langer's Theory of symbolism**

The American philosopher, Susanne Langer (1895-1985), has made the notion of the symbol as the specific aspect of her studies. Langer claims that symbolization is a basic process of the man's mind and the important act of thought. She also argues that the function of making symbols is one of the main actions of man like eating

moving or looking. (Langer91)For her, Lacking symbolism, means losing something indispensable from language and art (20). Through the use of symbols writers could convey ideas above and beyond the literal level of the text.

Furthermore, Langer asserts that there is a separation between a symbol and a sign. Humans have the capacity to use symbols rather than signs that are mainly associated to animals.(22)

## **1.6 Kinds of symbols**

Amongst the literary devices that determines the artistic value of art and literature is the symbol. Symbols are divided into two key types: conventional and personal symbols.

### **1.6.1 Conventional symbols**

Conventional symbols are universal and prevalent so that readers grasp their significance effortlessly. (qtd. in Fadaee 21). A symbol becomes conventional only if it is replicated persistently, until its meaning turns to be firm in different cultural contexts. (Kennedy et al 35). For instance: The dove symbolizes peace, red color stands for love, whereas spring represents youth.

### **1.6.2 Personal symbols**

Personal symbols are personally created ones by literary men, being writers or poets, for specific art works. As an example, a rainbow symbolizes hope in William Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps up When I Behold". Unlike conventional symbols, personal symbols challenge the reader's capacity to decode their meanings. (qtd. in fadaee 20).

## 1.7 Symbolism in art

Nathalia Brodskaja, in her book *symbolism*, claims that any work of art that is coupled with the notion of symbolism is inevitably a work of strangeness, paradox and absurdity. She adds: "Symbolism in the plastic arts was rather the reflection of literary intellectual movement." (102). In other words; since symbolism is a reaction to Naturalism, the other fine arts like drawing, painting and sculpture are also against Realism and Impressionism. Following the Impressionist era, symbolic ideas inspired creative artists to express and manifest their brightest decorative styles. Inside France, the native soil of impressionism, symbolism was first mirrored in the fine arts. Paintings were derived from the archaic mythical stories in spite of the impressionist attempts to disengage them from literature. As time passes, great artists have succeeded in creating a glamorous touch in their paintings by including hints of mysticism, sorrow and doom. Amongst those artists, Albert Besnard was famous for the most prestigious wall-paintings of Paris's Hôtel de Ville and the Petit Palais.

## 1.8 Symbolism in literature

Symbolism in literature comes to light with a group of French Poets, such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine and Gustave Kahn, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They have been striving to phrase their personal and spiritual experiences in life. The concentration of symbolism in literature has been raised astonishingly and affected the European and American literatures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Brodskaja 38) Some of those writings are: William Butler Yeats' *Easter 1916* (1916.); T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (1925); James Joyce's *The portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

## 1.9 Literary works of symbolism

### 1.9.1 In poetry

Symbolism comes into sight with the poetry of Charles Pierre Baudelaire, a French poet and critic. He has urged writers to depict their inner feelings implicitly through the use of symbols. His collection of poems: *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleur du Mal*, 1857) and (*Le Spleen de Paris*, 1869) *Paris Spleen* investigate the intricacy of love and emotions.

Furthermore, the history of symbolism in literature records other three prominent French poets whose poetry has contributed in the blossoming of the symbolist movement. Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry such as *The Afternoon of a Faun* and *Ramblings* were approved to be incomprehensible because of their vague expressions and blurred imagery ("Stéphane Mallarmé" Poetry Foundation). Critics have continued to question the explanations of many of his works.

At an early age, Arthur Rimbaud ,the enfant poet composed poems such as *The Drunken Boat* (1871), *Vowels* (1886), *The Rooks* (1886), *Blackcurrant River*(1886), and *Festivals of Endurance* (1886).The influence of his poetry on a host of poets ,such as André Bréton ,has been highly acknowledged. His poetry was viewed as a model to the symbolist movement in poetry.

The Master, Paul Verlaine, as he was known to his friends and admirers, has composed his poem *Songs without Words* (*Romances Sans Paroles*, 1874) that made of him a model for the decadent movement.

### **1.9.2 In fiction**

Since the 19th century, authors created symbolic patterns of imagery. Some of the celebrated symbol masterpieces are Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*(1850), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*(1851), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*(1902)



As it is stated previously, symbolism came as an extension to the gloomy sides of romanticism. Nathaniel Hawthorne created an oeuvre that explores themes of guilt and the dark side of human beings. His work, *The scarlet Letter*, portrays the rigid puritan society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The novel's major conflict is about Hester Prynne, a female protagonist, who gives birth to a child out of marriage, and refuses to tell about her lover. For her sin, Hester has been punished by wearing a scarlet letter "A" which symbolizes her adultery. (Carrez)

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) is a work of interest for readers. The story turns around a whale, Moby Dick, and a sailor captain Ahab, who is obsessed by hunting and killing the whale, as it was guilty in the loss of Captain Ahab's leg. The captain catches Moby Dick in his boat, but the whale damages the boat and escapes. Captain Ahab believes that the white whale represents evil, and everything that is wrong with the world. He believes that it is his destiny to put an end to that evil. The white whale is the idea of purity, it is seen as "different", that is something people do not accept easily. Melville uses the whale symbol to address people who like to "stick to the norms" that they pretend are safe and feel comfortable with. (Baldwin)

One more remarkable work of symbolism is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. For Conrad, the real novelist is required to look for image. Conrad's extensive use of symbols is highly acknowledged. *Heart of Darkness* is about Marlow, an English sailor, who travels to Africa where he encounters a European man called Kurtz. Marlow's journey to the wilds denotes his spiritual exploration to his own soul. (Moran)

### **1.9.3 In Drama**

Symbolism in theatre had its beginnings in France. In 1911, Maurice Maeterlinck earned the Nobel Prize for his creativeness in play writing. His plays *The Intruder* and *The Blind* are among the few symbolist dramas in the world of literature. Maeterlinck's *The Intruder* is one-act play in which an extended family wait upon the ailing mother who had just given birth. The family members are helpless and the play ends up with the death of the mother. *The Intruder* symbolizes death that no one can keep it out of his home. Whereas, *The Blind* portrays twelve blind characters lost in the forest, they were guided by a sighted man, but suddenly he disappeared. Finally, they discovered that he has died. Readers appreciate this symbolic picture of life in which people wanders without faith or sight in the forest of ignorance. (Hovey)

Furthermore, Alfred Jarry is celebrated as one of the symbolist playwrights in theatre of the absurd. In his play *Ubu Roi* (King Ubu), Mama and Papa Ubu, conspirators, soldiers, and Captain Barbage lead the ultimate revolution. They kill the king and his family and leave only his son and wife to live. Soon after the king's death, the Queen announces that she has but two hours to live and dies shortly after. Ubu begins taking advantage of his new throne, and wants to take revenge. He takes money from people and kills everyone who stands in his way to the crown. The story seems to be inspired from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which Alfred Jarry depicts the bourgeoisie as the supper mediocre. (Britannia)

### **1.10 Conclusion**

Symbolism, as it is stated before, is a stylistic and literary device that is applied by numerous authors in an attempt to convey certain messages and points of view. Symbolism has been the core subject of many scholars who have been working for

generating theories. Those theories help readers in getting and decoding the meaning of symbols in any piece of literature.

**Chapter two:**  
**Symbolism in African American**  
**Literature**

## **Outline**

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Symbolism in American literature
  - 2.2.1 William Faulkner
  - 2.2.2 F. Scott Fitzgerald
  - 2.2.3 Earnest Hemingway
- 2.3 Characteristics of symbolism in American literature
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  - 2.6..3 Racism
  - 2.6.4 Blindness
- 2.7 Ralph Ellison and symbolism
- 2.8. Conclusion

## 2.1 Introduction

Symbolism has been a worldwide phenomenon. It emerged first in the French literature. Yet, it prospered to touch other literatures particularly the American literature and the African American literature. In this chapter, the tackled issue is symbolism, its characteristics and some examples from the American literature. Furthermore, the chapter provides insights about the acclaimed African American writer Ralph Waldo Ellison and his experience with symbolism in composing his novel *Invisible Man*.

## 2.2 Symbolism in American Literature

The development of symbolism in American Literature after the WWI is a reflection of a worldwide phenomenon. Olds, in his article *Literary Symbolism*, argues that the involvement of symbolism has been momentous in the creation of the American modernist prose and poetry(161).For Karakaçi, symbolism affects the modernist literature by shifting” the focus of narration on word arrangement and images”(566). Karakaçi, from the above quotation tends to say that the writers’ reputation of literature surpasses that of being a documentary to a more “lyrical one” (568). Among the representatives of symbolism in the American literature are the masterful authors: William Faulkner (1897-1962), F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) and Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) who have succeeded in adapting the symbolist esthetics to their masterpieces.

### 2.2.1 William Faulkner

Faulkner’s *As I Lay dying* is a good example of his extensive use of symbols. It is a story about the burial of a woman “Addie” in the Mississippi river. Symbols appear immediately after Addie’s death. Early in the novel, Addie’s coffin symbolizes the enormous burden of dysfunction that Addie’s death, and circumstances in general place

on the Bundren family. None of them was emotionally and mentally balanced. Another symbol is Verdaman's fish that makes him realize that it is, like his mother, in a different state of existence and leads him to understand the nature and meaning of death. One more symbol is Jewel's Horse. Jewel's relationship with his horse stands for his deliberate decision to detach himself from the rest of the Bundren family. (Lieberman)

### **2.2.2 F. Scott Fitzgerald**

Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* is a novel that is praised for being highly symbolic. As far as color symbolism is concerned, the main colors in *The Great Gatsby* consist of green, white, red, yellow, blue and grey. Green represents the American Dream and Gatsby's hope and aspirations to be with Daisy. White symbolizes void, superficiality, and emptiness of Daisy's true personality. Red stands for Tom's cruelty and selfishness. Yellow stands for materialism, luxury, greed and death. Blue symbolizes melancholy and loneliness. Finally, Grey represents decadence, isolation and corruption. Fitzgerald's accurate use of symbols plays a significant role in creating his notable work. (ZHANG 38)

### **2.2.3 Ernest Hemingway**

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a vivid example of his interest for symbols. The story turns around the struggle of the protagonist, old Santiago, to catch a fish. The Sea, as a setting, symbolizes the universe and Santiago's separation in this universe. Santiago represents the Jesus Christ and the nature of the human being who dislikes to be overpowered in his life. The Marlin represents a worthy opponent of Santiago. Santiago knows that he must kill the marlin and it takes every ounce of his strength, courage, and determination to do so. The marlin is described by Santiago as a creature nobler than humans. One more symbol is Santiago's eyes. Despite his age,

Santiago's eyes remain in their vivid color with no changes. Thus, these eyes stand for Santiago's persistence to reach his dream. (Sandamali 127)

### **2.3 Characteristics of symbolism in American Literature**

The trend of symbolism that has been emerged in America following the First World War, reaches its peak from the 1920s till the 1940s. It is the writing technique that affects all fields and types of writing such as poetry, drama and even film production. The major characteristics of symbolism in the American literature can be summed up in these major points: first, it constructs "the morbid beauty". It is that beauty that absorbs readers especially when they come across Edgar Allen Poe's works such as *The Raven*. Another trait of symbolism is that it displays the genuine inner world. In other words, symbols expand their meaning to the readers through making the characters seem more than imaginative creations. One more feature is that symbolism makes images in the illusion from which the reader can obtain depth in meaning. (Haibing 40)

### **2.4 Symbolism in African American Literature**

When African Americans have had the opportunity to write in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an exceptional group of black writers have shaped their own body of literature that gained critical acclaim. Bernard W. Bell in his essay, *Voices of Double Consciousness in African American Fiction*, claims that contrary to the American novel, the African American one is a combination of the "oral and the literary tradition of African American culture." (132). In other words, African American writers fused their oral traditions with the western culture to create their rich, powerful and distinctive discourse. In an analysis of Ralph Waldo Ellison, an example of the representatives of the African American literature, Berndt Ostendorf discovers Ellison's endeavor to merge the modernist aesthetics with the African American folklore through his



dependence upon Jazz to build his novels' structure. (Bloom 9) Ellison draws upon many aspects of folklore which are strongly associated with blacks such as; music, song, rhymes, rituals and customs. These aspects are the source of symbolism in his work. (Malinová 5)

## 2.5 Ralph Ellison as an African American writer

Ralph Waldo Ellison is fond of music and literature. At some point in the twentieth century, music and literature were almost the barely artistic fields that tendered the opportunity of achievement and celebrity to a young African-American man. When Ellison failed as a symphony composer, he turned to writing. (Early 7)

Ellison's journey to become a writer started "soon after his move to New York in 1936" (Washington 3). Two years later, Ellison had partly completed a draft of a novel to be entitled *Slick*, a novella called *Tillman and Tackhead*, and four short stories: *Last Day*, *Goodnight, Irene*, *The Black Ball*, and *A hard Time Keeping Up*. (Early 35)

Near the beginning of the 1940's, Ellison begun to write a novel about an arrested "American pilot in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp". (Washington 3) Yet, in the summer of 1945 he began composing the novel that would be *Invisible Man*. He wrote in his notepad "I am an Invisible man" as an opening of the published book. (Early 35)

Ellison spent six years writing *Invisible Man*. He had not enough experience in novel writing thus he has encountered difficulties in formulating a coherent plot. For him fiction did not come easily as nonfiction works (essays and book reviews). (37)

On January 27, 1953 *Invisible Man* won Russwurm Award and the National Book Award for fiction. For this remarkable achievement, Ellison was acclaimed as a prominent figure in the American literary history. Despite the fact that Ellison was

primarily known for his great novel *Invisible Man*, one cannot deny his works of nonfiction. For instance, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) together with numerous unpublished speeches and writings were published in 1995 as *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. (Washington 4)

## **2.6 Main Themes in Invisible Man**

### **2.6.1 Invisibility**

Invisibility is the most important theme to start with. *Invisible Man* begins with the narrator's declaration that he is invisible. Ellison's novel suggests many dimensions to the theme of invisibility. First, invisibility implies people's reluctance to view the individual as a person. The narrator complains from invisibility because people treat him for what they see him, not for what he really is. Invisibility here has a strong relation with racial discrimination. Second, Invisibility proposes isolation from society. The narrator is invisible because he chooses to stay apart and to hide himself in his hole. Thus, Invisibility at this point is linked to hibernation. Moreover, invisibility refers to the lack of identity. The narrator is invisible because he has no identity. (Abbott 45)

### **2.6.2 Identity**

*Invisible Man* is the story of a young black man searching for his identity. Throughout the novel the narrator is anonymous. Yet, at several points in the novel he has been offered papers that name and identify him as getting a new role: student, patient, member of the Brotherhood. But none of these names is his true name. The narrator strives to find his true self, a self that is not identified by others. Hence, *Invisible Man* can be read as a story about a black man's struggle to get along and learn to be himself. (Abbott 46)

### **2.6.3 Racism**

Racism is the discrimination between two different groups or individuals due to their religion, race and skin color. Race is a constant subject in *Invisible Man*. Throughout the book the unnamed narrator constantly faces obstacles in order to find himself. Whites are always against the blacks and show antipathy towards everything they do if it is not in their way. Although, African Americans do not like the way they are treated, they have nothing to be done about it. The narrator is the only one who wants to make change, but nobody helps him. The narrator wants to feel the social equality, however the other African Americans in the community feel as if they are supposed to live this way. The narrator struggles with different expectations pressed upon him as a black man. He faces racism all over his journey. Racism is reflected in his growth process in the south as well as his experience with the social life in New York. (JING and PENG)

### **2.6.4 Blindness**

Blindness is persistent throughout the novel. It represents how people willfully avoid seeing the truth and this strengthens the theme that racism is an obstacle to individual identity. During the Battle Royal fighters accepted to be blindfolded” All ten of us climbed under the ropes and allowed ourselves to be blindfolded” (Ellison 21) this implies their inability to recognize their exploitation at the hands of the white men who think that they are superior. The fighters therefore are incapable to create their own identity since they accept the idea that they are there for enjoyment. Furthermore, the narrator notes that people’s inability to see what they wish not to see “their inability to see that which their prejudice does not allow them to see” has forced him into a life of effective invisibility. But prejudice against others is not the only type of blindness in the

novel. Many characters also refuse to confront the truth about themselves or their communities. (Sight & Blindness in the Invisible Man)

## 2.7 Ralph Ellison and symbolism

Ralph Ellison was insistent to publish a prestigious American novel. Biographer Arnold Rampersad wrote that Ellison hopes “to create a novel so rich in its symbolic, allegorical, psychological, social, and historical insight that it would be acclaimed as a masterpiece,” (qtd in Early 37) Rampersad asserted Ellison’s brilliancy in writing his novel helped shape the uniqueness and individuality of black people in the USA. Furthermore, Gerald Early agreed upon Rampersad’s claim and notes that Ellison’s style in writing was not a realist nor a naturalist style but rather a modernist one. His style is full of “abstract interior monologues and descriptions, highly symbolic images and allusions, and hallucinatory passages” (39)

Mastering the poetic devices, Ralph Ellison encompasses a number of symbols and archetypes in his novel, which provides a peculiar perspective on the plot and supports its dominant themes. (Washington 98)

## 2.8 Conclusion

Approximately after a century from the symbolist movement, Ralph Waldo Ellison’s *Invisible Man* was published. This novel is one of the widely read American novels post WWII. It was a novel that recalls visions and strains peculiar to the American life as African Americans experience it. Ellison’s promise of a powerful narrative whatever the costs will be makes him create a highly symbolic novel. Thus, *Invisible Man* functions with symbolism.

**Chapter three**  
**Symbolism in *Invisible Man***

## **Outline**

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Object Symbolism

3.2.1 The brief case

3.2.2 The Sambo doll

3.2.3 The Coin Bank

3.2.4 The Dark lenses glasses

3.3 Color Symbolism

3.3.1 Red

3.3.2 Green

3.3.3 Black /White

3.3.4 Blue

3.4 Machine Symbolism

3.4.1 The Invisible Man

3.4.2 Liberty Paints: The Boiler room

3.4.3 Liberty Paints: The hospital

3.4.4 Harlem: The Brotherhood

3.5 Conclusion

### **3.1 Introduction**

As it is stated previously in the first chapter, a number of theorists have tackled studies on symbolism and each one of them has his own view of it. This study aims at investigating the use of symbols in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. *Invisible Man* has a great deal with symbolism, thus it would be impossible to work with all the symbols. In his work, Ellison attempts to shed light on certain themes and issues from his world. Whitehead's theory asserts that the manifestation of symbolism is associated with men's life experiences. Consequently, this chapter is going to focus on the predominant ones by applying Alfred North Whitehead's theory.

### **3.2 Symbolism in objects**

Generally once the word symbolism is brought up the first idea that springs to mind is that objects might be symbols. A concrete object may bring several meanings besides its literal one. As it is mentioned before, Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* works with objects to highlight certain themes in the actual world.

#### **3.2.1 The brief case**

In *Invisible Man*, the calfskin briefcase is such an object that accompanies the narrator throughout his journey. Washington writes: "The narrator's calfskin symbolizes his psychological baggage" (98).

After the Battle Royal scene, in which the narrator and other nigger boys were in a blindfolded boxing for the amusement of a group of white leaders, the bleeding narrator is asked to deliver his graduation speech. It was a speech on submission for advancement of African Americans. The narrator does not feel free enough to say what he wants, but what pleases the white leaders and what they want to hear. After he finishes his speech, a supervisor awards him with the briefcase that contains a

scholarship to the State College of Negroes. The narrator recounts: "Boy," he said, addressing me, "take this prize and keep it well. Consider it a badge of office. Prize it. Keep developing as you are and some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people."(Ellison 32).The narrator receives his prize as a foolish boy. He forgets about all the cruel acts caused by the white leaders towards him and literally with a rope of bloody saliva falling from his mouth he expressed his thanks. He was delighted by the amazing opportunity to attend college. For him, the scholarship and going to collage are steps towards his dream of being someone of importance. But in fact, they are “products of the same system that allows for humiliation” (wollace)

At night, he has a dream of his grandfather telling him to look inside his briefcase. The narrator finds an envelope in which there is a piece of paper that read “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.”At this moment the narrator wakes up. In the interpretation of dreams, the briefcase symbol represents hard work; it appears also in one’s dreams when he has troubles dealing with his work tasks. (Briefcase dream meanings). The narrator initially does not recognize the significance of his dream. The scholarship turns to be an order to let him running. It is a way to trick the narrator into believing that he is progressing while he is kept submissive to white benefits. (wollace)

By the end of the the novel, the narrator falls into a dark hole. He was in need of light and he found no way but his briefcase. He set on fire in much of its contents starting from his diploma. The loss of the briefcase is a “complete severance of ties to his youthful past”(“The Battle Royal Briefcase in Invisible Man”) The briefcase starts as a symbol of youthful and innocence, However, as the novel progresses it turns to be a symbol of racism, humiliation and disillusionment.



### 3.2.2 The Sambo Doll

Another object that bears a symbolic meaning, both in itself and in the actions related to it, is Tod Clifton's Sambo doll. Walking down in the street, the narrator reveals that Tod Clifton, a former member of the Brotherhood, displays a show by controlling a Sambo doll "Making it dance and sing a song" ("Sambo Doll: African American Discourse in Ellison's novel.") David Wollace claims that the Sambo is kind of black caricature that dances when its operator pushes it down.

Lydell Payne in his book , *Black Novelists and The Southern Literary Tradition*, acknowledged that "the Southern Negro writer's perception of a black man's experience differs from that of the Southern white writer,"(qtd in Tewarie189)Ralph Ellison also confronts the southern experience what allows him to use southern elements as the sambo caricature in his novel. The narrator gets astonished by this bigoted image. It is:

A grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper with thin flat cardboard disks forming its head and feet and which some mysterious mechanism was causing it to move up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face [...] [that throws] itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received a perverse pleasure from its motions. (Ellison 43)

The narrator initially sees Clifton's act as a betrayal to the Brotherhood. But soon later, he recognizes that Clifton purposefully wants to show the "manipulative intentions of the Brotherhood" (Malinová 17)The image of the sambo doll that is manipulated by unseen imperceptible cords to dance ludicrously to entertain white people implies how

black men are looked out stereotypically and that are used as marionettes by the Brotherhood.

In the last scene of the novel, being in need of light, the narrator decides to burn the souvenir sambo doll that he took from Clifton after his death. The narrator says: “The next to go was Clifton’s doll, but it burned stubbornly that I reached inside the case for something else” (Ellison 568) The devastation of the doll symbolizes the narrators’ break from racism and societal pressures.

The Sambo doll is a symbol of black oppression. It depicts thoroughly the novel themes of race and identity. It is an effective portrayal of the deep-rooted acceptance of racism in America. Yet, its elimination validates the one’s individuality and his ability to neglect the societal pressures. (“Sambo Doll: African American Discourse in Ellison’s novel”)

### **3.2.3 The Coin Bank**

The coin bank is the object that the narrator discovers in his rented room in Mary’s house. It is “the cast-iron figure of a very black, red lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at [him] from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest.”(Ellison 319)It is in the shape of a stereotypical black man, more specifically a slave who is delighted to eat coins. The slave swallowing coins symbolizes an actual slave doing whatever white man say in order to get rewards. It is a symbol of prejudice and racism.

The narrator is furious to see this object in Mary’s house. He is “Enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around” (319) Mary is one who talked about racial equality for blacks. Yet, the fact that she owns this racist item emphasizes the idea that even though she

may be liberal against racism and prejudice, she may still subconsciously follow the norms and views of those that oppress. If even a liberal person has such an item, then it is seemingly inevitable to avoid racism in society. Furthermore, the narrator is angry after seeing the coin bank because he does not think that it is a good sign of his past. He attempts to throw away his past and cultural background, thus with so much force he smashes the coin bank into pieces, places them into his briefcase and leaves Mary's house.

The narrator decides to weed out the bank; however he fails in each try. In his first attempt a "short yellow woman" shrieks at the narrator and tells him "we keep our place clean and respectable and we don't want to you field niggers coming up from the south and running things" (328) She stereotypes him and obliges him to take back his racist object. Her action stresses her racism towards the narrator and proves his invisibility. Later on, when the narrator tries to throw the bank in the snow a black man asks him to take it back. He says addressing him "You young New York Negroes is a blip! I swear you is! I hope they catch you and put your ass under the jail". (330) The narrator gets shocked when the black man stereotyped him. The black man's action emphasizes the idea that even blacks are racist and blamed of being blind. (Lowe)

Nearly at the end of the novel, the narrator discovers why his briefcase is heavy. It is the coin bank that rests with him along his journey. The coin bank reinforces the theme of racism and it is symbolic of the predicament of withdrawing from the tradition of past stereotypes which represent the black's burden that they carry in their whole life (Wollace).

### 3.2.4 The Dark- lenses glasses

When the narrator leaves the bar and begins to walk, he runs into Rus the Exhorter. Ras and his followers recognize the narrator and surround him, however he escapes. The next day, he comes across men with dark glasses. He immediately goes to the nearest drugstore and buys his own pairs of dark glasses "They were of a green glass so dark that it appeared black" (Ellison 389) Because of his new sunglasses, he goes out into public with a new identity. Many strangers around Harlem begin to refer to him as a man named Rinehart, whom the narrator becomes interested with.

In a study about the psychological effects of wearing sun glasses, Justin Thomas argues that feeling invisible or less visible behind the sunglasses is a "flawed logic". People are aware of this but still parts of their naivety believe in this invisibility. Furthermore, when the narrator puts on his sunglasses, he encounters different experiences of people mistaking him. Hence, the dark lenses glasses do not only symbolize the physical invisibility but another kind of invisibility which is the invisibility of identity. In other words, the narrator thinks that he is invisible because of the sunglasses, but in fact through the lack of identity he is still able to be invisible. (The Queen of Awkwardness's AP lit Site).

The narrator's sunglasses may also symbolize the surprising fluency of identities. The more he puts on his glasses, the more identities does he find out. The narrator discovers that Rinehart is a man of multiple identities. He is a procurer, a gambler and a cleric. From Rinehart the narrator understands the power of invisibility and having different personalities. (Dietrich)

### 3.3 Symbolism in colors

Amongst the symbols Ellison applies in the novel *Invisible Man*, colors have created a profound impression on readers. There are five colors that appear regularly in the novel: red, green, black, white, and blue. The multiple references of these colors shows the narrator's emotions and his progress throughout the narrative.

#### 3.3.1 Red

In literature, red is the color of roses, fire, and blood; it is the color of faces when they show shame, humiliation and anger. (Ferber 169) In the western culture, red is a symbol of love and passion. However, it is a symbol of death and grief in the African cultures. (Stewart) Throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison uses both African and Western color symbolism. Red initially appears in chapter thirteen to represent danger. The later is lead back to Brother Jack's red hair. When the narrator has been sitting with Brother Jack, he states that he has a feeling of something bad will happen. Another reference to the red color occurs in chapter nineteen when he has an affair with a woman dressed in red. The color red here symbolizes love and passion. Moreover, it represents shame and anger, the narrator states: "I looked at the floor, a red mist of anguish before my eyes." (Ellison 58)

Furthermore, Ellison refers many times to the red color by using the word blood. The later symbolize the violence and pain that black people, like the narrator, experience in white America. After the Battle Royal the narrator says "It's my blood, my face is bleedin. I stand there holdin' my face and tryin'to keep the blood from flowin. The blood was runin' all over my clothes..." (65) He also refers to blood in Tod Clifton's funeral "...and this blood spilled out like any blood; red as any blood, wet as any blood and reflecting the sky..." (456).

### 3.3.2 Green

Generally, green is associated with springtime. In western culture, green symbolizes renewal, prosperity and jealousy. It can mean wealth, which is represented by the color of the dollar. Whereas, in the African cultures, green stands for corruption (Stewart) In chapter twenty three the narrator disguises himself by a pair of green dark glasses. When Harlem citizens do not realize him, he appreciates his experience and learns how it is important to be invisible. The narrator states “They were of green glass so dark that it appeared black, and I put them on immediately...it was almost dark now, and the streets swarmed in green vagueness” (Ellison482-483).

Moving and seeing the world in green, the narrator is frequently mistaken for a man called Rinehart. The narrator then discovers that Rinehart is a man of multiple identities. He is a procurer, a gambler and a cleric. Rinehart fluidity makes the narrator realize the power of invisibility, as well as the corrupted reality of American society. Furthermore, Washington claims that green is also the color of lush campus verdure and money that are the narrator’s main motivator.

### 3.3.3 Black/ white

It is common that the color white is associated with purity whereas black is linked to evil, vagueness and obscurity. However, In Invisible Man it is the reverse. The color white is linked to the nasty things. Ellison intentionally uses the African culture’s comprehension of black and white to foster the narrators own perspective. In Africa, the color white symbolizes the spirit world whereas black implies wisdom and age. (bethuhnay)

Ellison uses black color that symbolizes everything good and positive. For instance, black power house “paralleling the black powerhouse with its engines droning earth-

shaking rhythms in the dark” (Ellison 34). Yet he linked white color to negative images of coldness, death and artifice. For example, snow, the white blindfolds, the white fog, the optic white produced by the Liberty Paint Factory and Brother Jack’s buttermilk and white glass eye. (Washington 100)

### **3.3.4 Blue**

The color blue bears both negative and positive meanings, it represents trust and serenity and it also symbolizes depression and loneliness. (Stewart)

Blue in *Invisible Man* refers to the blues, a sort of African American folk music or a tragic song, which is typified by verses that explores the misery and the sadness pain of lost love (Washington99). Blue occurs first in Louis Armstrong’s song “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” (Ellison3) By referring to this song, Ellison wants to underline the narrator’s endeavor to define himself and to combat all the hardships that prevent him from being a black in a white dominated society. In one of the scenes, the narrator compares himself to Louis Armstrong. Both of them suffer from invisibility. They are powerless, oppressed and mistreated. “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind...That’s what you here vaguely in Louis’ music” (8). In addition to Louis Armstrong’s song, the Blues symbol is stressed through constant allusions such as; the references to musical instruments, Blues singers like Bessie Smith and the characters who appreciate singing the Blues like Mary Rambo and Jim Trueblood. At last, The Blues symbolize the bitterness of life that Black men and women overcome due to their religious faith and hope of better future.

### **3.4 machine Symbolism**

Through frequent references to the machines such as, the invisible man himself, the boilers at liberty paints the hospital capsule and the organization that is the

Brotherhood; Ralph Ellison intends to disclose the acts of racial suppression that causes the loss of identity and the sense of individuality.

### 3.4.1 The Invisible Man

Throughout the book, the narrator is controlled like a machine. After, the Battle Royal scene, swallowing back his blood, the narrator tries to perform his speech. Whenever he pronounces “social responsibility” the white men stop him and scream at him to repeat it loudly. The narrator unconsciously says “social equality”, a phrase that they never expect to hear. The white leaders become furious and ask him what he intends to say by his lapse:

What's that word you say, boy?

You sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?

Oh, yes, sir," I said. "I was swallowing blood.

Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand.

We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times.

(Ellison 31)

It is true that they give him the scholarship but always know that he will never be in the same level as them, because blacks are not considered equal to whites. By sending him to college, they want him to shape other black students to be subservient.

When the narrator attends college, he meets Dr. Bledsoe the director of the school. The narrator sees him as a mythical creature “He was [his] coal-black daddy, of whom, [he was] afraid” (116) The narrator is too naive for that he cannot see Bledsoe’s true self. Raymond Olderman states that Bledsoe is “the man who assumes the mask of humility to cover the drive for power. He says yes on the surface while he controls underneath”. (147) Dr. Bledsoe informs the narrator that he can work in Harlem, however he never told him that he was expelled. After reading Bledsoe’s letter to white



men, he discovers that he was kicked and cannot return. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he is expelled from college because he has gone astray and presents a danger to rest of the students and staff. Bledsoe does not care about helping the narrator; he only cares about his power and image. At last, college seems to create robots, not individuals.

### **3.4.2 Liberty Paints: The Boiler room**

The narrator gets a job at a paint factory. He works with Lucius Brockway at the boiler room in the basement. Brockway is a black man who has been maintaining the factory boilers for twenty five years. In their first meeting, Brockway warns the narrator telling him “They got all this machinery, but that ain’t everything; we the machines inside the machine” (Ellison 217) People think that the basement is just a room that contains an engine and that machines there are run by themselves. But in fact it is Brockway who has been working there for years. Despite his efforts, the factory owners underestimate him and ignore his importance in the field work. Zena Ibrahim claims that “Brockway personifies the alienated, exploited and un-accommodated Black man on whose labor and sweat America has been built and sustained.”(420)To illustrate more, Brockway is one example of those African Americans working underground with no right to enjoy authority and to express power in their work. Furthermore, Tracy Wyman notes that:

The concept of “the machine” ideates horror on both a psychic and physical level in Invisible Man. First, it is the discursive mechanism of an ideological engine that drives a separate and unequal philosophy; and second, machines index the industrial conditions of Invisible Man’s environment.(175)

In other words, Ellison’s concept of the machine draws attention to the American ideology of race that treats colored people as machines not human beings.

### 3.4.3 Liberty Paints: The hospital

At the liberty Paints factory, the narrator gets into an accident and is sent to the factory hospital. Raymond Olderman argues that doctors treated him as if he is a machine that needs repairing.(150) the doctors attempt to cure the narrator of his illness, however his illness is purely his blackness. He has been exposed to an electric shock, then when he starts to restore his vision one of the doctors tries to communicate with him by showing him questions written in cards about his name and his identity. These cards can symbolize a birth certificate. The narrator lost his memory and could not realize anything about his identity. This is symbolic of a blank birth certificate. He has no name, so he is unidentifiable. Moreover these papers may symbolize a death certificate as well, the death of his old identity. His previous name died, and his knowledge too. The narrator is energized as he is asked who he is. He has a chance to re-identify himself and become someone new. At that point, he has chance to escape, but e does not. He says:” I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I’ll be free” ( Ellison 243) Olderman once again asserts that he was not conscious of what he was saying, but it was the beginning of his rebirth and his move to a different phase in life. The narrator thinks that the discovery of his identity and becoming independent leads him to be free. Furthermore, the machine screams that sound like a woman giving birth and the separation of its cord that is attached to the narrator’s stomach node is symbolic of the moment of his rebirth (151)

### 3.4.4 Harlem: The Brotherhood

Despite the fact that the Brotherhood had first good intention which is defending the oppressed African Americans, it ends up restraining them. One good example is the narrator. For the Brotherhood, he is nothing but a spokesperson. He is invisible and not even considered as an individual who has power and authority. In one of the scenes, the narrator receives a phone call from one of the magazines requesting him to make an interview with them. He apologizes telling the magazine editor to interview Clifton in his place. The editor urges him telling him that he is the hero but the narrator stops him saying "but please...I'm no hero and I'm far from the top; I'm a cog in a machine." (Ellison 402) The narrator's description of the Brotherhood as a machine symbolizes the fake ideologies of the Brotherhood that deprives the blacks from their individualism and does not even encourage them to think of themselves or to understand what is really happening.

Moreover, during a meeting with the Brotherhood's committee, Brother Jack and others has blamed the narrator when he acts in Tod Clifton's funeral without the authority of the committee. They mock on him when he tells them that it is his personal responsibility. The narrator finally realizes what is happening around him. He concludes that enjoying personal responsibility is a crime in the Brotherhood and that the individual should stay inferior and dismissive to the group. Shortly after, He declares the beginning of his journey "The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath". (580) At this instant, the narrator is ultimately getting away from the past fake identities and launching for a quest for his own true identity.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

Writers depend on symbolism to communicate their messages and to introduce their views. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is full of symbols which enable him to convey his themes of racism, invisibility, identity, and blindness. Ralph Ellison through symbolism portrays the hardships and confusion that colored people went through in the 1940s and 1950s when Jim Crow laws and racial discrimination were in their peak.

## General Conclusion

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is placed in a period of an extreme racial confusion in America, when the African Americans start to go against the mainstream white society and fight for their rights. The novel tells the stories of inequality, exploitation, pain and solitude that the protagonist faces throughout his journey. He is an unknown black man, who despite the fact that he is not physically invisible most characters refuse to see him.

Ralph Waldo Ellison promises to create an effective, powerful and outspoken narrative. Yet, his powerful use of accurate symbolism was not intended. When Ralph Ellison was asked for whether he intends to plan and place symbolism in his work. He replied saying: "symbolism arises out of action...Once a writer is conscious of the implicit symbolism which arises in the course of a narrative, he may take advantage of them and manipulate them consciously as a further resource of his art."(qtd in Lovejoy)

Ellison's *Invisible Man* concentrates on a number of social and psychological problems facing African Americans early in the twentieth century. It touches on the conflict of identity, blindness, invisibility and racism. The major theme of *Invisible Man* is the necessity to construct a personal identity in a divided society. Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles with finding his identity. He tries to shape his identity into what others want before he realizes he will only have a chance at freedom when he has his own identity. The protagonist suffers from the society's blindness. People, whether blacks or whites, never see the narrator as a free thinking individual but as a foolish black man. As a result, he comes to a conclusion that he must be invisible if they cannot see him for who he is. Furthermore, he is subject to much racism, wherever he goes he faces racism.

To conclude, symbolism is a vital part in invisible man. It is more than a decorative technique. It allows readers to read between the lines and appreciate the simple and complex shades of meaning. For further study, these questions are provided: Does Ralph Ellison think that symbolism saturating the novel obvious enough for readers to fully understand? Do the times post world war two call for caution that you could not freely express your ideas and openly criticize society in writing?

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