The Freedom of One Word

Existentialist philosophy asserts that we live in a "broken world" (Marcel). An "ambiguous world" (de Beauvoir). A "dislocated world" (Merleau-Ponty). A world of indifference. Of "absurdity" (Camus). One we are "thrown" into and "abandoned" in, yet "condemned" and "free" (Heidegger and Sartre). It is this philosophy that detonates what superficially appears to be the doctrine of a dark and dismal lifestyle, yet it is quite the opposite. It is a philosophy of freedom, of choice, of letting go of that which is unimportant and accepting a world characterized by irrationality and indifference. Grounded in the freedom of self-invention and power of choice, one is not bound to the simplifications and theoretical definitions of others have determined what "being human" predicates, but the assertion that individual man defines his own reality and existence.

Often times in literature, an existentialist figure will find himself separated from the world and other people. As a result of feeling isolated or alone, he feels threatened, meaningless, insignificant, but learns to embrace the unresolvable confusion of the human world and resist the all-too-human desire to resolve that confusion by extending himself to whatever appears or can be made to appear safe or familiar. Published in 1952 by Ralph Ellison, the disoriented protagonist of *Invisible Man* fits this description by facing a confusing world in which he cannot fit into. Wherever Ellison's unnamed Negro character travels in the novel, he is weakened and left rootless by people who did either entirely disregard his inner character or envisage and use him as a symbol. In the 581-page novel, the narrator spends much of it shifting his personality like the colors on that of a chameleon, as each time he throws off that mask, he finds himself trapped inside another stereotype or disguise. In Ellison's existential bildungsroman, it is only until he realizes the absurdity and irrationality of the world that he is able to free himself of the building

expectations of the roles he feels he is supposed to play. A close reading of the opening passage and concluding passages demonstrates the existential ontogenesis of Ellison's protagonist as it exhibits his movement from rural innocence to cosmopolitan maturity and disillusionment. With the discovery of one word, he finds himself free, free of the expectations and roles and he creates his own reality, and finally able to establish his identity as the man *he* wants to be.

Following a wild and disorienting prologue, the narrator begins in the first paragraph with self reflection. He comments, "All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was…I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer" (15). Acting as frame for the novel, this narrative gives readers the context for the story of an existential bildungsroman.

Occurring later in the first chapter, the narrator attends a gathering to give his celebrated graduation speech to the significant white men of the community. Expecting a proper, polite, and respectable gathering, the narrator finds the scene of to be the exact opposite. He finds himself hurled into a group of other Negro boys, forced watch a beautiful, stark naked woman dance, and then fight in a humiliating battle royal. Serving no purpose other than vulgar entertainment for the prominent white men of the town, the battle royal exists as another occasion in the novel where white men take advantage of the narrator's passivity and idealistic nature.

In addition to heightening the tension between submission and rebellion, the battle royal can be seen as a contrast of the narrator's personality, between his youth and later developed self. Later in the novel at the occurrence of his existential revelation, he has a specific understanding and diction to describe the procession of chaotic ongoing events surrounding him. But, during the battle royal, he endures the same injustice, the same randomness, the same irrationality and problems of agency, yet he equivocally describes it. He claims he had "some misgivings over the

battle royal" (17), feels "guilt and fear" (19) and "blind terror" (21). Despite the loss of his dignity ("I had no dignity" (22) in the "mad" (20) "anarchy" (21) of the situation, the narrator continues to fight "automatically" (24). He obediently follows and does not question his orders. "There was nothing to do but what we were told," he claims (21). A fundamental cornerstone in existentialism is the belief in a choice – there is always a choice. With the narrator indicating he had none, Ellison highlights his immaturity and inability to command his own life as lives in the shadows of others.

In stark contrast of his thoughts and self at the end of the novel, Ellison willfully places this scene as the opening chapter. The absolute absurdity and irrationality of this commencing incident is no mistake. Ellison purposely introduces his narrator in a light of inferiority and literal and metaphorical blindness to show the development of his protagonist into a confident existentialist figure. Ellison extends his naïveté through the symbol of the blindfold. The blindfold parallels the narrator's metaphorical blindness in that he cannot see through the mendacious masks of the white men's benevolence. Like the blindfold, the speech he gives also plays with another theme of the book. His memorized oratory parallels the narrator 'playing the game' as he participates in a sort of performance, a masquerade of acting and playing the part of a humble Negro boy. Contributing to the narrator's metaphorical 'blindness' and 'performance,' the sequence of the battle royal contributes to the narrator's initial steps in becoming the man he chooses to become.

Fast forwarding to chapter 23, the narrator realizes his role in the Brotherhood. Furious to finally understand his function was nothing more than to act as a puppet for a corrupt organization, the narrator begins a deep process of self reflection. He comments,

> And now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time…I began to accept my past…I saw that [images of past humiliations] were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me (507-8).

This passage marks the narrator's commencing conscious process of self-invention as he begins to flirt with existential philosophy in his building of his identity. It is further developed in chapter 25 while under attack by Ras's mob. This is the most crucial moment of the narrator's existential bildungsroman and it begins with Ras threatening his life. "'Hang the lying traitor,' Ras shouted" (558). It is at this moment in which the narrator, faced with the very likely prospect of death, begins to see through the eyes of an existentialist. "…It seemed unreal. I faced them knowing that a madman in a foreign costume was real and yet unreal, knowing that he wanted my life, that he held me responsible for all the nights and days and all the suffering and for all that which I was incapable of controlling" (558). The playing with the words "real" and "unreal" plays with the idea of absurdity, of death and existence being absurd, and the world existing as a meaningless scope of irrationality in which he begins to realize his place. In the next paragraph, he repeats the word "absurd" four times, each time recapitulating the power and force behind that word. He now has a word, a language, to describe the night, Ras's existence, his existence, and the deceptive American masquerading for identity. Unlike his description of the battle royal in which he not once used the word "absurd" to describe the utterly insane chaos around him – the word "absurd" means something to now him: it offers him a new direction new and possibilities in life. The repetition of the word "absurd" furthermore alludes to a fundamental key in existentialism. Ellison crafts his interpretation of the "absurd" to refer to the objectivity, indifference, and ambiguity the narrator experiences in the world, and simultaneously the possibility of the narrator creating meaning through his actions and interpretations.

His new discovery of the "absurd" contributes to the narrator's realization for the first time that he has control over his life and the power of *choice*. "[I] recognized the absurdity of the whole night…and I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of

others, whether for Ras's or Jack's." His existential breakthrough creates the narrator's source of meaning to his life as the narrator's identity. He later comments in the epilogue that "my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own" (573), and following and attempting to fulfill the expectations of others, he found it destructive to his identity and his creation of meaning of his life. The consequent action of throwing the spear back at Ras demonstrates the narrator's commitment to his own identity and his permanent refusal to be subject to others peoples' visions and demands any longer. With this notion, he finally devotes himself totally to an effort to assert his true identity.

The next chapter finds the narrator's story has come full circle, as it both begins and ends with his underground life. Though some critics see his choice to live underground as a cop-out or evasion from his problems, in reading his choice through the philosophy of existentialism, readers find that the importance lies in neither asking if he is evading or snubbing society, but that he has made a choice. Instead of trying to follow the myriad of advice and guidance recommended to him throughout the text, the narrator takes matters into own hands and decides to stay underground to ponder his existence and the meaning he wants his life to have. In his cave, he points out, he does not have the interference of others, and he is open to thinking for himself. At the end of the novel, the narrator affirms his uncertainty in regards to a concrete identity, but determines to venerate his own complexity and duty to society as an individual. In reflecting back to his language and personality in the initial chapter of battle royal then comparing that to the closing episode with Ras, readers witness his movement from rural innocence to maturity and disillusionment in this existential bildungsroman, in which a lone protagonist discovers himself and frees himself of the expectations and roles created by society. "Life is to be lived, not controlled," he claims, "and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of defeat" (577).