

University of Oran  
Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts  
Department of Anglo-Saxon Languages  
Section of English



Doctoral School of English  
EDALPCBS

**The Quest for Identity in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's  
*The Great Gatsby* and Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*.**

A Dissertation Submitted in partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Magister in **American Literature**.

**Supervised by:**  
**Dr. Malika BOUHADIBA**

**Presented by:**  
**Mr. Abdelwahid ABIDI**

**Board of Examiners: Soutenu le 25 MAI 2014**

Chairperson : Dr. Leila MOULFI

University of **Oran**.

Supervisor: Dr. Malika BOUHADIBA

University of **Oran**.

Examiner : Dr. Louafia BOUKRERIS

University of **Oran**.

Examiner: Dr. Nadjouia HALLOUCH

University of **S.B Abbas**.

2013-2014

## ***DEDICATION***

*I dedicate this work to my family and to all the teachers who had a hand in our formation throughout our academic journey.*

## **Acknowledgements**

*I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Malika BOUHADIBA, for her precious help and enriching advice throughout the progress of this work, I would also like to thank Dr. MAMI Fouad, with whom we had our first contact with American literature at the University of Adrar, Pr. Lakhdar Barka Sidi Mohammed with whom we had one intensive week in American Literature that was really inspiring. Pr Fawzi Borsali for his ceaseless pieces of advice throughout the four years of our undergraduate studies. I would also like to thank the members of the jury: Dr Leila MOULFI, Dr Louafia BOUKRERIS and Dr Nadjouia HALLOUCH. My thanks also go to the Director of the Doctoral School Pr Yacine Rachida, and the teachers of the Doctoral School of English, Oran University.*

## **Abstract in English.**

The theme of identity is one of the mostly debated themes in America literature. Throughout the history of American literature, the different generations tried to answer the question; what is an American? The Puritans wanted it to be God's Kingdom on Earth. The generation of independence wanted it to be the place where all people were equal. In 1865 a Civil War broke out between the American North and South which gave birth to the class of the African Americans to whom the American ideals of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness did not apply. By the outbreak of the First World War many voices claimed their rights by taking part in the question of the American identity. African Americans and women were claiming their rights of equality. In this period all the ideals that America built as the basis of its identity were being challenged. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* are two examples of the wide literature that has been written about the theme of identity in that period. In both novels, light is shed on the contradictions that the Americans face in shaping their identities both at the personal and communal levels.

## الملخص بالعربية

يعتبر موضوع الهوية من المواضيع الأكثر مناقشة في الأدب الأمريكي. الكتاب الأمريكيون في مختلف العصور التي مر بها الادب الامريكي حاولوا ان يعطوا اجابة لمعنى الهوية الامريكية. هذا يرجع الى الاصول المختلفة للشعوب التي تشكل المجتمع الامريكي منذ اكتشاف أمريكا. البيوريتانيون هم اول مجموعة منظمة تستقر في أمريكا ارادو ان يؤسسوا ما اسموه "مملكة الرب على الارض" الدين كان هو العنصر الاساسي في تعريف هوية الشخص الامريكي انذاك. مع التوسع الجغرافي الذي شهدته امريكا نقص تأثير المبادئ الدينية التي تميز بها البيوريتانيون. شعوب من مختلف الديانات و العقائد بدئت تستقر في امريكا الشيء الذي جعل الدين عنصرا ثانويا في تعريف الهوية الامركية. سنة 1776 استقلت امريكا عن بريطانيا. بيان الاستقلال امريكي صرح ان كل الناس متساوون و هذا ما لم يكن محققا في المجتمع الامريكي انذاك. في سنة 1861 اندلعت حرب اهلية بين الشمال و الجنوب الامريكي نتيجة الخلاف على مسألة انهاء العبودية. بعد انتهاء الحرب الاهلية بدء الامريكيون من اصول افريقية بالمطالبة بحقوقهم في المساوات التي ينص عليها بيان استقلال امريكا. قضية هوية الامريكيين من اصول افريقية كانت من المواضيع الاكثر مناقشة انذاك. من نهاية الحرب الاهلية الى بداية الحرب العالمية الاولى, امريكا شهدت تطورا ملحوظا من الناحية لاقتصادية و التكنولوجية مما اثر على نظرة الافراد للحياة و بالتالي نظرهم الى الهوية. رواية "قاتصي العظيم" من تاليف فرانسيس سكوت فترجرالد و رواية "الرجل الذي لا يرى" من تاليف رالف والدو اليصن هما من اهم الروايات التي تتطرق الى موضوع الهوية الامريكية في العصر الحديث على المستويين الفردي و الجماعي او الوطني.

# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION**.....1

## **CHAPTER ONE: Identity in American Literature from 1620 to WWI.**

### **A- Identity in Colonial American Literature.**

A-1- Puritan Origins of American Identity.....9  
A-2- The Middle Colonies and the American diversity.....14  
A-3- The Founding Fathers and American National identity..... 17

### **B- The New Nation.**

B-1- Transcendentalists' Contribution to the American Identity.20  
B-2- The Abolition of Slavery and African Americans' Identity.24  
B-3- Modernity and its Impact on Identity.....28

## **CHAPTER TWO: The Quest for Identity in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.**

A- Identity in the 1920's America.....32  
B- Gatsby and the American Identity.....43  
C- Identity in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.....46  
D- Identity between Past and Future.....49  
E- Identity and Materialism.....52  
F- Gender Identity.....56  
G- Class and Racial Identity.....59

**CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Identity in Ellison's *Invisible Man*:**

A- Harlem Renaissance and the African American Identity.....	64
B- Identity and the Past.....	76
C- The African Americans' National Identity.....	79
D- Identity and Stereotypes.....	83
E- Individualism and Communal Identity.....	86
F- Identity and Self-expression.....	89
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>93</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>96</b>

## INTRODUCTION

"Know thy self."<sup>1</sup> This expression was inscribed on the walls of Temple Delphi which dates back to the fourth century B.C. Ever since, or well before, people have been trying to know themselves.<sup>2</sup> Knowing oneself is, of course, the answer to the question "Who am I?" Though a simple one, this question is not easy to answer. It is simple in the sense that nobody would confuse his/herself with anybody else, and it is complicated when getting in touch and socializing with other people. All what one does is, in fact, based on who one thinks he/she is. One's identity is not void of social, cultural, religious, and class connotations. Philosophers, sociologists and psychologists have made ample research about the meaning of identity and the different factors that affect its formation. They have stressed the importance of time to the definition of identity. Is one's identity prescribed by history or is the person responsible for creating his/her identity? Does the community determine one's identity or is the person free to act according to what his own mind dictates? Does the true identity lie in being or in having?

The word identity means "sameness, oneness," from Middle French *identité* (14c.), from Late Latin (5c.) *identitatem* (nominative *identitas*) "sameness," from *ident-*, comb. form of Latin *idem* (neuter) "the same"; abstracted from *identidem*"<sup>3</sup> The etymology of the word identity shows that the meaning of identity revolves

---

<sup>1</sup> Benton, William, *et.al. Encyclopedia Britannica*. 1943. V15.p.149.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*,p. 149.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=identity>. Online Etymology Dictionary,



around "sameness." The latter is central to the definition of identity. The individual considers him/herself as a member of a community on the basis of the similarities that exist between him/her and the group to which he/she belongs. These similarities may be in terms of birth traits; such as ethnicity or race or mentally acquired traits such as ideologies and religions. The extent to which the individual feels similar to the members of his community makes him different from the members other communities. Moreover, these points of similarity are, in fact, the distinctive features of the identity of that group.

Identity has a long philosophical history. According to Martin Raymond, the history of identity has gone through three main phases.<sup>1</sup> The first phase was called the Platonic phase. This phase was characterized by its emphasis on the soul; the part of the self that survives the bodily death. The true personality is an immaterial substance. In the second phase, which he called the Lockean phase, the physical dimension was added to the question of identity. John Locke defined the self as the "constantly changing process of interrelated psychological and physical elements."<sup>2</sup> This phase lasted to the 1960's.<sup>3</sup> From the 1960's on, the study of identity has taken other dimensions. The philosophical definition of identity concentrated on the self and the issue of how one can know that 'X' is the same person. Is it by having the same body or the same soul? In the twentieth century, identity was studied from social, cultural and psychological angles.

The Social Identity Theory is one of the theories that investigated the ways in which the person reaches an answer to the question "who am I?" The proponents of this theory argued that identity is formed through self-categorization.<sup>4</sup> This means that people categorize themselves into groups and consider each person similar to themselves as a member of the group. This similarity can be physical appearance or religious or ideological. The group to which the individual belongs gives meaning

---

<sup>1</sup>Martin, Raymond and John Barresi. *Personal Identity*. USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003. p.1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.1.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Huddy, Leonie. "From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory". *Political Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 *International Society of Political Psychology*. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001. p. 132.

to his/her beliefs, ideas and values. The individual contributes to the protection of that identity by emphasizing its characteristics. It follows that the person keeps alert to the things that distinguish his/her community from other communities. This theory also "focuses on prejudice, discrimination, and conditions that promote different types of intergroup behavior—for example, conflict, cooperation, social change, and social stasis."<sup>1</sup>

Self-categorization is achieved at the expense of the individual's personal identity. This process is called "depersonalization". It means that the person "[sees himself] as an embodiment of the in-group prototype rather than as a unique individual."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes individuals may have an inner call that contradicts the rules of the group to which they belong. Here the conflict begins. This happens when the "meanings and expectations associated with the role identities conflict with the meanings of person identities."<sup>3</sup> They would consequently "act without regard to the role identities so as to maintain person identities."<sup>4</sup> Categorization is not simply putting people together like objects but rather people are linked by explicitly or implicitly agreed upon rules that govern the correct behavior.

Erik Erickson was one of the most prominent psychologists who studied the question of identity. Unlike Freud who pinned the question of identity down to the ID, Erickson extended Freud's theories to include interpersonal, social and cultural factors.<sup>5</sup> Erickson believes that the question of identity formation is a lifelong process that goes through stages. Each stage affects the one that follows it. If anything goes wrong at any stage, it may affect identity formation later. He argues that each individual goes through an identity crisis at the age of adolescence. He proposed some ways in which this crisis could be solved or overcome. First, *Foreclosure* in which the individual *suppresses* the anxiety that results from the

---

<sup>1</sup>Hogg, Michael A. and Scott A. Reid."Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms". *International Communication Association*, 2006. p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Stets, Jan E. and Peter J. Burke , "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory" *American Sociological Association*, 1998. p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Fleming, James S., "*Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Stages* ", 2004 available on <http://swppr.org/Textbook/Ch%209%20Erikson.pdf> consulted on 04/12/2013.

identity crisis simply by assuming somebody else's identity; for example, to do the same thing his father was doing. Second, *Moratorium* in which the individual *suspends* his choice while looking for other alternatives. Third, *Diffusion* in this case the individual *represents* an identity but without commitment.<sup>1</sup> The crisis can be also successfully and positively solved. This happens when the person really knows who he/she is? And where is he/she heading? This is called identity achievement or positive role identity.<sup>2</sup> Identity achievement may also take a negative direction. In this case the individual may rebel against the norms and the expectations of his parents and society.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnic group to which one belongs has also been considered to have a considerable effect on the process of identity formation. All young people face a crisis of identity but the members of minorities have another point to take into account; that is their ethnic group. Mark is one of researchers who stressed the fact that the ethnic group has an influence on identity. He stated that "Identity provides the structure for personality, equipping the individual with a sense of purpose and direction for one's life. Ego identity exploration is common to all adolescents. However, it is particularly complex for members of ethnic and minority groups."<sup>4</sup> Mark concentrated on the African Americans. He observed that the young African Americans are "faced with the challenge of not only developing their personal identity, but also integrating their identity as an ethnic group member with their identity as an American."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the members of minorities find it difficult to make their minds up about who they really are. To be both things at the same time contradicts Erickson's definition of "Igo Integrity" which means "oneness"<sup>6</sup>. This characterized the African American identity. It was expressed in Dubois' "double consciousness."

---

<sup>1</sup> Fleming, James S., "Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Stages ",2004 available in <http://swppr.org/Textbook/Ch%209%20Erikson.pdf> consulted on 04/12/2013.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Mark H. Chae, "Gender and Ethnicity in Identity Formation" *The New Jersey Journal of Professional Counseling*. Winter 2001 /2002. Volume. 56. p.17.

<sup>5</sup>Fleming, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

Gender has also been considered as one of the factors that affect the process of identity formation. The meanings attached to being a man or a woman has been changing through time and cultures. Marcia affirmed that "being a biological male or female [is] less important in understanding adult relationships than [are] one's beliefs and values about their maleness and femaleness."<sup>1</sup> Stets differentiated between gender identity, gender roles, gender attitudes and gender stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> He stated that Gender identity "refers to the degree to which persons see themselves as masculine or feminine given what it means to be a man or woman in society."<sup>3</sup> Gender roles are "shared expectations of behavior given one's gender."<sup>4</sup> Gender stereotypes are the "shared views of personality traits often tied to one's gender."<sup>5</sup> Gender attitudes are "the views of others or situations commonly associated with one's gender."<sup>6</sup> Gender identity formation starts at an early age. Since childhood society constructs the gender identity of its members through the way of clothing and even the toys that are bought for boys or for girls. Gender identity has always been considered in contrast i.e. (man/woman) (husband/wife). In each social structure there are tacitly agreed upon meanings that define the roles of man and woman. In the modern period, gender identity and roles are undergoing considerable changes.

The question of identity is more important nowadays than ever before. Because of the technological development the world is witnessing, identities are threatened more than anything else. As Schöpflin puts it "The deepest threats to human existence only appear to be concrete - wars...natural catastrophes.... the threat from non-material factors, quite logically, has intensified...it is identities that are

---

<sup>1</sup> Marcia, J. "The Relational Roots of Identity". In J. Kroger (Ed.), *Discussions on Ego Identity*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. 1993 .p .107. Quoted in Mark H. Chae, "Gender and Ethnicity in Identity Formation"

*The New Jersey Journal of Professional Counseling*. Winter 2001 /2002. Volume. 56. p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Stets, Jan E. and Peter J. Burke. "Femininity/Masculinity" Department of Sociology, Washington State University . in Edgar F. Borgatta and Rhonda J. V. Montgomery (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Revised Edition. New York: Macmillan. p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

threatened."<sup>1</sup> In the modern world boundaries between, religious, cultural, and gender identities are merging and the quest for identity has become a matter of mental consciousness.

There are a number of reasons that motivated the choice of this subject. I have always viewed literature as a virtual life in which one can go down the depths of oneself in a pleasurable journey of self-exploration. This subject springs from a personal interest in the subject of identity and how people reach spiritual stability by adopting a given way of life, be it religion or culture and to what extent does this culture answer the questions and give sense to all the behaviours of its members.

In this dissertation, a descriptive and analytical method is used. The point of discussion is always put into its historical context. The question of identity is analyzed on the basis of the above mentioned definitions and concepts. We will also take into account, repetitions, hesitation in our analyses of the identity of characters in both novels.

The theme of identity is one of the mostly debated themes in American literature. This is because of a number of historical reasons: the relatively new American society, the different people or rather peoples that constituted the 'American' society arrived at different times of its history. Some fled their countries for religious or economic reasons; some fascinated by the opportunities America offered, others were simply taken there. These peoples, who settled in America, ever since its discovery, found it difficult to consider themselves as one nation. This resulted, on the one hand, from the differences in the origins of these people and, on the other hand, the different reasons that led them to immigrate to America. American literature, throughout its history, tried to reach a common denominator that would satisfy all these groups. This made the American individual in continuous quest for his/her identity. For the study of these questions we have chosen two

---

<sup>1</sup> George, Schöpflin "The construction of identity" 2001 available on [http://www.oefg.at/text/veranstaltungen/wissenschaftstag/wissenschaftstag01/Beitrag\\_Schopfl](http://www.oefg.at/text/veranstaltungen/wissenschaftstag/wissenschaftstag01/Beitrag_Schopfl).

American classics Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).

The dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is devoted to identity in American literature since the arrival of Puritans till the First World War. The Puritans were the first most important group that immigrated to America. The Puritan ideals were very central to the formation of the American identity. The great numbers of people who settled in America had alleviated the strictness of the Puritan society and the Puritan preachers lost the battle for material and economic gain. The economic prosperity that America witnessed in parallel with its geographical expansion permeated a sense of economic independence among settlers and a national identity started forming. Ample literature was written by writers such as Thomas Paine's *The Crisis*, *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason* Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, who sowed the seed of the American national identity. The latter was materialized through the War of Independence that was waged against Britain in 1776. The end of the war gave birth to a new nation.

Political independence was not enough to make of America a 'nation', because cultural and geographical differences between North South, East and West persisted. These differences degenerated into a Civil War (1861- 1865). The latter threatened the existence of the newly-born nation. The union was restored only to give rise to another class in the American society; that of the African Americans. The latter was heretofore excluded from the definition of the America identity. African Americans had put the American ideals to test. A new episode in the Americans quest for identity started. The latter reached its climax by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century.

The second chapter is devoted to the quest for identity in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; a novel that was published in 1925 and was set in America of the 1920's. After the end of the First World War in 1919, America witnessed an unprecedented economic and technological prosperity. This has greatly affected the

American society. Because of the war and the destruction it caused, Americans, like their European counterparts, lost faith in their traditional ways of life. The young generation started looking for new ways and attempted to make a break with their past. The generation of writers that emerged during this period was called the 'The lost generation'. Scott Francis Fitzgerald was considered as the spokesman or the historian of the 1920's. Most of his works covered the loss of values and the contradiction that the American society was experiencing. The *Great Gatsby* was viewed as a criticism of the American Dream. The American Dream was in fact the dream of an identity. We will discuss the different aspects of identity that the novel reveals.

The third chapter is devoted to the quest for identity in Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The latter is set in 1930's. After the First World War, great numbers of southern African Americans migrated to the North. This was due to the oppression and the segregation they suffered in the South and the better life that the North promised. Most of these migrants settled in a section of New York called Harlem. It was in Harlem that the African Americans united and wanted to give a collective image of their identity, but this was not an easy task. The African American intellectuals were divided between those who favoured integration into the American society, and those who favoured an identity that was based on their shared past experience. Ralph Ellison is one of black American novelists who tried to shed light on the problems and barriers that stood in the face of the formation of African American identity. Ellison makes a survey of the quest for identity from the South to the North. He tries to show that the North is no better than the South. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison gives voice to the different layers that constitute the American society and focuses on the different factors that influence the identity formation of the African Americans.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Identity in American Literature from 1620 to the First World War:

#### A- Identity in Colonial Literature:

From 1620 to the outbreak of The First World War, America has gone through three centuries that were replete with remarkable events that greatly affected the American identity. Each generation tried to define America in terms of the beliefs and principles that were, then, available. The Puritans wanted to establish a state in which the rule of God prevailed. They claimed that the truth was in what the Bible preached not in what one thought it was. These religious principles were on the wane because the expansion of the American territory and the great numbers of people who came to settle in America. Religion was no more the main uniting factor. Because of the growing diversity of the American society and the shared oppression the Americans faced from the English government, a sense of unity prevailed among the colonists. These circumstances formed a fertile soil for the ideas of intellectuals such as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson who greatly contributed to the formation of the American national identity.

#### A.1- The Puritan Origins of the American Identity:

The Puritans' contribution to the American identity was remarkable. It was "for fear of losing their identity as a religious community"<sup>1</sup> that Puritans immigrated to America, since they could no more live in conformity with the teachings of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Baym, Nina. *et. al.*, *the Norton Anthology of American Literature: beginning to 1820. Vol. A 7<sup>th</sup> Ed.* New York: Norton& Company, 2007. p. 10.



Anglican Church. The New England colonies; Plymouth in 1620, Salom in 1628 and Massachusetts in 1630 were the seed of Puritan culture in America. These colonies were established mainly by Puritans; Men who immigrated to America in search of freer religious practice. The literature the "Pilgrim Fathers", have written has been considered as a great contribution to the formation of the American identity. From this literature stemmed almost all the American ideals that were and are still central to the definition of the American identity.

The first group of Puritans immigrated to America in 1620 under the leadership of William Bradford on board the *Mayflower*. Before landing on the American shores, and because of the impending dangers, the pilgrims signed a document that was called the *Mayflower Compact*. The latter stated that they "Covenant and Combine [themselves] together into a Civil Body Politic for [their] better preservation...[and]...to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices."<sup>1</sup> This document is, up to now, considered as a symbol of the American 'democracy'.

Moreover, Bradford stated that the posterity are to be proud of the fact that "their fathers were English men who came over the great ocean and were ready to perish in this wilderness [...] let them confess before the Lord His lovingkindness and His wonderful works before the eyes of man."<sup>2</sup> Bradford stressed the fact that taking pride in the past was an important factor in the formation of the future generations' identity. Bradford was conscious of the fact that his present was the foundation of the future generation's present. The question of time; past, future and present was really central to the question of identity.

In *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1620- 1647),<sup>3</sup> Bradford wrote that it was God who was actually leading the trip across the ocean and tried to show that they were the

---

<sup>1</sup>Bradley, Sculley. *The Tradition in American Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup>ed, vol.1, New York: Norton& Company 1967. p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Paul, Lauter, *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*. USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. p.18.

chosen people and that God punished the wicked. Most of the events that Bradford recounted started with the expression "it pleased God to"<sup>1</sup> Moreover, "Bradford's account of chosen people, exiles in a 'howling wilderness' who struggled against all adversity to bring into being the city of God on earth is ingrained in [the American] national consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

Charles I, the king of England, was more severe with the Puritans than his father James I had been. Therefore more Puritans fled to America and most of them settled in Boston. In 1691, Boston and Plymouth united under the name of Massachusetts. The latter had played a very important role in consolidating and spreading the Puritan ideas and ideals which were central to the American national identity. Winthrop, the leader of the group of immigrants on board of the *Arbella* in 1630, was the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony. His writings "came to be seen in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as elements of American identity."<sup>3</sup> His slogan: "we shall be like a city on a hill"<sup>4</sup> became an ideal that most Americans acted on. Americans always set themselves as a model for the world to follow. Paul Lauter remarked:

*Because the Puritans had come to identify their position in the world as the "City on a Hill," in John Winthrop's resonant phrase, a model for all to follow, and because they came to identify that mythical city with America as a geographical place, the Puritans began to shape some key components of what came to be called "American identity"<sup>1</sup>*

The Puritans were against the church hierarchy and the absolute authority of the Pope. According to the Calvinist doctrine, each individual is directly responsible to God. Ning kang pointed that the "Puritans' anti-authority and their strong self-

---

<sup>1</sup>Baym, op. cit., p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Paul, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Bryn, O'Callaghan. *An Illustrated History of U.S.A.* London: Longman, 1990. p.17.

awareness paved the way for the development of individualism in colonial America, and later becoming one of the most important values of the American people."<sup>2</sup>

The Puritans did not consider their immigration to the New World merely as way of fleeing the persecution they suffered at the hands of the English kings but they considered it a mission delivered to them by God to spread His word in the wilderness. They always included the world in their writings, which meant that what they were doing was not only for their own safety but for that of the entire humanity. When addressing his fellowmen on board the *Arbella* 1630, Winthrop told them that "the eyes of all people are upon us"<sup>3</sup>, which meant that "they would stand as an example to the world either of the triumph or the failure of this Christian enterprise."<sup>4</sup> This meant that Americans had a great responsibility and they were supposed to be up to it, otherwise "the enemies will speak evil of the ways of God."<sup>5</sup> Ning affirmed:

*The strong sense of mission became a spiritual stimulus of early Puritans in the course of developing the New World. With the increasing of their ethnic identity, Americans integrated the mission sense into their nationality. Moreover, the mission –sense has been clearly manifested in the country's foreign policy. Most Americans have always believed that the United States is a beacon to the world. It is their mission.....to spread their democracy and liberty to all peoples of the world, and send light to every corner of the world.*<sup>6</sup>

The Puritan society was patriarchal. Women had a relatively inferior status to men. They were supposed to obey their husbands. The Puritans believed that women

---

<sup>1</sup>Paul, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Ning, Kang. "Puritanism and Its Impact upon American Values". *Review of European Studies*, V. 1, N. 2 (09/2009).p.149.

<sup>3</sup>Baym, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>6</sup>Ning, op. cit., pp. 150-151.

bore some of the sin of Eve. Anne Bradstreet was among the first women poets in the Puritan New England. In her poems, she gave a vivid image of the roles assigned to the Puritan women. She ironically showed the inferiority of women in America in her collection of poems *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*.<sup>1</sup> She wrote that "To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings, /Of cities founded, commonwealth begun, / For my mean pen are too superior things."<sup>2</sup> Religion in the Puritan society was the main foundation on which identity was based. The reluctance to play one's assigned role meant disobedience of God's law.

Americans owe most of their ideals to the Puritan literature. The strict laws that the Puritans had imposed loosened under the pressure of materialism that conquered the continent. A great number of immigrants started to pour into America, since the Indians were no more a danger and safer settlements were being established. There were some other attempts to revive the religious fervour. The most famous of which was the Great Awakening which occurred in 1730.<sup>3</sup> Unlike their predecessors, preachers such as Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), tried to widen the scope of religion to include physical sciences besides spirituality.

In a society such as the Puritan New England, there was no room for a quest for identity and everything was dictated by the Bible. Society, and consequently the individual, had to follow the way the church drew for him and any diversion from this way was considered not as a quest for identity but rather as a sin that deserved punishment. The strictness of the Puritan laws alleviated when the number of immigrants grew too rapidly and new colonies were being settled. These colonies campaigned for freer religious practice. The Middle Colonies represented a sample of the diversity of the American society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Baym, op. cit., p.187.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.,p.188.

<sup>3</sup> B. High, Peter. *An Outline of American Literature*. UK: Longman, 1986, p. 12.

## A-2- The Middle Colonies and the American Diversity:

In the Middle Colonies, more religious freedom was allowed. Consequently, large numbers of people from different origins and religions came to settle there. Religion was no more the only uniting factor among the settlers of these colonies as it had been the case in the Puritan colonies. The individual in such communities had to find ways to act towards people who had a different religion or culture. It is in these colonies that the American ideal of diversity, the so called 'melting pot' emerged.

William Penn (1644-1718) the governor of Pennsylvania was among the first governors to allow freedom of faith in his colony. Penn, being a Quaker, believed in the freedom of conscience, belief and the liberty of the individual. In most of his works Penn propagated these ideas. In his *The Frame of the Government of the Province of Pennsylvania in America* (1682)<sup>1</sup>, he stressed the fact that "all citizens [were] free as they obey[ed] the law they helped create."<sup>2</sup> By saying so, Penn stressed the idea of freedom within the boundaries of law and the right of people to participate in the making of law.

The Quakers believed in the fact that "all men and women possessed a divine inner light."<sup>3</sup> These beliefs played an important role in the formation of the American character that was based on individual freedom. This placed more responsibility on the individuals in shaping their beliefs, or rather their identities. In addition, Penn in his *No Cross No Crown* (1669)<sup>4</sup> argued that all men were equal and that no one was supreme over anyone else.<sup>5</sup> He proposed an annual meeting for all the colonies in

---

<sup>1</sup>Franklin, Benjamin V. *A Research Guide to American Literature: Colonial Literature 1607- 1776*. USA: University of South Carolina, 2010.p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>McDougall, Walter A "The Colonial Origins of American Identity." This paper is based on his presentation to the FPRI History Institute, New Perspectives on the Genesis of the U.S.A., held June 5–6, 2004; published by Elsevier Limited on behalf of Foreign Policy Research Institute, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin, op. cit., p. 152.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

1697.<sup>1</sup> In this meeting the economic affairs of the colonies were discussed. Consequently, a sense of unity permeated among the colonies.

The French born J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735-1813) was among the first American writers who shed light on the diversity of American society and tried to provide a definition of this new nation. In his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)<sup>2</sup>, he pointed out that the American is a new man who is a mixture of different European origins. He gave America and the Americans a sense of identity in contrast to Europe. He unveiled many of the points that united the Americans and the ones that showed their distinctiveness from the old European society. In his letter *What is an American?*<sup>3</sup>, he addressed the distinctiveness of the American society. He claimed that the American society was "a modern society that offer[ed] itself to [the American's] contemplation, different from what he [the American] has hitherto seen. It is not composed, as in Europe, great lords who possess everything.....no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Crèvecoeur depicted the complexity of the American society. People from different origins 'took off' their past and 'put on' a new identity that was 'American'. He dubbed the American as "a new man, who act[ed] upon new principles; he therefore [had to] entertain new ideas, and form new ideas."<sup>5</sup> This idea of a new beginning is one of the pillars of the American identity. People in the Middle Colonies were "the most lightly governed people on earth."<sup>6</sup> This was one of the things that contributed to eclipsing the differences that existed between the peoples who settled there. In addition, Crèvecoeur's letters "marked the beginning of

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Vickers, Daniel. *A Companion to Colonial America*. USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>Baym, op. cit., p. 596.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 599.

<sup>6</sup> Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 41.

a new sense of national identity as colonists from different backgrounds and varied nationalities now found reasons to call themselves Americans."<sup>1</sup>

The American myth of the 'melting' pot, which was forged in the Middle Colonies, became one of the basic foundations of the American identity. It was based on the premise that all the settlers of America must forget about their past and melt into one new American society. However, it is not easy to erase one's past and convince him/her to embrace a new identity. This ideal was understood differently by different people. Some considered it as an assimilation process i.e. the minority had to melt into the majority's identity. As Mckenna remarks:

*The promoters of nationalism fastened on the image of America as a melting pot that would soften and finally eliminate all those all these potentially divisive identities. But people do not like to have their social identities rubbed out; they cling to them as a source of self-understanding and therefore of self-confidence; they make them feel they are part of something larger than just themselves, something more truly worthy of effort and sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>*

The ideal of 'Melting Pot' did not meet the expectations of all Americans. Americans had to find another slogan that would satisfy all the constituent identities of the American society; a slogan that would both unite the Americans without erasing their authentic identities. Americans would live together, taking into account the differences that exist between them. The word 'mosaic' was used as a substitute for the 'melting pot' which means that the American society is "a multicultural

---

<sup>1</sup>Baym, op. cit., p. 362.

<sup>2</sup>Mckenna, George. *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism*. USA: Yale University Press, 2007. p. 281.

environment in which the individuals negotiate an identity for themselves between the different traditions they encounter."<sup>1</sup>

Many metaphors were used to describe the American society: 'melting pot' 'monolith', 'mosaic', 'hybrid' but none seemed to satisfy all the members of the American society. The question of identity and clashes between identities remained among the subjects mostly debated in American literature.

### **A-3- The Founding Fathers and the American National Identity:**

Up to the second half of the eighteenth century, there were still many colonists who considered themselves no more than British subjects. Ideas pertinent to the American independence started to spread among them. To wage a war against the mother country was not an easy task. The need for writers to steer the Americans' minds towards independence was compelling. Revolutionaries such as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson played an important role in changing the views of the Americans towards their mother country and in shaping a new national identity. These ideas were materialised in the Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Paine was among the pioneers who propagated the concept that reason was the basis of any view of life. In his article *The Age of Reason* that was written in two parts in 1794 and 1795 he stated that "the most formidable weapon against errors of every kind [was] reason."<sup>2</sup> Though Paine came to America only in 1774, he played a very important role in telling the Americans who they were or who they were supposed to be. Being conscious of the religious diversity of the American society and the barriers it might create in the face of American unity, Paine was against any form of compulsory faith. He claimed that "it [was] necessary to the happiness of Men that to be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity [did] not consist

---

<sup>1</sup> Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Boswell, Marshal, and Carl Rollyson. *The Encyclopedia of American Literature 1607 To Present*. New York: Facts On File.Inc., 2008. p. 9.



in believing or disbelieving; it consist[ed] in professing to believe in what one [did]not believe."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Paine firmly believed in the separation between state and religion and construed the relation between them as "adulterous"<sup>2</sup>. This principle was rooted in the American culture. This was confirmed by the Article N° 6 of the American Constitution which states that "no religious Test shall be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States"<sup>3</sup> Religion, which was the main criterion of identity in Puritan society became a secondary one. This resulted in the continuous secularisation of the American national identity.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*<sup>4</sup> was one of the most important texts that contributed to the formation of the American national identity. It was written at a crucial time i.e., when the Americans were divided between those who were for independence and those who were against it. Paine rejected the idea that Britain was the mother country of the Americans by saying that "Europe, and not England, [was] the parent country of America."<sup>5</sup> By saying so Paine made the idea clear that the English had no right to oppress the Americans under the veneer that England was the mother country of America. This was compelling evidence against those who claimed that England was the mother country of America and considered this as an obstacle to the independence of America. Thomas Paine's pamphlets greatly contributed to the formation of the American identity. As Bercovitch wrote "Revolutionary Americans [read] voraciously, and their leaders [wrote] easily and often, leaving rich varied material both in print and manuscript. No generation,

---

<sup>1</sup>Baym, op. cit., p. 643.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 644.

<sup>3</sup>Campbell, Neil and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* .2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.p. 98.

<sup>4</sup> Baym, op. cit., p. 630.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 633.

whether in reading or in writing, [had] looked more carefully for to the printed word as the basis of its identity."<sup>1</sup>

Paine's *Common Sense* paved the way for the American Declaration of Independence that was signed on 4 July 1776. The Declaration of Independence can be considered as the birth certificate of the American identity. More than just a political document that declared the independence of America, it became one of the cornerstones of the American identity both at the personal and communal levels. It was one of the documents that greatly contributed to the formation of the American identity. The Declaration's call for the break with Britain was taken as a break with the past. It marked "the beginning of a new history....which separate[ed] [the Americans] from the past and connect[ed] [them] with the future."<sup>2</sup> The break with the past was one of the central principles of the American national identity. McDonald notes that "The first public expression of nationhood was the Declaration of Independence; thus a break with the traditional society [was] fundamental to the nation's history and image."<sup>3</sup>

Although it was a political document, the Declaration of Independence was one of the most important texts in American literature. The eloquence of its language and the solidity of its evidence helped in bringing the Americans together despite all the disparities that existed between them. This declaration was called the charter of the "American Dream."<sup>4</sup> The latter was considered as "the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like "democracy," "Constitution," or even "the United States."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Cambridge history of American literature*. V.01. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p. 350.

<sup>2</sup>Mckenna, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>McDonald, Gail. *American Literature and Culture 1900-1960*. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.p.80.

<sup>4</sup>Cullen, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

The Declaration stated that "all Men [were] created equal" which was not the case then in America. More than one million black Americans were under slavery. Women were disfranchised. In the few years that followed independence, America had to fulfil the promises of the declaration. The founding fathers succeeded in shaping the minds of the Americans to fight for their independence and they laid the foundation for a new national identity. Yet, there was still much work to be done for this identity to survive and blossom under the pressure of diversity and division that characterised the American society.

## **B- The New Nation:**

As soon as the war ended and the independence was gained, internal divisions began. America was politically independent, but culturally Americans still owed many of their values to their European origins. The need for the formation of a new authentic American culture became urgent. The emergence of the transcendentalist movement in America greatly contributed to this end. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman were among the most prominent transcendentalists in America. They campaigned for the abolition of slavery. The question of slavery degenerated into a civil war in 1861-5 which culminated in the birth of new class in the American society that was heretofore excluded: the African Americans. By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century America witnessed conspicuous changes. These changes reached a turning point by the outbreak of the First World War.

### **B-1- Transcendentalists' Contribution to the American Identity:**

The transcendentalist movement, which had its roots in the German idealism and the New England Puritanism, had greatly contributed to the formation of the American identity when the break with the mother country had been made. The emergence of this movement happened in due time. Americans needed a source, other than the past and history, as the basis of their identity. The works of the

transcendentalists, such as Ralph W. Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau and Walt Whitman had remarkably helped in providing food for thought for the Americans.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was among the pioneers of the transcendentalist movement in America. Being a Unitarian, he believed in "reason and the power of the individual spirituality"<sup>1</sup> as well as in "the study of nature as a way of learning to admire God's infinitely wise design."<sup>2</sup> Unlike the Puritans, the Unitarians granted the individual more freedom. These principles have greatly influenced Emerson and his fellows. In his essay *Nature* that was anonymously published in 1836<sup>1</sup>, he affirmed that "nature [was] understood through the direct experience of the individual soul, not through scientific methods or reason, and pro-posed that through such an understanding of nature one became closer to God or to divinity."<sup>2</sup> Emerson stressed the fact that the break with the past and the disposal of the views of others in viewing the world was mandatory for the accomplishment of one's true identity. He was conscious that the Americans could not achieve their national identity if they kept clung to their past. The only way they can feel truly American was by forgetting all about their past and creating a present out of their own imagination through an original contact with nature.

Emerson's essay the *American Scholar* (1837)<sup>3</sup> was dubbed by Oliver Wendell Holmes as America's Intellectual Declaration of Independence. In this essay he pointed out how the American scholar and the American individual could be original. Emerson construed imitation as suicide. He argued that the original knowledge should not be taken from books but from a direct contact with nature. By focusing on originality, Emerson helped in the formation of a distinct American identity that sprang from the nature of the New World and that was not based on the ruins of the old one. This principle of self-creation was very important to the formation of the American identity.

---

<sup>1</sup>Bercovitch, Sacvan, *etal.*, *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. V.02.UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 281.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 378.

Henry David Thoreau, one of Emerson's contemporaries, called for spiritual independence. Unlike Emerson, he decided to live in isolation in a cabin he built in Walden, the place after which his book was named, because he wanted to "live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life."<sup>4</sup> Thoreau criticised the material direction that civilisation was taking and people's neglect of the spiritual and the intellectual aspects of life. He said that "while civilisation has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them."<sup>5</sup> Like Emerson, Thoreau believed in the supremacy of the individual and considered civilisation as "an institution in which the life of the individual [was] to a large extent absorbed in order to preserve and perfect that of the race."<sup>6</sup> Thoreau believed in dreams as a way towards success; a principle that is central to the American national identity. He believed that "If one advance[ed] confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavour[ed] to live the life he [had] imagined he [would] meet with a success unprecedented in the common hours."<sup>7</sup>

Because of the diversity of the American society, the theme of national identity remained one of the crucial issues. In the second half of the nineteenth century the survival of the American 'nation' was threatened by the disagreement between southern and northern states about the question of slavery. In these circumstances the need for an idea that would bring the Americans together was compelling. Walt Whitman was one of the transcendentalists who devoted their poetry to the exploration of the American national identity that fluctuated between individuality and community. Whitman believed that the genuine union was not accomplished through law, economics or anything on the material level but through "a fervid IDEA melting everything else with its resistless heat."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Wayne, Tiffany K. *Encyclopedia of transcendentalism*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2006. p. 188.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Ed. Cramer, Jeffery S. USA: Yale University Press, 2004. p. 97.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>8</sup>Setzer, Suzan, "Whitman, Transcendentalism and the American Dream: Alliance with Nature's Government through Language." *Modern and Vedic Science*. V. 9 N. 1, USA, 1999.

In his poem *Song of My Self* (1855)<sup>1</sup>, Walt Whitman combined the two seemingly contradictory and mutually exclusive concepts; the personal and the communal. The poem is written in the first person singular, as if to say that this poem should be everybody's song and not Whitman's only. Whitman viewed the diversity of the American society as a variety of fragrances and invites every American to "breathe the fragrance of [himself]."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he remarked that "the atmosphere [was] not a perfume.....it [was] odourless"<sup>3</sup> Whitman hinted at the fact that the outward atmosphere of the American society should be neutral or "odourless" in which each individual would be free to practice what he believed in and not to allow "the distillation"<sup>4</sup> of the outward fragrances to "intoxicate"<sup>5</sup> or affect his/her personality. As Susan Setzer puts it: "Although Whitman's poetry enacts unity by accepting and celebrating everything as part of himself, he does not advocate unity at the price of the individual identity, nor does he exalt in the individuality destructive of the whole."<sup>6</sup>

In the first half of the nineteenth century, slavery still existed in America. Even those who signed the declaration owned slaves. Women did not have the least of freedom men had. They did not have the right to be educated and if they had the chance to do so they would be educated at home. They did not have the right to own property. They spent their lives dependent on their fathers and if they got married, the mission would pass to their husbands. Margaret Fuller, based on the transcendentalists' views, advocated equality between men and women, in all walks of life. In her treatise *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), she stated the fact that women should have the same rights as men and this should not be a concession from men, but a right.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Whitman, Walt . *Leaves of Grass*. Ed. Karbiener, Karen. New York: Barnes & Nobles, 2004, p. 190.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 191.

<sup>6</sup>Setzer, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 137-138.

Transcendentalism played a very important role in weaning the Americans off their mother culture and helped them create a genuine and authentic American literature. The latter sprang from their personal and direct contact with nature. In addition, it greatly contributed the formation of a genuine American identity. The emergence of an authentic American literature meant that an authentic American identity was in the making. Moreover, the transcendentalists support for the rights of woman and African Americans steered the public views towards the gender equality and the abolition of slavery.

## **B-2- The Abolition of Slavery and the African Americans' Identity:**

The beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed an active movement in favour of the abolition of slavery. The disagreement between the north and the south about the abolition of slavery threatened the unity of the American 'nation'. When Abraham Lincoln, who was for the abolition of slavery, won the elections of 1861, some states wanted to secede from the union. Consequently, a civil war broke out in 1861 and lasted for five years. The end of the Civil War gave birth to a new class in the American society: 'the African Americans'. The emancipation of slaves did not grant them fully equal rights as their white counterparts. It was only the beginning of a continuous quest for the recognition of the African American identity.

The African slaves were brought to America against their will. They were sold and bought like goods. Therefore they did not have the right to speak about themselves, let alone to have their share in the definition of the American identity. Almost a century had passed since the American Declaration of Independence declared that "all men [were] created equal" but this seemed not to include African Americans. When the Declaration was written, there were still 1.2 million African Americans under slavery out of a population of 7.2 million Americans.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>O'Callaghan, Bryn. *An Illustrated History of U.S.A.* UK: Longman, 1990, p. 44.

In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (1845), Frederick Douglass provided details about the life of slaves in America. Douglass was born a slave in Maryland. He was separated from his mother at an early age "before [he] knew her as [his] mother."<sup>1</sup> This was, in fact, a custom in Maryland. This was done "to hinder the development of the child's affection towards its mother and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child."<sup>2</sup> Slaves were harshly whipped for the slightest actions of disobedience and the overseers took pleasure in that as Frederick put it, when depicting the overseer torturing his aunt; "he would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush."<sup>3</sup>

In his narrative Douglass showed a Christian identity. He used religious terms to describe the overseer in the plantation. He dubbed him as a "profane swearer."<sup>4</sup> He wrote "it was enough to chill the blood and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man to hear him talk."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he considered the death of the overseer as "a result of merciful providence."<sup>6</sup> In the end of the narrative Douglass clarified the point that there was a great difference between Christianity proper and the one that actually existed. He wrote "I love the pure, peaceful, impartial Christianity of Christ and therefore I hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle plundering, partial, hypocritical Christianity of this land."<sup>1</sup> Douglass's use of the religious language earned him the support of those who had the Christian faith. This was the case for all slaves as Fountain claimed:

*Christian slaves refused to abandon their faith because its teachings gave them an identity and future that they could embrace fully. Specifically, Christianity asserts the value of all human beings, whether they are black or white or slave or free.*

---

<sup>1</sup>Andrews, William L. and William S. Mcfeely. *A Norton Critical Edition: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, New York: Norton & Company, 1997.p.13.

<sup>2</sup>Andrews, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 18.



*The teachings of Jesus indicate that all individuals are an important part of the Christian God's creation. No one, no matter how lowly in earthly status, is worth less than another person in the eyes of God.<sup>2</sup>*

The abolition of slavery did not put an end to the sufferings of ex-slaves. It was only the beginning a fiercer struggle between the former slaves and the former masters. The struggle can best be understood a struggle for identity. In the South African Americans lived in a segregated society under what was called "Jim Crow Laws"<sup>3</sup>. When the reconstruction was made there were no laws to the advantage of the African Americans. They were left alone to find their own ways. Consequently, many of them remained in plantations in return for low wages. In addition, the "Ku Klux Klan"<sup>4</sup> kept the African Americans in a continuous horror and threatened anyone who would achieve any kind of success. This would have seemed normal for those who had once been slaves, but this might not be the case for those who were born free. The slaves who were born on the American land found it difficult to call themselves anything else but Americans. Baldwin remarked.

*It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you... I was taught in American history books that Africa had no history and neither did I. I was a savage*

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Fountain, Daniel L. *Slavery, Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. USA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. p. 94.

<sup>3</sup>Legal statements adopted by the Southern states after the Revolution to enforce segregation of whites and blacks in schools, public transportation, theaters, hotels and restaurants. Such laws were overturned by the courts or repealed by the states, chiefly after the Second World War.' From *Encyclopedia Americana: International Edition Complete in Thirty Volumes* Connecticut, USA: Scholastic Library Publishing, 2006. p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>'Ku Klux Klan is America's oldest terrorist hate group. It was was founded in December 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee by several well educated ex-Confederate soldiers. The group took its name from the Greek word *Kukios* meaning circle. The group gained about half-a-million members throughout the south. Hooded nightriders who terrorised and killed African American activists and their sympathisers. In the 1920, it became more violistic against 'immoral whites and minorities' From McDonogh Cary W., Robert Gregg and Cindy H. Wong. *Encyclopedia of contemporary American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2001.pp. 407-408.

*about whom the least said the better...You  
belonged where white people put you.*<sup>1</sup>

W. E. Du Bois was among the first African American intellectuals who spoke about the question of the identity of the African Americans. He was conscious of the difficulty that faced the formation a genuine African American identity. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he affirmed that an African American "would not Africanize America...and would not bleach his soul in a flood of white Americanism"<sup>2</sup> Du Bois, moreover, focused on the irreconcilability of these two identities. He added that "an American, a negro two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body"<sup>3</sup>He also emphasised the fact that African Americans always "looked at [themselves] through the eyes of others"<sup>4</sup> In his "The Conservation of the Races", Du Bois observed that the Americans traditionally placed the African Americans at the bottom of the hierarchy. He recognised the fact that God had divided humanity into nations and that in American the two most extreme types met.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Du Bois, Booker believed that the African Americans like the Europeans needed some time to form their position or rather their identity in the world. He was conscious of the fact that shaping one's identity would take time. Just as it took the Europeans one century and a half to declare America as an independent nation, the African Americans equally needed sometime after their freedom to form their identity. He remarked that "In a few hours the great questions with which the Anglo-Saxon race had been grappling for centuries had been thrown upon these people to be solved."<sup>1</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century, America received more immigrants than ever before. A great number of African Americans came to settle in the north. This had resulted in the creation of a majority black district in New York called Harlem. The latter, the cradle of the African American culture, contributed to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Cullen, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>2</sup>Du Bois. W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes& Noble Classics, 2003, p. 09.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>Paul, op. cit., p. 323.

formation of a somewhat united African American identity. This period marked the beginning of modernity which had a great impact on identity in America and in the world as a whole.

### **B-3- Modernity and its Impact on Identity:**

America has conspicuously developed in the few decades that followed the Civil War. Many new tools were introduced into the American society such as; railroads, telephones, electricity. Cities were getting bigger; towns were getting smaller, farms gave way to factories and warehouses. The effect of such changes did not stop only at the material level but it also had inwardly affected people's thoughts and views of life. The late nineteenth century and the beginning the twentieth century marked the beginning of modernity. The latter altered the traditional concepts of identity. Because of the work opportunities offered by the accelerating rate of industrialisation, women, African Americans and children as well were employed. Both women and African Americans started fighting for their rights or rather the right to shape their own identities. People started questioning what had once been unquestionable. As Leach remarked:

*By 1900 the [American] nation's story had grown congested with subplots and hidden texts. There was no longer a widely shared consensus about what it meant or where it was heading, in part because the story had grown so complex, It was not because the centre did not hold, but rather those who looked for a centre could not find one.<sup>2</sup>*

There is a difference between modernisation and modernity. Modernisation refers to the process of social change that followed the industrial and technological

---

<sup>1</sup>Kent, Alicia, A. *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Whitefield, J. Stephen. *A Companion to 20th Century America*. USA: Blackwell publishing, 2007, p. 3.

revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whereas modernity is understood as the individual and collective experience of modernisation. Moreover, modernity was understood as the issues that arise when experiencing these changes. People's view of life started to take a different direction. People sought the truth more through scientific and experimental methods than through religion, myth and superstition. This conflict between the religious, spiritual, mythical and the superstitious on the one hand, and the scientific, material, practical and the experimental on the other hand, is one of the main characteristics of modernity.

Religions, myths and superstitions were people's main, and almost only, source of meaning. People resorted to these sources when they face questions that are beyond the reach of their knowledge "in order to explain complexities, and to banish contradictions, thus making the world seem simpler and more comfortable.....to inhabit."<sup>1</sup> This comfort is not a material one but a spiritual one. In pre-modern era, religion, myths and superstitions were unquestionable. Therefore, individuals had somewhat stable identities. This stability results from the stability and solidity of their faith in the principles on which their identities were based. When modernity shook these bases, the modern individual was in continuous search for alternatives. As De Benoist puts "it is easy to understand why the question of identity appears, first, as a reaction to the dissolution of the social network and the disappearance of traditional points of reference brought about by modernity, and, second, in connection with the emergence of the notion of individual in the Western world."<sup>2</sup>

With the advent of modernity, religions and myths became no more the primary source of meaning. Researchers distinguished between *mythos* and *logos* as sources of meaning that help individuals make sense of the world around them. The former is based on myths and superstitions. In this case the only thing the person has to do is to believe and to act accordingly. The latter is based on logical reasoning. In this

---

<sup>1</sup>Cullen, op. cit., p. 08.

<sup>2</sup>Alain De Benoist, "On identity" available on [http://www.alaindebenoist.com/pdf/on\\_identity.pdf](http://www.alaindebenoist.com/pdf/on_identity.pdf).

case the individual consciously uses his/her mind to find the truth.<sup>1</sup> Because of the results that experimental science achieved people's beliefs in spiritual truths were shaken. It was the *logos* that prevailed from the beginning of the modern era onwards.

Consequently, the individual was free to believe in the thing that his logic led him/her to believe. This was what made the continuous quest for 'comfort' a necessity in the modern era. People in the modern era suffer from an identity crisis. The latter resulted from the discrepancy between what they theoretically believe and what is practically taking place. They are all the time trying to make a compromise between the two. As Donskis puts it "not only does the idea of identity come to bridge the gap between the "ought" and the "is," but it also serves as an attempt to reconcile and bridge what has been separated by modernity: Truth and value, rationality and tradition, expertise and social intimacy, the individual and community."<sup>1</sup>

The American society was dubbed as a classless society but with the accelerating modernisation the gap between the poor and the rich widened. Industrialisation resulted in the creation of consumer societies in which the individual relies mostly on industrialised goods. This consumerism did not only affect the outward appearance of society but it has also affected people's identity. Modernity added a new dimension to the definition of identity. Instead of being the answer to the question "who am I?" identity also included the answer to the question "what do I have?" People started to view themselves in the clothes they wore the quality of the car they got. The criterion of 'having' has become one of the most important criteria to the definition of 'being'. The spread of media, means of transport and means of communication had altered the traditional relation between space and time. Through the use of the means of communication people could go wherever they want and whenever they want in a very short time. This has greatly affected people's identity

---

<sup>1</sup>Armstrong, Karen. "Faith and Modernity" From the *World Wisdom online library*: available on [www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx](http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx). 2005. p. 74.

and the way they viewed themselves. People were introduced to different cultures, languages and religions indoors. Moreover, the scientific explanation of the natural events and had reduced everything to cause and effect. People no more viewed nature the same way their ancestors did. As Anthony Giddens puts it:

*In modern societies....self-identity becomes an inescapable issue. Even those who would say that they have never given any thought to questions or anxieties about their own identity ... Whilst earlier societies with a social order based firmly in tradition would provide individuals with (more or less) clearly defined roles, in post-traditional societies we have to work out our roles for ourselves.<sup>2</sup>*

The question of identity in American literature seems to be among the most important themes. Throughout the history of American literature the theme of identity seemed to be the focal point over which all the other themes revolved. In the modern period the theme of identity has become even more important than ever before. This was due to the different challenges that the traditional bases of the American identity such as the Promised Land and the American Dream faced. The American literature of the early twentieth century has unearthed many of the deficiencies of these ideals to form a stable American identity because of the difficulty or rather the impossibility of putting them into practice. F. Scott Fitzgerald was one of the prominent writers in the early twentieth century American literature. In his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* he brought to the surface much about the complexity of the question of identity and how it was affected by the materialism of the modern world.

---

<sup>1</sup>Donskis, Leonidas, *Troubled Identity and the Modern World*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. USA: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 70.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Quest for Identity in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:**

The war was a sort of a bridge that America crossed towards a new way of life. It has ever since become difficult to bring the nation back to the pre-war traditions. The war was considered by many as a sign of the failure and the expiry of the old ways. It "shattered the Victorian certainties regarding morality and proper behaviour."<sup>1</sup>The new ways had affected the American society both materially and spiritually. Post First World War American society made a break with all what was traditional. People tried to create their own tradition or rather to shape their own identities. They sought their identities not in the traditional beliefs of society but rather in the modern, scientific findings. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was one of the remarkable works of the period that uncover much about how these changes have influenced the American, racial, class and gender identities.

### **A- Identity in the 1920's America:**

The second decade of the twentieth century marked a very important period in the history of the American identity. America received one million immigrants a year between 1905 and 1914. Many Americans worried about the continuous waves of immigrants that continued to settle in America, the thing that kept the ethnic composition of the American society in a continuous change. Consequently, The American government passed the Immigration Restriction Act and National Quota Act in 1921 and 1924 respectively. These acts were passed in hopes of "protect[ing] Anglo-Saxon element in the American population against further

---

<sup>1</sup>Carlisle, Rodney P. *Handbook to Life in America: The Roaring Twenties*. New York: Facts On File, 2009. p.13.

encroachment by undesirable groups."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this period witnessed remarkable changes in racial and gender identities which were brought about by the social and economic changes that followed the war. Carlisle observed that "Although only a decade, the years from 1920 to 1929 represented a distinct era in American life, with the flourishing of changes that represented the end of many earlier styles and cultural norms, and the transition to new ones."<sup>2</sup>

There were many attempts by some American intellectuals such as John Dewey, Jane Adams and Arthur Bentley to unify the American society and try to flatten the differences that existed among the different groups that composed the American society. For that end, they followed an ideology that was called "pluralism." The latter tried to strike a balance between the individual's "right to be different with the right to participate in mass society."<sup>3</sup> To reach a common ground between these two somewhat mutually exclusive concepts was not an easy task. Some considered it as a way of erasing the racial and ethnic identities that constituted the American society. Americans found themselves in a paradoxical situation between the ideals of the American Dream; liberty, freedom and equality, and the difficulty to apply these ideals in reality.

The First World War greatly affected the American social structure. Women participated in the war and showed their ability of doing jobs that were once exclusively male. This resulted in a shift in the gender and role identities in the American society. In each society males and females have different roles to play. Gender identity is defined as "the degree to which people see themselves as masculine or feminine given what it means to be a man or woman in society."<sup>4</sup> These roles are part of the individual's identity. Modern psychologists proved that gender role identity is socially constructed and not biologically determined. In America, traditionally women were confined to domestic works whereas men were supposed to work outside the house. In the 1920's, gender roles underwent a

---

<sup>1</sup>Campbell, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

<sup>2</sup>Carlisle, op. cit., p. XI.

<sup>3</sup>Zunz, Olivier, *Why the American Century?* USA: University of Chicago Press, 1998. p.116.

<sup>4</sup>Stets, Jan E. and Peter J. Burke. "Femininity/Masculinity" *Encyclopedia of Sociology, Revised Edition*. New York: Macmillan. Available on <http://wat2146.ucr.edu/Papers/00b.pdf> .p. 1.



remarkable change. White women were granted the right to vote in all the American states. This was not accepted by most Americans from both sexes and "believed that suffrage would undermine family values by inviting the filthy world of politics into the home."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, women held positions and jobs that were once confined to men. This led women to feel, at least financially, independent from men as Whitefield put it "the woman of the 1920's was more independent than her mother's generation, less reliant on men, and less willing to follow social rules. She rejected domesticity and demanded the same rights as men."<sup>2</sup>

Women tried continuously to break the shackles imposed on them by society. This feeling of independence was not personified only in holding positions outside home but rather leading a freer and more independent life. This period witnessed the appearance<sup>1</sup> of a sort of women who were called "flappers". The latter tried to shake free of all the traditional manners. This equality seemed to be even in clothing and hair-cut. It became difficult to tell the boy from the girl. This merger in role and gender identities that was taking place has always been a subject of debate in modern literature. Moreover, most women held full time jobs and found it difficult to manage between the career and the domestic work that was supposed to be their responsibility.

Most of the American writers of the period that followed the First World War immigrated to Europe and participated in the war. This experience had a great influence on the writers' lives and consequently their works. This generation of writers were called by Gertrude Stein 'the lost generation' because they lost faith in the traditional ways of life and in the innocence that characterised the preceding generations. As Kazin described them:

*The war had dislodged them from their homes and their old restraints, given them an expected and disillusioning education, and left them entirely rootless.....the generation that had been uprooted and betrayed, a generation cast, as one*

---

<sup>1</sup>Whitfield, Stephen J. *A Companion to 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*. USA: Blackwell, 2007. p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

*of them wrote, "into the dark maw of violence."  
Life began with war for them and would forever  
after be shadowed by violence and death.<sup>1</sup>*

Having lost faith in their past, the lost generation writers found themselves in a ceaseless journey in search of meaning in life and "their detachment from the native tradition...became their own first tradition."<sup>2</sup> In the twenties, the American society witnessed the emergence of a distinct youth culture. Young Americans adopted new ways of life at all levels and revolted against the already established traditions. The family was no longer the source of morals and value. Carlisle claimed that "Teens and young adults no longer looked primarily to their families for their sense of identity, but instead to their peers."<sup>3</sup> Children were employed at an early age and earned money, the thing that, in most cases, had negative effects on their moral behaviour.

The shift in space VS time caused by modernity has greatly affected people's lives. The existence of washing machines, automobiles and phones helped people to do much work in shorter time, the thing that gave people some extra time for leisure. These unprecedented changes in the American society provided food for thought for many of the American writers of the period. F. Scott Fitzgerald was called the historian or the spokesman of the lost generation. A close study of his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* can reveal much about identity in the America society in the period.

Fitzgerald was born on September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1896 to Edward Fitzgerald and Mary McQuillan in St. Paul, Minnesota. Fitzgerald's two elder sisters died. He remained the only child until the birth of his younger sister Annabel who was born in 1901. Being the only boy, Fitzgerald received an excessive care form his mother. Since his childhood, Fitzgerald failed to socialise with people. He spent his childhood trying

---

<sup>1</sup>Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Ground: An interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Anchor Books, 1956. p. 240.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>3</sup>Carlisle, op. cit., p. 21.

to make himself popular in any possible way. The difficulties that his family was, then, enduring made him shameful and embarrassed in front of his wealthier friends.

In 1908 Fitzgerald's father lost his job and matters went from bad to worse for him. He was then studying at St. Paul Academy. In 1911 he was elected captain of the basketball team. He was feigning intellectual superiority by showing a "familiarity with books he has not read." During his three years at St. Paul Academy Fitzgerald worked for the school Drama Club and Newspaper. In 1909 Fitzgerald published his first story *The Mystery of the Raymond Mortgage*. Failing to get good grades at the St. Paul Academy, Fitzgerald was sent by his parents to study at The Newman School in Hackensack. In Newman, Fitzgerald rose to fame by befriending a brilliant student and a star football player and Fay who was a Catholic priest. The latter had great effect on Fitzgerald's ideas. Fay was "like Scott a spiritual wanderer, always curious and receptive of new ideas."<sup>1</sup> The death of Fitzgerald's Grandmother and the will that she left to the Mollie family had opened new opportunities and made him think of Princeton which was among the most prestigious universities. Fitzgerald did not have enough grades to qualify him to enter Princeton University. At Princeton Fitzgerald associated with some students who had a great impact on his personality to mention.

*Henry Strater, one of the few philosophical radicals on campus, served as a model of integrity and political involvement and John Peale Bishop, the future poet and novelist, Broadened Scott's reading interests and forced him to raise his literary standards. And Edmund "Bunny" Wilson, the erudite son of a Princeton lawyer, assumed his role as Scott's "intellectual conscience" early in their relationship, chastising Scott privately or and publically for his personal faults- including his boastfulness and lack of seriousness- as well as his literary failures.<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup>Tessitore, John, *F. Scott Fitzgerald, the American Dreamer*. USA: Franklin Watts a Division of Scholastic Inc., 2001. p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

At Princeton, Fitzgerald was living among rich people and he was conscious of that. He tried all the possible ways to create the self that would correspond to the situation in which he was living. He outlined a diary to follow in order to reach his dreams. All these things resurfaced in his fiction.

By 1917 Fitzgerald was trained to be a military officer. He wanted to participate in the war not for patriotic reasons but merely for social ones. He tried any way that would bring him social prestige even if it were at the expense of his life. He left Princeton in October 1917 without graduating in pursuit of a better and shorter and more perilous path. For Fitzgerald the danger of the war weighed almost nothing against social prestige. He spent most of his time outlining his future novel. While in the army, he met Zelda in 1918. The War ended before he had the chance to take part in it. In February 1919, he left the army, and tried to start his life afresh. He tried to work hard to gain back Zelda who refused to marry him because he was not rich enough. When Fitzgerald wrote his first novel *This Side of Paradise*, he earned great amount of money. Zelda accepted him as a husband. Fitzgerald and Zelda spent a luxurious life touring around Europe.

Fitzgerald's works were a kind of "spiritual history of the lost generation." He showed the loss of faith in the traditional American ideals. He wrote collections of short stories to mention *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920), *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). *The Great Gatsby* was considered by many critics to be among the best American novels.

*The Great Gatsby* is told in a first person narrator named Nick Carraway. He introduces his cousin Daisy, her husband Tom and Jordan baker. Tom Buchanan lives in the fashionable West Egg, which is situated across the bay from the less fashionable East Egg where Nick lives. Afterwards the novel's main character Jay Gatsby is introduced. He is a wealthy and mysterious man who lives next door to Nick. Tom, Daisy's husband, takes Nick to the city to meet his mistress: Myrtle Wilson. The latter is the wife of George; a working class man who owns an auto garage next to the valley of ashes. Tom visits Myrtle at her house. He makes an

appointment with her seizing the opportunity when George leaves to bring a chair. Myrtle leaves with the first train to New York, pretending that she is going to visit her sister, to meet Tom. In his house, Gatsby holds parties that are attended by many people. People who come to Gatsby's parties do not know one another and rarely meet Gatsby. All this is done in hopes of meeting Daisy if she once enters one of his parties. When Gatsby learns that Nick is a cousin of Daisy's, he invites him to a party. He reveals to Nick that the reason behind his invitation to the party is to tell him that he loved Daisy before going to the war though she is married to Tom but he still wants her back. Nick is supposed to arrange the meeting, and so he does.

Gatsby and Daisy meet and start arguing about the possibility of reviving their thwarted love. Later, Tom knows about what was going on between Daisy and Gatsby. Tom reveals Gatsby's past. He says that he grew up in a poor uneducated family, and would in all likelihood have stayed that way had he not met the wealthy and the elderly Dan Cody who took him as a companion and taught him what he needed to know.

The story reaches the climax when Daisy, Tom and Gatsby meet. Daisy is torn between her lover and her husband but she cannot leave Tom. On the way back to Long Island, Myrtle, George's wife is struck and killed by Gatsby's car. The car was driven by Daisy but Gatsby pays the price. Tom makes George believe that it was Gatsby who killed Myrtle. George kills Gatsby and takes his own life. Tom and Daisy take off, and let other people clean the mess they made. Nick is the only one left to take care of Gatsby's funeral. None attends Gatsby's funeral except for a peculiar former guest.

When it was first published in 1925, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* did not attract the attention of critics. In fact, Fitzgerald's works did not gain popularity when they were published in the 1920's and the 1930's. This was due to the literary criticism that was then in vogue. During Fitzgerald's lifetime, critics concentrated on the writer's personality rather than on the work as the main criterion of their criticism. They always considered Fitzgerald as an immature writer and consequently his

works were also considered as immature. Fitzgerald was also "frequently criticized during his lifetime for writing about unreal characters or unbelievable situations."<sup>1</sup> Within the two decades that followed Fitzgerald's death, criticism concentrated on the form of the text and fished it out of its historical and social context. Fitzgerald's works had little to offer in this sense as well. By the advent of New Criticism which took the historical and social context of the literary text as the source of extracting the meaning of the text, critics found that the works of Fitzgerald were among the most expressive and detailed works that could really give vivid images about life in America in 1920's and 1930's. Fitzgerald was, consequently, called the historian of the Jazz age.

Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* was unsuccessful in terms of readership and sales when it was first published in 1925 despite the fact that it was positively received by many critics. *The Great Gatsby* has been considered by many critics as Fitzgerald's masterpiece. Few articles were written about *The Great Gatsby* since its publication in 1925 up to 1945 after Fitzgerald's death. It was in the 1940's and 1950's that critics became more interested in Fitzgerald's works mainly *The Great Gatsby*. The views of critics about *The Great Gatsby* diverged between appraisal and disapproval. Gilbert Seldes announced that "Fitzgerald has more than matured; he has mastered his talent and gone soaring in a beautiful flight, leaving behind him everything dubious and tricky in his earlier work, and leaving even farther behind all men of his generation and most of his elders."<sup>2</sup> Unlike Seldes, the Critic H. L. Mencken, who did not consider the novel as great, stated:

*the story is obviously unimportant,...it is not to be put on the same shelf with, say, This Side of Paradise. What ails it fundamentally is the plain fact that it is simply a story- that Fitzgerald seems far more interested in maintaining its suspense than in getting under the skin of its people. It is*

---

<sup>1</sup>Tanselle, G. Thomas and Jackson R. Bryer. "Consider Fitzgerald's Early Reputation". *Bloom's Guides: F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2006. p.76.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew, J. Bruccoli. (ed) *New Essays on The Great Gatsby*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. p.2.

*not that they are false; is that are taken too much for granted. Only Gatsby himself genuinely lives and breathes. The rest are marionettes – sometimes astonishingly life like, but nevertheless not quite alive. What gives the story distinction is something quite different from the management of the action or the handling of the characters; it is the charm and beauty of writing.*<sup>1</sup>

*The Great Gatsby* was received positively by most writers of Fitzgerald's generation. T. S. Eliot claimed that *The Great Gatsby* seemed to him "to be the first step that fiction has taken since Henry James."<sup>2</sup> Bunny Wilson told Fitzgerald, it was "the best thing you have done- the best planned the best sustained the best written." In the last few decades critical interests grew remarkably in Fitzgerald's works. *The Great Gatsby* was considered as a successful step that Fitzgerald made. In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald used the resources of style to convey the meanings. The novel has also been praised for its structure and how the latter contributes to the story of Gatsby. It keeps the reader following facts about Gatsby and he is not given the whole image until almost the end of the story. Bruccoli stated that "The greatest advance of *The Great Gatsby* over his previous novels is structural. Fitzgerald's narrative control solved the problem of making the mysterious—almost preposterous— Jay Gatsby convincing by letting the truth about him emerge gradually during the course of the novel."<sup>3</sup>

*The Great Gatsby* was published in a time when the social and psychological sciences were not well developed. That's why it remained among the most important novels in the American literature. W. Aldridge claimed that the novel "represent[ed] one of the last attempts made by an American writer to come directly at the reality of the modern American experience while its outlines were still visible and before the social sciences convinced us that they could do the job and do it better"<sup>4</sup>, and it is

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Tessitore, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Bruccoli, Matthew J. "Looks at Fitzgerald's Maturation as Reflected in the Novel". *Bloom's Guides: F. Scott Fitzgerald's the Great Gatsby*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2006, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup>Aldridge, John W. "The Life of Gatsby". *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2006. p.44.



one of the few novels that "we are still able to read with any kind of enduring pleasure"<sup>1</sup> He adds that *The Great Gatsby*

*is a fragile novel, to be sure, in some ways imperfect, in some ways deeply unsatisfactory, but it is clearly alive because produced by a directly experiencing, living imagination, one that habitually and with great innocence so perfectly confused its own longings, fears, defeats, and chimeras with those of a certain portion of American society.*<sup>2</sup>

*The Great Gatsby* has become among the most widely read texts in modern American literature. In the 1990's and 2000's, Fitzgerald's works have gained more critical interests than ever before. In hindsight, Fitzgerald was considered the spokesman and the historian of the Jazz Age. He gives vivid images of the material and spiritual lives of men and women of his generation. This novel has become among the American classics even though it was not considered a literary work that deserved attention when it was first published. To borrow Tanselle's words "It is the success story of how "an inferior work" with an "absurd" an "obviously unimportant" plot became a book that "will be read as long as English literature is read anywhere."<sup>3</sup>

*The Great Gatsby* marked a dramatic turn in Fitzgerald's literary career. He used the technique of the engaged narrator, in which the narrator is not only reporting the events but is also taking part in them. Despite the fact that the story is Gatsby's it is told by Nick Carraway. The latter was dubbed by critics as an "unreliable narrator" because as it is stated in the novel that he has the tendency to "reserve all judgements"<sup>4</sup> This provides more space for the reader to participate in judging the events of the novel. The novel contains characters from different classes and races of the American society.

---

<sup>1</sup>Aldridge, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>Tanselle, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>4</sup>Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. England: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 7.



Nick Caraway is the narrator of the story. He is a Midwesterner. He is a distant cousin of Daisy's. He moves to the West to study bond business and coincidentally finds himself a neighbour of Gatsby's. Nick is present in almost all the scenes of the novel and it is through his eyes that the events are reported to reader. Even though he said he "reserves judgements", judgements leak out through his language. Nick becomes a close friend of Gatsby's and plays the role of arranging the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy who lost sight of one another for five years. He is the only one who attends Gatsby's funeral and wants to save Gatsby's reputation by erasing an 'obscene' word that was scratched on a wall in Gatsby's mansion.

Daisy Buchanan is Nick's distant cousin. She is married to Tom Buchanan. She is described variously as a socially adept but cynical woman, a smart but typical flapper, a girl with "a voice full of money." Jay Gatsby meets her once and begins a romance, but the romance ebbs and Daisy marries Tom Buchanan. With Nick's help, she meets Gatsby again. She finds herself torn between her past romance with Gatsby and her present as the wife of Tom. She tells Gatsby that she cannot repeat the past, while he believes that the past can be repeated. Daisy is involved in killing her husband's mistress Myrtle.

Tom Buchanan is Daisy's husband. Tom is described as cold, forceful, arrogant and affluent. Tom represents the Nordic race and considers it the dominant race in America. He is afraid of the submergence of the white race through miscegenation. Tom is an epitome of manhood in the novel. He is successful early in his life to the point that all what comes after is an anti-climax. He has an extra-marital relation with Myrtle Wilson; the wife of George. She has an affair with Tom Buchanan. Ultimately, she is killed when Daisy, while driving Jay Gatsby's car, accidentally hits her in the valley of ashes.

George is Myrtle's husband. He owns a garage that is located near to "valley of ashes" between Manhattan and the fashionable communities of East and West Egg.

George is an honest or a somewhat naïve man. He seems to be under the control of his wife, out of fear or out of utmost respect. He is described by Tom as being "dumb" and that "he does not know he is alive." Because he thinks that his wife goes to visit her sister while she goes to see Tom.

Jordan Baker is a golf-pro who attends Gatsby's parties and meets Nick at the Buchanans' house, early in the novel. While living largely at the expense of the Buchanans, Jordan is frequently Nick's guide through the labyrinths of the excesses that characterize Gatsby's parties, and asks Nick to arrange for Gatsby to surprise Daisy. Jordan and Nick pursue a brief love affair. She is described as "balancing girl" and that she was "completely stationary"

Jay Gatsby is the assumed name of the young affluent who owns an elaborate mansion on West Egg, next to which Nick Carraway lives. Gatsby throws elaborate parties which are held solely to attract Daisy Buchanan to attend them. Gatsby's hope is to rekindle a long lost romance with Daisy. Gatsby, as described by Nick, has so little to say. Throughout the novel he is only showing things and trying to appear a particular way. He claims that he inherited his money and that he is an Oxford man but in fact his money is gathered in unscrupulous ways.

The characters of *The Great Gatsby* and the way that they are related to one another clearly reveals the complexity of the question of identity in the modern life and the troubles that arise from the moral dissolution and loss of rules or rather universal and unified rules that govern these relations. The story ends by the death of Myrtle, Gatsby and George taking his own life. Gatsby's belief in the achievement of his dream through the material gains was the case for almost all Americans, if not for America as a whole.

## **B- Gatsby and the American Identity:**

Because of the mosaic structure the American society, the American national identity has always been under debate especially in the nineteen twenties. This was

due to the great waves of immigrants that America received in this period. The distinction between those who considered themselves natives and the newcomers became clear. Scott Fitzgerald in his novel *The Great Gatsby* sheds light in the question of American national identity. By a close study of the novel's main character Gatsby one can find out many of the characteristics and paradoxes of the American national identity in the nineteen twenties.

There is good reason to believe that Gatsby "comes inevitably to stand for America itself."<sup>1</sup> He randomly throws wild parties. Those parties are attended by different people who do not know one another and do not know who exactly Gatsby is but they know him only through rumours. Nick stresses the mysteriousness of Gatsby's identity when he says "only Gatsby the man who gives his name to this book."<sup>2</sup> This also happens when he wants to speak about Gatsby's mansion. The expression: "it was Gatsby's mansion"<sup>3</sup> would have sufficed if Nick takes Gatsby's identity for granted but he puts in another way by saying "it was a mansion inhabited by a gentleman of that name."<sup>4</sup> By so doing, Fitzgerald invites the reader's attention to Gatsby's identity and does not want him/her to take Gatsby's identity for granted. Fitzgerald's description of Gatsby can stand for many of the characteristics of the American identity. Campbell affirmed that "Nick Carraway's story of Jay Gatsby can uncover much about the contradictions of identity and how these are central to any conception of 'America'. In the same way that Nick constructs a history of Gatsby through telling his narrative, so too America has been invented and reinvented by each generation."<sup>5</sup>

The way in which Gatsby is represented in the novel gives the impression that he represents, to some extent, the way in which America was viewed in the 1920's. Gatsby's story is a story of identity. The structure of the story contributes to the mysteriousness of Gatsby's identity. It is not until he faces his fate that Gatsby's true

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara, Will. "The Great Gatsby and the Obscene Word" *College Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Fall, 2005), p.125.

<sup>2</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>Campbell, op. cit., p. 23.

identity is revealed. Has the identity of Gatsby been revealed from the beginning of the story, all what Gatsby does will be meaningless since the reader knows Gatsby. Gatsby's identity is hidden from both the readers and the characters of the story. This would give the reader the chance to shape his own views of the Gatsby's identity.

One of the main characteristics of the American identity is the assumption that America is a nation that is connected to the future and tends to break from the past. This break was made not only at the cultural, social, moral but also at the spatial level. This can be clearly seen in the novel's main character Gatsby who broke with everything that would connect him with his past and tried to assume a new identity that "sprang from his platonic conception of himself."<sup>1</sup> Gatsby changes his name and disowns his real parents and creates his own history and his own past. He moves to live in another place. This seems to be one of the characteristics of the American identity as Bloom put it.

*It is reasonable to assert that Jay Gatsby was the major literary character of the United States in the twentieth century. No single figure created by Faulkner or Hemingway...was as a central presence in [the American] national mythology as was Gatsby. There are few Americans, of whatever gender, race, ethnic origin, or social class, who do not have at least a little touch of Gatsby in them.<sup>2</sup>*

In the novel it is only Nick's story of Gatsby that readers are allowed to trust. Nick considers himself "one of the few honest people [he] ever known"<sup>3</sup> this honesty entails the truth, or rather the objectivity, of the story of Gatsby he is telling and the other rumours which may be, in fact, a part of the truth would be regarded as dishonest. Gatsby's dark side is always presented in a dubious way and taken from unreliable sources, for example "somebody told me they thought he killed a man

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p.94.

<sup>2</sup>Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Chelsea House, 2006. p.233.

<sup>3</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 59.

once."<sup>1</sup> The use of these words such as "somebody" and "they thought" proves the unreliability of these rumours and therefore they are not supposed to be a part of the truth. Moreover, in the end of the novel, after Gatsby's death, Nick finds an obscene word written on the wall of Gatsby's mansion and he erases it. This means that Nick does not want other voices to take part in the story of Gatsby. The Americans found it difficult to steer the nation back to the pre-war traditions, and so did Gatsby. He met Daisy while he was in the Army and lost sight of her for five years. This can stand for the fact that America lost sight of its traditional ways for five years of the war and it impossible for her to repeat the past.

### **C- Identity in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:**

Before speaking about identity in *The Great Gatsby*, let's try to mention some important concepts to the understanding of the quest for identity. The American psychologist Erikson spoke about an identity Crisis (1956). This identity crisis has to be solved either through the achievement of "ego identity [which is] based on a sense of personal continuity with the past and future."<sup>2</sup> In case when the continuity between the past and the future does not occur, the person would be in an identity diffusion state in which "commitments to both the past and the future are vague or non-existent."<sup>3</sup> The quest for identity mostly happens after a crisis of identity. The title of the novel *The Great Gatsby* provokes questions about Gatsby's identity. As Thomas Stavola claimed:

*Erik Erikson's psychoanalytic theories, rooted in the belief that personal growth and communal culture are inseparable, have seemed to offer a uniquely appropriate means for examining the American identity crisis of Scott Fitzgerald and*

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Argyle, Michael. *Social Encounters: Readings in social Interaction*. USA: Penguin Books, 1973. p. 340.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 340.

*those of the major male characters in his four completed novels.<sup>1</sup>*

In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald gives interesting insights into the question of identity. Earlier in the novel the narrator says that "conduct can be founded on the hard rock or on the wet marshes."<sup>2</sup> Conduct is the outward projection or the practical side of an identity "just as sign on a road way signifies the presence of a nearby town."<sup>3</sup> From the beginning of the novel the narrator feels the need for a basis for conduct. The meaning of one's behaviour springs, in fact, from a solid identity "the rock" which is the opposite of the "wet marshes" which signifies the loss of a strong basis for one's conduct and therefore his/her identity. Anne Bradstreet used the word 'rock' to refer to the solid basis of one's identity when she told her children that "it is upon this rock Christ Jesus' that she built her faith."<sup>4</sup>

One of the main characteristics of modernity is that it attacked the once unquestionable religious beliefs and myths, the thing that shook "the rock" that was the basis of people's identity. In the modern era, people thought that through the logical use of their minds they can achieve a stable identity. Nick or rather Fitzgerald says that "the rock of the world was securely founded on a fairy's wing." This shows the loss of the strong basis on which faith, or rather identity was based. Even "the rock" he mentioned earlier on which conduct can be founded is not really a rock but it is rather placed on a "wing" which means that it is not stable. Consequently, the things that we once took for granted as common sense are no more a solid basis on which identity is founded and from which all judgements on our conduct stem.

*The Great Gatsby* has always been considered as a criticism of the American Dream. Fitzgerald himself has been called the American Dreamer. The American

---

<sup>1</sup>Stavola, Thomas J. *Scott Fitzgerald: Crisis in American Identity*. London: Vision Press, 1979. p.176. quoted in, Stanelly, Linda C. *The Foreign Critical Reputation of F Scott Fitzgerald 1980 to 2000: An Analyses and Annotated Bibliography*. USA: Green Wood Publishing, 2004. p.7.

<sup>2</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup>O'Donnell, Patrick. *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980*. USA: Wiley black well, 2010.p.80.

<sup>4</sup>Baym, op. cit., p. 11.

Dream was based on the ideals of endless progress, self-creation, achievement and success. These ideals were not sought out of the context of race, class and pedigree. This is what one can see in the case of Gatsby. He made money, but could not be considered as an equal or qualified to marry Daisy. This means that the American Dream is not merely a running behind material gains but there is also an identity quest behind this material gain. Campbell claimed that:

*The novel concerns itself with issues of identity and in particular with the temptation to believe in a 'dream' which is manifested in Gatsby's yearning for Daisy Buchanan, a woman he almost married in the past, who encompasses 'the endless desire to return to "lost origins", to be once again with the mother, to go back to the beginning', and yet proves to be beyond his reach and unattainable as all such dreams are.*<sup>1</sup>

The question of identity has been studied in *The Great Gatsby* up to the recent years. As Schreier puts it "few books have suffered Americanism's presumptions as has *The Great Gatsby*."<sup>2</sup> Most critics agreed on the fact that the theme of identity is one of the central themes of *The Great Gatsby*, but whether the novel offers "a straightforward description of something called "America", "American" identity"<sup>3</sup> or "raced American identities"<sup>4</sup> remains a matter of debate. Those who adopted the second view, to mention: Michaels, Goldsmith, Thampson, Washington and Neis, believed that "practices and signs bear racial meaning" and that Fitzgerald did not take for granted the "American" identity. Moreover they considered the unraced view of the American identity as "universalised", "imperial" and "surreptitiously white"<sup>5</sup>

In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald does not seem to have taken the American identity for granted. Fitzgerald paid much attention to showing the racial and ethnic

---

<sup>1</sup> Campbell, op. cit., p.23.

<sup>2</sup>Schreier, Benjamin. "Desire's second act: 'race' and *The Great Gatsby*'s cynical Americanism." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.2 (2007):. *Literature Resource Center*.Web. 4 July 2012. p.153.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

differences in the American society but this was not always done in a direct way. By concealing Gatsby's identity till the end of the story Fitzgerald stirs the reader's curiosity about Gatsby's identity throughout the progress of the story. Gatsby is in a state where he lost his past and running behind an unknown future.

### **D- Identity between Past and Future:**

Time is an important factor in the definition of identity. Individuals are always in a continuous struggle trying to reach a common ground between their past principles and views and the extent to which these principles can be of benefit to their present and provide good prospects for their future. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato and Plotinus defined the self as "the timeless centre of consciousness that sums up within itself the *past* that it has already....and pregnant with the *future* that it will...create"<sup>1</sup> It is the difficulty to arrive at a reconciliation between the past events and the future expectations that troubles the identity of the main characters in *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's interest in the theme of past and future and how they affect the individual's identity is clearly stated in his essay *Crack Up* 1940 when he said that "I must hold in balance of the futility of the effort and the sense of the necessity of struggle; conviction of the inevitability of failure and the still the determination to "succeed" and more than these the contradiction between the dead hand of the *past* and the high intentions of the *future*."<sup>2</sup>

*The Great Gatsby* is a "time-haunted"<sup>3</sup> novel. The first verb of the story is conjugated in the past tense; "in my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice" and the last word in the novel is the word "past." The past is the moving force of many of the scenes of the novel. One may say that the whole story is a story about the past because the story of Gatsby is all about a love story that happened in the past and was for some reason thwarted and Gatsby is trying to

---

<sup>1</sup>Barber, Kenneth F. *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy : Descart to Kant*. USA: New York University Press, 1994. p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Curnutt, Kirk. *The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 55.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew, op. cit., p. 11.



renew it, the fact that leads him in the end to his fate. Throughout the novel there are gossips and discussions about Gatsby's past. Gatsby is making all his effort in order to hide or conceal his true past identity as Jimmy Gatz. Campbell remarked that:

*This tension between stasis and the future is part of the web of contradictions and conflicts that fills the novel (The Great Gatsby) and suggests an American identity wrestling with diversity and unity, assimilation and separation, individualism and community, roots and routes just as the self-made man 'Gatsby' himself is simultaneously of the West and East of the Old World and New.<sup>1</sup>*

Gatsby did anything in order to erase his past and build a new one "that sprung from the platonic conception of himself"<sup>2</sup> Gatsby found that his past is a barrier that hampered him from achieving the future he dreamt of. Therefore, the shortest way to do so is to forget his past and create a new one that would meet his expectations and suit the new identity 'Jay Gatsby' that he created. Gatsby's identity is merely a continuous denial of his true past identity. By so doing Gatsby thought that he would achieve his dream of happiness. The problem is that the optimism with which Gatsby views life and the American Dream ideal no more works in his present. Nevertheless, Gatsby still holds the traditional American belief that he can achieve his dreams through hard work.

Gatsby passes through a crisis of identity which lies in his denial of his past. The latter is an important factor in forming a stable identity, as Berman puts it "the present needs to attain its significance through connection to both past and future."<sup>3</sup> Many times Gatsby himself verges on contradicting the story he himself created and therefore jeopardizing his newly formed identity. This is also the case for America as a whole. He once told Nick that "it took [him] only three years to collect the money that bought [the mansion]"<sup>4</sup> in which he was living. Nick reminds him that he

---

<sup>1</sup>Campbell, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>3</sup>Berman, Ronald. *Fitzgerald-Wilson-Hemingway: language and Experience*. USA: University of Alabama Press, 2003.p.34.

<sup>4</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 87.

said that he inherited the money. Gatsby evades this contradiction by saying, hesitatingly as the dash shows, that he "lost most of it in the big panic-panic of war"<sup>1</sup> Gatsby is in a continuous struggle trying to keep his story consistent, otherwise he will face troubles in his future.

Gatsby's decline began when people started to know about his true past identity. The people who attended his parties were behind the deformation of Gatsby's present identity through unravelling his true past identity. Nick says that "Gatsby's notoriety spread about by hundreds who accepted his hospitality and so become authorities over his past."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the discussion that went on between Tom, Baker and Nick in Gatsby's car Tom says that he "had been making a small investigation of his past"<sup>3</sup> and tries to refute Gatsby's claims about his past and therefore all the glory that Gatsby built would collapse. Tom believes that no matter how great Gatsby's success will be in the future, he would still be judged by his past when he says "However glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the novel Gatsby finds himself in situations where he thinks of the past and wishes only if the events have taken another direction. Daisy is also torn between her love to her husband Tom and her past love for Gatsby but she says that she "can't help what is past."<sup>5</sup> Gatsby, on the contrary, believes in the possibility of repeating the past and tries to find out what problem is and solve it.

*He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was...<sup>6</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.87.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.94.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.116.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.106.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.106.

The nativists, like Tom, believed that identity was determined by the past and that it was based on the racial past of the person and cannot be clung solely to future without being based on the past. The person's identity is not defined through his economic or material achievements but rather through his past. On the contrary, the modernists, like Gatsby, believe that identity can be created out of one's personal imagination.

### **E- Identity and Materialism:**

Materialism is an ancient doctrine. People believed only in what they could see and touch and did not believe in the existence of abstract things. "It is only much later, after an effort of refined thought, that we come to recognise an existence in everything that can be perceived in any way whatever, even in an idea."<sup>1</sup> Though under knew disguises this doctrine still lingers. Due to the material and technological development that America and the world witnessed by the end of the World War I, people's views of life as well have taken a material direction. The modern person believes more in the visible tangible things than in the abstract spiritual ones. People started to identify themselves on the bases of what they own. This theme has been tackled by many of the American writers and intellectuals of the period. Fitzgerald, in his novel *The Great Gatsby* is very much alert to the materialistic view of the American society in the 1920's and how it affected people's views of themselves and of the world around them.

Fitzgerald uses language in a way that attracts the reader's attention to show the materialistic nature of the characters' views of their identity and their shallowness. Nick describes Gatsby as "simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door"<sup>2</sup> because he has spoken with him for a long time and found out that "he had little to say."<sup>3</sup> Having little to say is the sign of shallowness, lack of interests and even emptiness of the soul. The materialistic sense of Gatsby's identity is seen as

---

<sup>1</sup>Binet, Alfred. *The mind and the Brain*. London,1907. p.202.

<sup>2</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

well when he invites Daisy to his mansion. He has nothing to tell her but only to show her the things he owns; that is what he is. Fitzgerald gives a detailed list of Gatsby's clothes to show the importance that people like Gatsby attribute to this matter and the way people like Daisy perceive it. Gatsby, in the absence of true identity based on his true past, tries to compensate for that through the things he owns:

*He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher — shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, and monograms of Indian blue.<sup>1</sup>*

Moreover, when speaking about Tom Buchanan, Nick ironically dubs Tom's accomplishments as being merely physical when he says "in addition to other physical accomplishments, [he] had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven"<sup>2</sup> Construing Tom's accomplishments as being merely physical means that Tom does not have any spiritual or emotional accomplishments beside the physical ones. Even when speaking about him he did not speak about his manners or emotions but simply about his appearance. Fitzgerald intentionally repeats the word body "powerful body", "cruel body" and did not attribute these traits to Tom himself as a person.

*he was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of*

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

*that body — he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage — a cruel body.*<sup>1</sup>

Tom's materialistic or rather bodily view of identity can be seen in the scene where Daisy described him as "...a brute...a great, big, hulking physical specimen of a-"<sup>2</sup> He kept silent about being 'brute, great and big.' These traits may describe his inward self but he "[hates] that word hulking...even in kidding"<sup>3</sup> the word hulking describes only the physical appearance and no more but Tom hates that more than any of the traits to the point that he interrupted Daisy as the dash in the text shows.

The materialistic view of identity did not only rest in the material level such as the body and the things that one owns but it expanded to conquer the mental and emotional sphere under the name of behaviourism. Behaviourists worked in laboratories on animals and then tried to apply those findings to men on the basis of stimulus/response. They purged their vocabulary of what they called subjective terms such as "sensation", "perception", "memory", "consciousness", "imagery."<sup>4</sup> Even love that is supposed to be an emotion, for behaviourists can be quantified and measured. That was what the most prominent figure in the twentieth century applied psychology John. B. Watson did. In 1920 after being expelled from Johns Hopkins University for an extramarital affair, "[he] measured his heart beat to assess the intensity of his love for the young undergraduate that was to become his second wife."<sup>5</sup> They believed that real data is only the things that can be observed. They also believe that human instincts can be controlled and adjusted to arrive at the desired results.

Being a contemporary of these scientists, Fitzgerald might be influenced by these findings. In *The Great Gatsby*, most of the characters seem to behave on this

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.17.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.17.

<sup>4</sup>Zunz, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

behavioural basis. Gatsby seems to act in a mechanical way void of emotions. His main aim from what he does is extract recognition from the others especially Daisy. Nick described Gatsby's personality as "an unbroken series of successful gestures."<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald's language reveals much about the presentational and mechanical or (I may say) behavioural view of identity that is void of emotion. Nick described Daisy and Baker as "The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon"<sup>2</sup>, Baker "was completely motionless"<sup>3</sup> and when Tom shut the windows "the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, when Nick describes the lawn he says "The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens — finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run."<sup>5</sup> One can also see this when Nick describes motor road and the railroad he says "the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land."<sup>6</sup> If one compares the language Fitzgerald used to describe Daisy and Baker with the language he used to describe the lawn one would feel that the lawn is 'more alive' than Baker and Daisy. The lawn 'started', 'ran', 'jump', 'reached', if one replaces the lawn with a name of a person the meaning would not have changed, whereas Baker and Daisy 'buoyed' on the couch and 'ballooned' slowly to the floor just like objects. Fitzgerald had used language in a very impressive way to speak about the materialism that conquered the American modern society at all levels. People's identity is no more based on who they are but rather is based on what they have in terms of material gains. This materialism has affected the once stable gender roles and families.

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

## F- Gender Identity:

In the 1920's, America witnessed an unprecedented shift in gender roles or rather gender identity. A distinction has to be made between sex and gender. The former refers to the biological differences that exist between males and females, whereas the latter refers to the roles assigned to each of them in different cultural or social contexts. In this period women held positions that were at a given time of the prerogatives of men. They were given the right to vote. The domestic roles were no more the only role played by women in society as was the case in the Victorian traditional society. These changes attracted the interests of many of the intellectuals and authors and novelists in the period and Fitzgerald was no exception. In his novel *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald paid much attention to this theme. Fitzgerald himself considered *The Great Gatsby* as "purely masculine book."<sup>1</sup> Wrein, one of the critics who discussed the question of gender identity in the *The Great Gatsby*, stated that:

*The Great Gatsby was written as a result of Fitzgerald's personal experiences in the 1920s and as a response to the issues of the time, among them the way women were perceived. Though women play a big role in his novel Fitzgerald only gives them secondary roles in the story, which keeps with the traditional view that women do not have a voice. Though these women have tremendous effects on men, which are often detrimental, they are portrayed as what Marsden has called "mere complements" to the men.*<sup>2</sup>

Earlier in the novel, when Nick visits the house of the Buchanans, Daisy tells him about the birth of her daughter. She says "let me tell you what I said when she was born?" Nick answers that he would "very much" like to hear. She says that as soon as she woke up she "asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl." Fitzgerald's use of the word "right away" shows the emergency of the matter. When Daisy was

---

<sup>1</sup>Kurnutt, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>Wrein, Heike, "The Women in Modernism" available on [www.uscupstate.edu/uploadedFiles/academics/artssciences/Language\\_and\\_Literature/ELFVol2wrenn.pdf2/213](http://www.uscupstate.edu/uploadedFiles/academics/artssciences/Language_and_Literature/ELFVol2wrenn.pdf2/213). p. 12.

told that it was a girl she "turned [her] head away and wept."<sup>1</sup> Daisy's crying can be taken as a sign of her dissatisfaction with women's situation in that period. This shows up when she says she "hopes that she will be fool- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world."<sup>2</sup> Daisy's generalisation conveys her dissatisfaction with women's status.

Tom is portrayed from the beginning of the novel as an "archetypal male figure"<sup>3</sup>, a "modern prototype of the ancient patriarch presiding over his family and property, a cruel body disguised under a thin veneer of wealth and civilization."<sup>4</sup> Tom's masculinity is stressed by Nick when he says that "not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the power of that body."<sup>5</sup>, "stronger and more of a man than you are."<sup>6</sup> Tom is married to Daisy and has got an extramarital relationship with Myrtle. Daisy knows that but has nothing to do because Tom is the man and he is in control. On the contrary, he almost broke Myrtle's nose simply because she mentioned his wife's name "Daisy". This shows that Tom does not want these two identities to merge; wife and mistress.

*Tom Buchanan's control over Daisy and Myrtle allows Fitzgerald to express the gender relations of a traditional patriarchal social system by which men define the female identity according to the needs of the male ego. Because this fragile structure of Tom's world depends upon female passivity, it cannot sustain any deviation from these roles in which women assert their agency and reclaim power over their identities.<sup>7</sup>*

Fitzgerald makes it clear that most of the troubles come from families in which husbands have no control on their wives. George has no control over his wife

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Klassen, Bethany. "Under Control: Patriarchal Gender Construction in *The Great Gatsby*", Universal Journal - www.AYJW.org Parrot Forum Parrot Trick Training Parrot Wizard Store Truman Show

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp.12-13.

<sup>7</sup>Klassen, op. cit., p. 1.



Myrtle. On the contrary she seems to be in control. When Tom and Nick come to see Myrtle under the veneer that they would like to see the car that Tom left in the garage of George, Myrtle passes her husband "as if he were a ghost"<sup>1</sup> and shakes hands with Tom and Nick. Moreover, she gives orders to her husband in an impolite way and without turning around when she said to him "get some chairs, why don't you so somebody can sit down."<sup>2</sup> George agreed "hurriedly."<sup>3</sup> Tom seizes this opportunity and makes an appointment with Myrtle. Tom describes George as being "so dumb, he doesn't know he is alive."<sup>4</sup> Because he thinks that his wife goes to New York to see her sister. If George controlled his wife she would not have had the opportunity to have the appointment with Tom and she would not have been killed by Daisy.

Fitzgerald hints at the collapse of the family ties especially those between wife and husband. There are so many scenes in the novel where there are struggles between wives and their husbands especially in Gatsby's parties. When Nick describes the lady that was singing and she "had decided, ineptly, that everything was very, very sad — she was not only singing, she was weeping too."<sup>5</sup> This shows that Nick did not understand the sadness that the women showed until the young girl explained that "she had a fight with a man who says he's her husband."<sup>6</sup> As stated earlier much of the themes of Fitzgerald's novel are implied in the use of language. It is clear that the husband is a man, but more than once, the husband is not referred to directly as husband but rather as "a man who says he's her husband"<sup>7</sup>, "with men said to be their husbands."<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald's insistence on using the word man to speak about the husband makes his interest in the gender identity of the husband. It means that more than being a husband he is a man. This sounds as if Fitzgerald implies that the women are not supposed to fight against her husband and vice versa.

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

In the *Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald shed light on much of the troubles that resulted from the shift in gender identities in the 20's especially as far as wife-husband relations are concerned. This led to the destruction of George's family by the murder of his wife and the loss of Gatsby's life as well as George's by the end of the novel. Moreover, female characters are depicted as having no identity. Their identity is only in men's eyes. They are all represented in terms of physical appearances and beauty. This does not prevent them from being the catalyst of all the catastrophic events in the novel.

### **G- Class and Racial Identity:**

Americans have always wanted to view America as classless society, a melting pot in which all different races melt into one "new man". This was clearly stated in the American Declaration of Independence: "all men are created equal." By the end of the World War I, America witnessed unprecedented race riots mainly by African Americans. The other races that made part of the American society did not want to deny their identity and integrate into the American white protestant society nor did the white protestant majority want to consider the other races as their equals. Moreover, the American society witnessed an active class mobility that resulted from the accelerating wealth that followed World War I. F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* has included discourses that hint at the debate that was then going on between nativists who wanted a dominant white protestant race and modernists who wanted multi-raced American identity.

In *The Great Gatsby* there are characters from different classes and races; George Wilson and his wife Myrtle from the working class, Nick from the middle class, Daisy and Tom from the upper class. Gatsby is said to have working class origins. Gatsby is the one in the novel who would like to climb the social ladder. Fitzgerald used many physiological and linguistic features in the novel to stress the class and racial differences among the characters. Wolfshiem is all the time referred to through the size of his nose. Nick described him as "a small flat-nosed Jew"<sup>1</sup>,

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 68.

"covered Gatsby with his expressive nose"<sup>1</sup> "wolfshiem's nose flashed at me indignantly"<sup>2</sup>, "his tragic nose was trembling."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Wolfshiem was also represented through his foreign accent in pronouncing the words "gonnegtion"<sup>4</sup>, "Ogsford"<sup>5</sup>. Nick, or rather Fitzgerald, shows this irony as well when referring to the black boys the Limousine that passed them when they crossed the Black well's Island. Nick referred to the eyes of the black boys as "yolks"<sup>6</sup>

Many critics considered Tom as a racist character. When Nick says to Daisy "you make me feel uncivilised"<sup>7</sup> Tom violently breaks out by saying that "civilisation is going to pieces."<sup>8</sup> Nick understands what Tom is implying and therefore he tries to distance himself from this racist talk by saying "I meant nothing in particular by this remark but it was taken up in an unexpected way."<sup>9</sup> Tom equals the fact that civilisation is going to pieces to the submergence of the white race by referring to a book titled "The Rise of the Coloured Empires by this man Goddard."<sup>10</sup> Fitzgerald uses this title fictionally to refer to Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Colour against White World Supremacy*.<sup>11</sup> Stoddard restricted true Americans are Nordics and Anglo-Saxons. Berman stated that:

*when Tom Buchanan says in The Great Gatsby that "Civilization's going to pieces," there are echoes meant to be heard. To allude to "civilization" is often to assume a nativist public role, and Tom means dimly to restore values of the American past by imposing distinctions of class, race, and religion.*<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit. p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.18.

<sup>11</sup>Berman, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

Nick does not sound to be in full agreement with what Tom is saying when he said "‘why, no’ I answered rather surprised by his tone."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Nick does not directly say "No" but he asks "why" as if implying that it is not important to read that book but Tom insists that "it is scientific stuff."<sup>2</sup> Tom seems to believe in the nativist view of American identity; white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant when he says "it is up to *us*, who are the dominant race."<sup>3</sup> Tom uses the words "we" and "us" which clearly convey his identity. Daisy wants show that she is included in the "we" that Tom is using she intentionally stops at the word "we" as the dash in the text shows when she says "what was that word we-"<sup>4</sup> Nick seems to be alert to the gestures the convey class distinction when he says for example that Daisy "looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged."<sup>5</sup>

Gatsby is supposed to be a white working class American as it is revealed later in the novel "his parents were shiftless unsuccessful farm people."<sup>6</sup> Gatsby had a strong strong belief in the American Dream. He thought that could change his class if he worked hard. He made money and purchased an elaborate mansion next to Daisy's house and started throwing enormous parties. By so doing Gatsby thought that he would be accepted as member in the Daisy's class by getting married to Daisy. Tom considered Gatsby as a threat to the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race and compared his marriage to Daisy as the marriage between black and white. Goldsmith maintains that "for both Tom and Nick, racial miscegenation and immigrant ethnic assimilation provide models of identity formation and upward mobility more comprehensible than amalgam of commerce, love, and ambition underlying Gatsby's rise."<sup>7</sup>

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was written in a period when the Harlem Renaissance was taking place. Many critics have read *The Great Gatsby* against the

---

<sup>1</sup>Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>7</sup>Goldsmith, Meredith. "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*" *Bloom's Guides: F. Scott Fitzgerald's the Great Gatsby*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2006. p.177.

works of the African American writers. Goldsmith argued that Fitzgerald's works had a " tacit dialogue with the African-American and ethnic literary context of the era."<sup>1</sup> Gatsby's story seems to have many similarities with African American quest for identity. Fitzgerald's story of Gatsby is based on the denial of the past and its replacement with an ideal past of his own creation. The latter was also a characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance literature in 1920's. As Goldsmith remarked:

*The masculine bildungsroman of the Harlem Renaissance and ethnic immigration provide a new entry point into The Great Gatsby, demonstrating the unspoken affinity of Fitzgerald's narrative with these genres. Jimmy Gatz's failed transformation into Jay Gatsby incorporates elements of both initially suppressing Gatsby's past in the tradition of passing fiction and finally locating the roots of his success in his Franklinesque immigrant ambition.<sup>2</sup>*

Gatsby is supposed to be a white working class man in pursuit of his dream identity. Gatsby actually failed in achieving the identity he dreamt of, because of the impossibility of denying the past and living only in the present and pulled forward by the future. Yet, he still did not lose faith in his dream. Having seen the question of identity in *The Great Gatsby* and the connection it has with the Harlem Renaissance literature provides good reason to read Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in comparison with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This would reveal much of the paradoxes between the American past ideals of equal opportunity and the persisting inequality in reality.

---

<sup>1</sup>Goldsmith, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **The Quest for Identity in Ellison's *Invisible Man*:**

By the end of the Civil War in 1865, slavery was abolished throughout the American territory. This resulted in the emergence of a new class in the American society, a class that has never been given the right to take part or to have voice in the American culture or history. In the 1920's and after more than half a century passed since the abolition of slavery, no laws were passed to guarantee the rights of the African Americans. In this period there were men and women who were not slaves, but sons and daughters of slaves. They were kept under an oppression that was in some cases worse than slavery itself. In the few years that preceded the First World War, America witnessed an unprecedented rate of migration of the African Americans from the South to the North. The latter was called the Great Migration. A great number of African Americans settled in a part of New York called Harlem. This district was a majority black district in which the African American intellectuals met and laid the foundation of a new African American identity. Harlem played a very important role in shaping the African American identity. All the African American writers have been affected, in one way or another, by the ideas and ideologies of Harlem Renaissance and Ralph Waldo Ellison was no exception.

## A- Harlem Renaissance and African American Identity:

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, African Americans left the South in great numbers towards the northern cities. This migration reached its peak in the 1920's when the African Americans formed a majority black city in a New York district called Harlem. The African American intellectuals who met in Harlem in the 1920's and 1930's played a considerable role in propagating the ideas that were of great importance to shaping the African American personal and national or communal identity. Harlem was the cradle of the African American literary and cultural achievements that would greatly affect not only African American identity but the whole American culture as well. As Crocker put it "The black 'consciousness' came about partly as a result of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that saw African American writers, musicians and artist redefine identity through their African continent as a place of their beginning."<sup>1</sup>

The main aim of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's was to construct a new African American identity apart from the one that was imposed on them by the mainstream American culture. Booker T. Washington was among the earliest African American scholars who laid the foundation for what was called Harlem Renaissance. In the turn of the century, he and the men of Tuskegee waged their campaign for self-help and race pride. He believed in the existence of racial differences but still the possibility of unity by saying that black and white Americans are "separate as the fingers and united as the fist."<sup>2</sup> Washington believed that the blacks are also Americans, despite the differences but they have to take pride in their racial identity.

W. E. B. Du Bois, on the contrary, stated that Washington's position fostered the inferiority of the African Americans. In his essay *The Returning Soldiers*<sup>3</sup>, he considered the participation of the African Americans in The First World War as

---

<sup>1</sup>Crocker, John and Celena E. Kusch. "Class and Race Identity in *The Great Gatsby* and *Passing*" *USC Upstate Undergraduate Research Journal*. Vol.2. (Fall, 2009). p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>Hudlin, Warrington. "Harlem Renaissance Re-examined". *Bloom's Period Studies: The Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2004. p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Lewis, David Levering. *The Portable: Harlem Renaissance Reader*. USA: Penguin Books, 1994. p. 3.

sign of their true American national identity by saying that “[they] fought gladly and to the last drop of blood; for America and its highest ideals.”<sup>1</sup> He adds that “this country of ours, despite all its better souls has done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land.”<sup>2</sup> Despite their fighting for America as their country the African Americans were still disfranchised and were still considered inferior to the whites. That’s why Du Bois said “we return from fighting we return fighting.”<sup>3</sup> Du Bois viewed the African American identity as a “double consciousness.” He believed that every single African American is torn between being both African and American at the same time and that they do not take their American identity for granted. Moreover, Du Bois edited a magazine named *The Crisis* which played a very important role in voicing the ideas of the African American intellectuals and bringing to the surface the African American identity and presence in the American mainstream culture. McNeese affirmed that “those literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance were having the same impact on the US culture that the traditionally black musical forms of jazz were also having during 1920’s. The message was simple: American Blacks had something to say and something to contribute.”<sup>4</sup>

Langston Hughes was among the prominent poets of the Harlem Renaissance who resorted to the African American popular culture in order to arrive at an authentic African American art.<sup>5</sup> In most of his poems he focused on the question of African American identity. Langston was concentrating on the creation of “a poetry that truly evoked the spirit of Black America involved a resolution of conflicts centring around the problem of identity.”<sup>6</sup> In 1925 he wrote a poem entitled “I Too Am American” this poem adopts the Duboisian “double consciousness.” When poetry of Langston was published, Allain Lock said that “the black masses had their voice.”<sup>7</sup> To find a voice that would bring together the divergent views of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Lewis, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>McNeese, Tim. *Discovering US History: World War I and the Roaring Twenties 1914-1928*. New York: Chelsea House, 2010.p. 113.

<sup>5</sup>Fabre, Geneviève and Michel Feith. *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at Harlem Renaissance*. USA: Indiana University Press, 2001. p.236.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, Raymond. “Langston Hughes: Evolution of the Poetic Persona”. *Bloom’s Period Studies: The Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004. p. 37.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 35.



African Americans was among the urgent needs. This can only be made by drawing on the African American tradition and the shared past as Birch stated:

*Black identity could not be affirmed if it entailed the rejection of the oral culture which was an expression of their shared experience, and which had been accorded no place of value within the dominant white culture...if black contribution to American culture was to be recognised, black artists needed to cherish, reclaim and build upon the oral culture which had preserved their sense of identity and self-esteem during their years of enslavement.<sup>1</sup>*

The Harlem renaissance had a great influence on the African American writers. The ideas propagated during the Harlem Renaissance were very central to unravelling most of the meanings the African American literature. Ralph Ellison is one of the African American writers who have been greatly influenced by the Harlem intellectuals and authors, though he was not always in full agreement with them. In his *Invisible Man*, he gives voice to many of the different views about the African American identity.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born On March, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 1914 in Oklahoma City to Lewis Ellison and Ida Millsap. His father was a Spanish-American War veteran and a member of the Twenty-Fifth U.S. Colored Infantry.<sup>2</sup> His father intentionally named him after the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in hopes that he would become a remarkable poet.<sup>3</sup> Ellison's father died when Ellison was three years old. He attended Douglass High School in Oklahoma City and graduated from it in 1932. One year after and due to the failure of his plans to join Langston

---

<sup>1</sup>Birch, Eva Lennox. "Harlem and the First Black Renaissance". *Bloom's Period Studies: The Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2004. p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, Lois. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Literary Renaissance*, New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2006. p.138.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

University, he joined Tuskegee Institute situated in Alabama. There he learned music with William Dawson and read much of Harlem Renaissance Literature.<sup>1</sup>

Following his teachers' advice Ellison moved to New York in 1936. This trip was a turning point in Ellison's life. In New York he was introduced to the Harlem Renaissance. He met writers such as, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright who encouraged him to write.<sup>2</sup> Ellison's first short stories began to see light in the 1930's. He joined the Communist Party. The four years that Ellison spent in the Federal Writers' Project that was interested in collecting folklore and presenting it in a literary form provided Ellison with the material that would enrich his fiction later. In 1943 Ellison joined the merchant marine. A year after, there was an attempt to write a novel but he failed to finish it but a part of it was published into a short story entitled "*Flying Home*"<sup>3</sup>. It was after the Second World War in Vermont that he figured out the plot that would make his masterpiece *Invisible Man*. It took him five years to write it and it was finally published in 1952. A year later, Ellison's *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award.<sup>4</sup> His major works were his, only novel *Invisible Man* essay collection entitled *Shadow and Act* (1964)<sup>5</sup> and *Going to the Territory* (1986)<sup>6</sup> and two other works that were published after his death *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1996) and *Juneteenth* (1997).<sup>7</sup>

The novel is told by a unanimous narrator who called himself an *Invisible Man*. He lives on the borders of Harlem in underground room or as he calls it; "a hole" that is lit by 1,369 lights. He makes it clear in the epilogue that his invisibility is due to the fact that the people surrounding him refuse to see him. He is a grandson of a slave. On his deathbed, his grandfather gives them a piece of advice that keeps haunting him throughout the story. He is bumped one day by a white man. He asks

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>Porter, Horace A. *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America*. Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2001. p. 140.

<sup>4</sup>Dickstein, Morris. "Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture". *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2010. p. 53.

<sup>5</sup>Porter, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

the man to apologise but he refuses and insults him instead. The invisible man comes close to killing him.

On his graduation day the narrator gives a speech to the effect that humility is the secret. Even though he does not believe in that but he does it because it works. He is praised for that and is asked to repeat that speech before the white leaders of the town. Before giving the speech the invisible man has to get involved in a very fierce ring fighting. This fighting is between ten black boys with their eyes blindfolded with a white cloth. This is called Battle Royal. He describes it as "a total anarchy" in which every body fights against everybody else and even if they come together once they will end up fighting each other. After the fight, he delivers his speech. To his disappointment, in return for speech he is given a calfskin briefcase that contains scholarship to the state college of Negroes. He later dreams of his grandfather asking him to open the briefcase. He finds a number of envelopes one within the other and his grandfather tells him that those are years until he reaches the last one he finds a document written on it "To Whom It May Concern Keep This Nigger-Boy Running"

In college the narrator works as a chauffeur for the white men who come to college during the Founder Day. In the time between the meetings, one of the college's white trustees, named Mr Norton, asks the narrator to drive him around. On their way Norton starts telling the narrator about the history of the college and how it was established. The narrator unintentionally drives him into the countryside; an impoverished black area. At the command of Norton the narrator stops in front of a log cabin set of from the rest. It is Jim Trueblood's cabin. The narrator and Norton sit with Trueblood and listen to his incestuous story. Norton consequently feels sick and urgently asks the narrator to find him a whiskey. The narrator, trying to fulfil the demand, makes things even worse by taking him to Golden Day which is the closest place he could find. Back in college, Dr Bledsoe is infuriated for the state of Mr Norton and the narrator expects that he will be expelled from college.

The narrator is deceived into believing that his punishment will be just to be expelled from college for a semester. Bledsoe gives him seven letters and asks him to go to New York to find a work to collect the next year's fees. Though the station

is empty, and the bus as well, the narrator sits in the rear. Having accepted his punishment the narrator wants to forget all about the events that led to it. To his disappointment, he finds one of the Golden Day vets on the bus. The vet advises him to "play the game but don't believe in it"<sup>1</sup> when the vet was leaving he advised the narrator saying "Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it. Last of all, leave the Mr Nortons alone, and if you don't know what I mean, think about it"<sup>2</sup>

When in New York the narrator still believes that he will succeed and tries to make use of the letters that Bledsoe gave him. The narrator uses six of them but in vain. None of them helps him find a job. The last letter is addressed to Mr Emerson. The narrator finds Emerson's son and gives him the letter. Mr Emerson tells the narrator what the content of the letter is. It was until then that the narrator knows that he is permanently expelled from college. Losing hope of returning to college the narrator finds a job in the Liberty Paint Factory.

In the factory, the narrator's role is to put ten drops of secret formula in some buckets of black paint that will result in the creation of "the purest white that can be found."<sup>3</sup> When the narrator uses the wrong formula he is sent to work with Lucius Brockway. An explosion takes place and the narrator is hurt. He awakes in the factory hospital, where he receives electroshock therapy. After the end of the therapy he finds that he could no more remember his identity. He is consequently asked to go and find work elsewhere. He goes back to Harlem and takes refuge in Mary's home. One day, while roaming around in the streets of Harlem he sees an old couple being expelled from their house and their furniture being thrown out of the house by two white men. The narrator intervenes and organises the crowd. This is the event that leads the narrator to meet Brother Jack the leader of the Brotherhood. Jack makes an appointment with the narrator and talks him into becoming a member of the Brotherhood. He is given a new name and a big salary and was asked in return to forget about his past identity.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Ralph W. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 2<sup>nd</sup>.Ed. 1995. p.33.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

Later the narrator is taken by the brotherhood to give a speech in Harlem. In this speech he stirs the emotions of the audience. His speech is not welcomed by the Brotherhood and is considered as “wild, hysterical and politically irresponsible and dangerous.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he is considered as a “wild speaker”<sup>2</sup> and he has got to be tamed. He is consequently sent for few months training with Brother Hambro. Afterwards the narrator is appointed as a chief spokesman of the Harlem District. When the committee assembles to his assignment the narrator meets Tod Clifton and he is introduced the Ras Exhorter; “the wild man who calls himself a black nationalist.”<sup>3</sup> Ras is the head of an organisation that is against the Brotherhood. Ras threatens Clifton with a knife because he is a member in the Brotherhood which is composed of members from different races and saying to him “you are my brother, *mahn*. Brothers are the same colour...”<sup>4</sup>

The narrator plays an important role, and the Brotherhood becomes very successful. He once receives an anonymous letter warning him of jealousy among white leaders. The narrator suspects that the letter is sent by Brother Wrestrum. The narrator is betrayed by the Brotherhood when charges are brought against him by Wrestrum. He accuses him of being an "opportunist" who uses the Brotherhood “to advance his own selfish interests.”<sup>5</sup> The investigation is carried out over these charges and the narrator is sent downtown to lecture on the Women Question.

The narrator is invited to come back to Harlem when Clifton disappears. The narrator wonders about what happened to Clifton and is eagerly waiting for the strategy meeting that is to be held. To his disappointment it is time for the meeting to start and he receives no call from the leaders. He tries to call them but in vain. When he arrives to the meeting, he finds a notice that says "not to be disturbed by anyone." The narrator leaves to Fifth Avenue. While roaming around, he recognises Tod Clifton selling paper dolls. Clifton gets involved in a quarrel with a policeman and he is shot dead. The narrator delivers a speech on the occasion. Consequently,

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 364.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 400.

he was rebuked by Brother Jack and he is considered as a racist. He leaves the Brotherhood headquarters and goes back to Harlem. There he meets Ras the Exhorter who accuses him of the betraying his people. To avoid Ras's henchmen flees and disguises himself by wearing black glasses. By so doing, he was mistaken for someone called Rinehart. The narrator gets involved in the violence that was taking place in Harlem, while fleeing towards Mary's House he falls into a manhole and burns all his papers to find the way out.

A year after its publication in 1952, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was heralded as a masterpiece and became among the best sellers. It has become the critics' point of interest whenever Ellison is mentioned. It gained the National Book Award. *Book Week* in 1965 and *Wilson Quarterly* in 1978 considered *Invisible Man* as the best novel published since the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> In the Modern Library list of the best twentieth Century novels *Invisible Man* is placed in number nineteen.<sup>2</sup> Anthony adds that the novel is "one of the most compelling and important novels of this century. Praised for both its artistic originality and its thematic richness..."<sup>3</sup>

In *New York Times*, Orville Prescott announced that the novel was "the most impressive work of fiction by an American Negro which [he has] ever read."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Warren stated that the *Invisible Man* is "the most powerful artistic representation we have of the Negro under these dehumanizing conditions; and, at the same time, a statement of the human triumph over those conditions."<sup>5</sup> The novel received unfriendly reviews about its representation of the African Americans to mention; "Ellison shows Snobbery, Contempt for Black people", "Blazing Novel Portrays a Negroes Frustration", "defamatory accounts of the black masculinity."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Tracy, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Dykema-Vander Ark, Anthony M. "An overview of *Invisible Man*." an Essay for Exploring Novels. Gale, 1998. Rpt. in Literature Resource Center. Detroit: Gale, 2012. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Nov. 2012.

<sup>4</sup>Hill, Michael and Lena M. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Reference Guide*. USA: Greenwood Press, 2008. p. 137.

<sup>5</sup>Warren, Robert Penn. "The Unity of Experience". *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison*. New York: Chelsea House, 2010. p. 205.

<sup>6</sup>Hill, op. cit., p. 139.

Despite all these achievements, the views of critics diverged about the novel. Longman is one of the critics who considered the appraisals that Ellison's *Invisible Man* received when it was first published in 1952 as a result of what he called "criticism specialising in mechanical analyses."<sup>1</sup> He argues that this appraisal is far from the core of the novel but concentrated instead on the "complex pattern of symbols and motifs; images of sight, of the visible and the invisible, of black and white, dark and light, have been counted through, assembled, interpreted...."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Longman states that the novel "is riven by kinds of confusion and indeterminacy more fundamental than such considerations of form can explain."<sup>3</sup> He adds that the narrative "moves through a variety of styles, not in a controlled and cumulative development but, it seems, according to the fluctuations of merely local impulse, passage by passage" and that "the novel as a whole lacks orchestration [and] reads as a succession of improvisations, often weakly derivative and eclectic in their models."<sup>4</sup>

*Invisible Man* remains one of the most controversial novels in the American literature. Ellison does not only discuss the question of the African American identity but also the whole American identity. The study of the novel can also be expanded to encompass the question of universal identity, ranging between the past and present, individual and community, race and how all these factors unite or rather collide to form a single stable identity.

Ellison's characters in *Invisible Man* reflect the complexity of the question of identity that the novel is about. Throughout his journey in quest for his identity the narrator has come in contact with individuals who held different views. Each seems to add a new dimension or rather a challenge to the formation of his identity. Despite the fact he is not one of the main characters; the narrator's grandfather seems to be the trigger of the question of identity in the novel. The advice he gave on his

---

<sup>1</sup>Langman, F. H. "Reconsidering 'Invisible Man'." *The Critical Review* 18 (1976) Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Daniel G. Marowski and Roger Matuz. Vol. 54. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Nov. 2012. p.114.

<sup>2</sup>Langman, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 114- 115.

deathbed preoccupied the narrator and made him conscious of his identity. The novel is told, in the first person narrator, by an unnamed narrator. In search of his identity, the narrator gives a survey of and brings to surface different views about the African/American identity. The characters he came in contact with and the way he came to terms with them can stand as outward projections of his identity.

Invisible Man is the narrator of the novel. He is invisible not because he is a 'spook' but because he is a black man living in the racist atmosphere of America in the 1920s and 1930s. The others refuse to see him because of his colour. The narrator lives in underground room or as he called it a "hole". The narrator tells his story from his younger naive and hopeful self, both as a student at a black southern college and later as the Harlem District leader of the Brotherhood in New York City.

Dr Bledsoe is the president of a southern black college. He was considered as a role model for the African American boys at school. His success story of rising from an illiterate boy to an influential spokesman for the race is considered as an example for the college students. Bledsoe lives meekly with the whites and doing only the things they like. He believes that's the only way to live in the south. A school with someone like Bledsoe as its head would only foster slavery, as the narrator ironically puts it when describing the symbol of the founder saying that " his hands outstretched in the breath-taking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place."<sup>1</sup>

Mr Norton is a white northern college trustee. He visits college on the Founder Day. In the interval between the lectures the narrator drives him through the neighbouring regions. On the way he tells the narrator about Ralph Waldo Emerson. Norton feels sick after listening to Trueblood's incestuous story and asks the narrator urgently to find him some whiskey. To make the bad things worse, the

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, op. cit. p. 36.



narrator took him to Golden Day. He, consequently, returns to the campus shocked. This was what to lead to the narrator's expulsion from college.

Mr Emerson is the son of one of the college trustees to whom the last letter the narrator had was addressed. He interviews the narrator for a job and ends up showing him Dr Bledsoe's sealed letter of introduction. He takes pity on this victim of Bledsoe's rage and finds him a job at the Liberty Paint Factory. He marked a turning point in the narrator's journey. By meeting Emerson the narrator's plans of going back to school fell flat.

Mary is the motherly head of a boarding house in Harlem. She takes the narrator into her house after his electroshock therapy at the paint factory's hospital. She is a philanthropist. She gives help to many people. She does not want anything in return for what she is doing. She takes care of the narrator during his months of unemployment, confident that he will eventually assist in the betterment of his race. The narrator owes her much respect but there is one trait that he dislikes about her is that people like her "seldom know where their personality ends and yours begins"<sup>1</sup>

Brother Jack is one of the leaders of the clandestine "Brotherhood" in New York, a political movement that advocates the mobilization of the masses and scientific objectivity and that is clearly modelled on contemporary Communism. A sprightly red-haired man with a penetrating gaze, he selects the narrator as the new district leader for Harlem after seeing him lead a protest against the eviction an old couple. He first defends the narrator against jealous party members but later accepts to bring the narrator to trial and fire him from the organisation under the banner that the narrator uses the Brotherhood for his personal selfish advantage.

Tod Clifton is another Brotherhood Harlem District leader, a strikingly handsome young man who fights with members from a rival movement and helps the narrator mobilize the community. His commitment to the Brotherhood is not absolute—he

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p.316.

talks of the temptation to renounce ideology and “plunge outside history”<sup>1</sup>—and when the narrator temporarily leaves Harlem, he disappears. The hero spots him several days later, selling demeaning black puppets on a street corner. When harassed by a policeman, Clifton resists and is shot. Clifton’s funeral marks the narrator’s real break from the Brotherhood.

Ras the Exhorter is the narrator’s political rival, the leader of a Harlem black separatist movement whose henchmen regularly disrupt Brotherhood demonstrations. Ras represents the alternative to the narrator’s political ideology; the rejection of the whites and the principles of universal equality. When a race riot erupts in Harlem, Ras relishes the violence. Dressed in African garb, he charges through the streets on horseback and hurls spears at the police and the narrator.

Rinehart is an elusive resident of Harlem who represents another alternative to the narrator’s Brotherhood. The narrator first learns of him when, disguised in sunglasses and the wide-brimmed hat of a zoot-suiter, he is mistaken by several beautiful women for their protector. Rinehart is the ultimate con man, a corrupt minister, a gambler, and a pimp. The narrator briefly decides to imitate him, selfishly abusing his power to get back at the Brotherhood.

Ellison, in his novel *Invisible Man* used different characters. These characters represented different views about the African American identity in particular and the American identity in general. Each of them can stand for a view of the African American identity. Later in the novels, he refers to some of the characters in plural forms when the narrator says "I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons"<sup>2</sup> This makes the idea clear that Ellison uses some characters as representatives of a group or an ideology.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 438.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 559.

## B- Identity and the Past:

The abolition of slavery marked the birth of the African Americans as a new class in the American society. The newly freed men found themselves without a collective past that would define their identity. As Eyerman put it "Collective identity refers to a process of "we" formation, a process both historically rooted and rooted in history."<sup>1</sup> The views of the African American intellectuals diverged upon whether they would adapt the mainstream past or to create their own. The individual African American was in a continuous struggle trying to come to terms with his past either to deny it or to take pride in it; either to form a peaceful relation with the ex-master or a relation that is based on revenge and hatred. These are at the bottom of all clashes that take place among African Americans themselves and with their white countrymen. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* deals with such a contradiction that most of the African Americans face.

In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison makes it clear that the African Americans have to seek their identity in the American past and history. After speaking about his invisibility the narrator says that he is "no freak of nature, nor of history."<sup>2</sup> This implies that the narrator is not an intruder in the environment that refuses to see him but he is a part of it and he "was in the cards, other things having been equal (or unequal) eighty-five years ago."<sup>3</sup> In more than one scene in the novel, discussions are going on about history. The Invisible Man in the novel speaks for the all the black Americans and his invisibility can be taken as the invisibility of the race to which he belongs.

Taking pride in one's past was among the most important principles that the African American intellectuals tried to spread among the African Americans. Earlier in the novel the narrator regrets the fact that he once hated his past as son of slaves when he says that "I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been

---

<sup>1</sup>Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.p.6.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed."<sup>1</sup> The narrator or rather Ellison believes that to accept one's past and to cope with it is the way towards knowing one's identity. Eyerman stated that:

*The notion of the African American identity was articulated in the later decades of the twentieth century by a generation of black intellectuals for whom slavery was a thing of the past, not of the present. It was the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that grounded the African American identity.*<sup>2</sup>

When the narrator joined the Brotherhood, he was asked to break with his past identity and was given a new name. The narrator knows that he cannot break with his past only by changing his name and did not accept the fact that "to call a thing by name is to make it so."<sup>3</sup> When the narrator delivered his first speech in Harlem he could extract a fervent response from the audience. This was only possible because he based his speech on the shared past and experience when he said "We share a common disinheritance, and it's said that confession is good for the soul."<sup>4</sup> The response and the interaction of the audience showed the compatibility between the narrator's identity and that of the audience.

The narrator's disability to deny his past caused him trouble with the Brotherhood who wanted to break with the African American past. This break seems almost impossible because the signs of the past are ingrained in the minds and bodies of the African Americans. One of the Brotherhood members limps because he was dragging the chain when he was in the south. Brother Tarp gives the narrator, by way of a reminder, a chain link saying "funny thing to give somebody, but I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of but two words, yes and no;

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Eyerman, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 345.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

but it signifies a heap more..."<sup>1</sup> The narrator accepted the link, given to him by Tarp, not because he liked it in itself but rather he considered it as a link between him and the past. It linked him to his ancestors. Ellison always stressed the importance of the past to the present and the future. One's identity cannot be stable without a continuation between the past, the present and future.

*Tarp's gesture in offering it [the link] was of some deeply felt significance which I was compelled to respect. Something, perhaps, like a man passing on to his son his own father's watch, which the son accepted not because he wanted the old-fashioned time-piece for itself, but because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of the paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future.*<sup>2</sup>

The past is one of the most important elements in the definition of one's identity. It is always the point of reference. One forms his/her identity either by denying or consolidating his/her past. The Narrator in *Invisible Man* is haunted throughout the novel with his past especially the piece of advice that his grandfather gave his father. When in the north, he finds it difficult to shape his identity on a gap and it was only by drawing back on his past experience that he could seize the attention of the audience and stir their emotions. This struggle between the African American humiliating past and the difficulty to cope with it is at the centre of all the controversies about the African American national identity. Around the end of the novel the narrator comes to the conclusion that his true identity can be achieved only through accepting his past. He said that "I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. I had learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 389-390.

experiences and my experiences were me."<sup>1</sup> The African Americans' disagreement about the way to perceive the past humiliations was at the bottom of controversies about how to view the African Americans national identity.

### **C- The African Americans' National Identity:**

The theme of the African Americans' national identity is one of the mostly tackled themes by the African American intellectuals especially in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, it is one of the controversial issues among African Americans themselves. Some favoured assimilation, submissiveness and integration into the American society while others favoured protest and violence and separation. In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison shed some light on the different views regarding the African American national identity.

Dr Bledsoe is one of the characters in the novel who represent the view of 'self-erasure' and 'self-advancement', which is the case for most southerners. He is considered to be one of the successful black men. He can be taken as a representative of a whole group of African Americans who deny their true self in order to please the white men. Bledsoe's goal is his personal advancement even if it is against what he actually believes. This seems to be the case in the whole American south when Bledsoe tells the narrator "You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?"<sup>2</sup> This gives the impression that the identity of southerners is based on the continuous denial of their true past identity.

Bledsoe always acts meekly with whites. The narrator stresses that when he says that "the posture of humility and meekness...made him seem smaller than the others

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 507-508.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.139.

(although he was physically larger)"<sup>1</sup> Bledsoe intentionally acts in this self-effacing way to ingratiate himself with his superiors. Though the narrator seems to disapprove of the way that Bledsoe acts but he also passed through that when he delivered the speech on his graduation day. The speech was against what he inwardly believed but had to do so because it worked. Ellison makes it clear that there are many 'Bledsoes' who cannot feel their 'American-ness' only through smothering their past identity. The narrator breached the rules on which the black-white relation was based in the south he was, consequently, expelled.

In New York and after all the attempts he made to find a job through Bledsoe's letters fell flat, the narrator finds a job in Liberty Paint factory. When going to the factory the narrator saw a huge electric sign saying "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS"<sup>2</sup> This paint is created through putting ten black drops into a bucket of a milky brown substance that would turn into "the purest white that can be found."<sup>3</sup> This scene is one the most expressive scenes in the novel. It shows Ellison's belief in the contribution of the blacks to the formation of the American identity as Boyogoda affirmed:

*The whiteness of this paint requires a component of blackness to achieve its purity; the colour represents not so much the disappearance of black Americans into a purely white national myth as the dependence of that myth on the inclusion of blackness. The painting allegory is indeed a critique of black complicity in the on going whitewash of national history, but is also the revelation of blackness as a constituent element of American identity.*<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Tracy adds that "Ellison had endeavoured to assert the absolute centrality of African Americans to the definitions of whiteness, America, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>4</sup>Boyogoda, Randy, *Race, Immigration, and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner*. New York & London: Routledge, 2008. p. 63.

freedom."<sup>1</sup> Ellison hints at the fact that African Americans are an inextricable part of the whole American nation. Therefore, their identity is formed by taking part in its making just as those ten drops help to make the paint the whitest paint ever. Walsh stated "for Ellison and for his protagonist the identity of black Americans depends upon the renewal of the spirit which formed the country of which they are citizens"<sup>2</sup>

While in the factory the narrator was knocked unconscious due to an accident that took place in the underground part of the factory. He woke up in a hospital and had to go through an electroshock therapy. This therapy was considered by some critics as the rebirth of the narrator's new identity. After going through the therapy the narrator joins the Brotherhood. He is given a new identity and a new name and is asked to forget about the past in return for a huge amount of money. Brother Jack the leader of the Brotherhood tells the narrator that he has to forget about his past and not to think beyond race. The narrator said that "For the first time, lying there in the dark, [he] could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race."<sup>3</sup> The narrator's identity expands from being racial identity to something wider that is national identity. The narrator's inclusion in the whole American national identity entails the erasure of his racial one. The members of Brotherhood wanted to shape an identity that is wider than race. This was Ellison's view as well.

*Ellison's wider ambitions were concerned with forging reconciliation between native black Americans and their white, historically dominant counterpart; between black claims to identity and the nation's denial of them; and between the black indigenous black cultural expression and the nation's overall self-understanding.*<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Tracy, Steven C. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>Walsh, Mary Ellen Williams. "Invisible Man: Ralph Ellison's Wasteland." *CLA Journal* 28.2 (Dec. 1984): Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt. Vol. 114. Detroit: Gale Group, 1999. *Literature Resource Center*. Web.p. 150. 7 Nov. 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 355.

<sup>4</sup>Boyogoda, op. cit., p. 52.



When in the north the narrator meets Ras the Exhorter. The latter represents the separatist view of the African American identity. He hates all those who belong to the Brotherhood and considers them as traitors. Ras comes close to killing Tod Clifton because he is a member of the Brotherhood. This was taking place in the presence of the narrator. Here the narrator is torn between being a member in the Brotherhood that tries to turn a blind eye to the racial differences and being considered a traitor by the members of his race. Later Clifton leaves the Brotherhood and the narrator finds him selling paper dolls. Moreover, Ellison includes passages of the African American accent of English. This shows the long history of the African Americans in America. Some critics considered Ellison's use of this form of English as way of proving the fact that the African Americans are an inextricable part of the American nation. As Boygoda put it:

*In thinking about Ellison's formulations of the American identity, however, one cannot divide questions of national identity from linguistic issues. To demonstrate American-ness in Ellison's formulation, one must speak a vernacular form English – a premise that encourages the recognition of the inherent black dimensions of the nation's identity.<sup>1</sup>*

Ellison's views the African American national identity as an amalgamation of both the African and the American traits. He stresses the importance of the past for the formation of a stable identity as well the African American accent which shows the ancient roots of the African American identity. That's why he inserted long passages in the African American accent. The African Americans do not have only their past to cope with but also a number of stereotypes deeply rooted in the American society.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 57-58.

## D- Identity and Stereotypes:

Stereotypes are the set of beliefs, preconceptions and prejudices that a given group has on another.<sup>1</sup> These stereotypes have a great impact on the person's identity. The member of a stereotyped group loses his sense of personal identity and would be merely an embodiment of the attributes of the group to which they belong.<sup>2</sup> This sometimes may lead the person to act according to those stereotypes whether these stereotypes are negative or positive. The African Americans have been always stereotyped in the American society. This keeps the individual in a continuous struggle between what he thinks he is and the way the others see him as a member of a group. The invisibility in the *Invisible Man* can be taken as a metaphor for the stereotypical image of the African Americans in the eyes of the dominantly white American society. Tracy argues that "first-person narration is used in *Invisible Man* to dissolve fixed, stereotyped notions so that the central character can finally be liberated by an open, indeterminate identity which he creates with his own consciousness and will."<sup>3</sup>

In the opening words of the novel the narrator says "I am an invisible man." Ellison makes it clear that the narrator is invisible not because he is a "spook" but rather because people refuse to see him. This means that the invisibility of the narrator is not that of his body but is that of his identity as a unique individual. The narrator is speaking about the way that people see him and not the way that he sees himself. When a member of a given community holds a stereotype on another group they would not see them as individuals no matter what they did but they would be judged by the image of the whole group of which they are members. This is exactly the state that the narrator in *Invisible Man* lives. People refuse to see him they only see his surroundings or the prejudiced image they have in their minds about him. In the opening words of the epilogue the narrator says:

---

<sup>1</sup>Hogg, Michael A. and Scott A. Reid, "Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms." *International Communication Association*. 2006. p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.p.10.

<sup>3</sup>Tracy, op. cit., p. 245.

*I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.<sup>1</sup>*

Stereotypes depersonalise the individual and reduce him/her simply to a sample from a whole, where in fact the individual has complex cognitive processes involved in the definition of his identity. That is what Ellison ironically implies when in the narrator says "I might even be said to have a mind."<sup>2</sup> It is in fact the mind that is at the centre of defining one's identity and not the body. The narrator feels that he is surrounded by "distorting mirrors" which can metaphorically stand for this distorted image in the minds of the whites about him.

The African Americans, as Du Bois puts it, "saw themselves through the eyes of the others" this is what the narrator himself is suffering from when he says that "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality."<sup>3</sup> Ellison's language makes the reader see the abstract. He refers to the white men's distorted image of the narrator as an 'inner eye' not simply an idea that they have in their minds about him. Ellison makes it clear that the African Americans' image is negative in the minds of whites. In *Golden Day* one of the vets says to Norton about The narrator that he is a "walking personification of the negative"<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 03.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 03.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 03.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

While in the south the narrator's identity was based mainly on stereotypes. He always tried to ingratiate himself with the white men even if that was against his true identity. This was when he delivered a speech about humility and "it was a great triumph." He was therefore asked to repeat that speech but before that he had to get involved in a fight. The Battle Royal is one of the most expressive scenes in the novel. It brings to the surface many of the African American stereotypes and the way that they are viewed in the eyes of the white majority. This scene is a double edged one. It shows how the whites look at the black as animals fighting for their pleasure and at the same time shows that the white are dehumanising themselves by doing so.

The Battle was attended by educated men. The narrator reports the insults and the humiliation he heard from them. The use of the white cloth as a blindfold can stand for the pleasure the whites find in keeping the blacks blind to one another. The battle was random there was no coalition between the fighters; sometimes they fought in unison and sometimes they fought against one another. This can stand for the inability of the blacks to come under one unifying identity. This explains to some extent the fight that would take place later between the Brotherhood and Ras and then they unified when Clifton was killed. As Eyerman stated:

*Negroes in [America] have never been allowed to organize themselves because of white interference. As a result of this, the stereotype has been reinforced that blacks cannot organize themselves. The white psychology that blacks have to be watched, also reinforces this stereotype. Blacks, in fact, feel intimidated by the presence of whites, because of their knowledge of the power that whites have over their lives...<sup>1</sup>*

The stereotypical image of the African Americans in the American society had a great impact on the formation of the individual's personal identity. This is due to the

---

<sup>1</sup>Eyerman, op. cit., p. 182.

fact that people usually want to be dealt with as individuals and not as a set of prejudices that one holds about the group to which that person belongs. This is at the bottom of the African American identity. Individualism is said to be among the most important American values. It seems to be the effective way to break these stereotypes.

### **E- Individualism and Communal Identity:**

Individualism is said to be one of the pillars of the American identity. It stresses the primacy of the individual. As Albrecht puts it "Ellison's individualism draws on a central Emersonian tradition of American individualism yet revises that tradition by placing it firmly in the context of American race relations."<sup>1</sup> Individualism is more complicated when applied to African Americans. The early twentieth century marked a very crucial period in the history of the African American identity. The African American individual found him/herself torn between the loyalty to the tradition and culture of their race or to that of the mainstream American culture. This was due to the oppression and segregation that they were facing and the reluctance of the mainstream American culture to accept them as equal American citizens. Throughout Ellison's *Invisible Man* the narrator comes across situations where he faces conflicts between his identity as an individual and as member of community whether this community is based on race or on ideology.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* was viewed by post war humanists as "a triumphant defence of the individual that masterfully transcended its 'merely' racial subject matter."<sup>2</sup> In African American communities "individualism has to be discarded as a matter of survival when an entire community could be punished for the actions of individuals."<sup>3</sup> The question of identity between individual longings and ambitions and the communal limits and restrictions has been one of the main themes of

---

<sup>1</sup>Albrecht, James M. "Saying Yes and Saying No: Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson". *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2010. p. 66.

<sup>2</sup>Hoberek, Andrew. "Race Man, Organization Man, *Invisible Man*". *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Info base Publishing, 2010. p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Tracy, op. cit., p. 24.

Ellison's writings which always reflected "a tension between feeling both a part of and simultaneously apart from various identity groupings."<sup>1</sup> In the epilogue the narrator speaks about his journey in quest for his identity. In the first lines of the first chapter, the narrator recalls that he has been looking for himself for twenty years and "asking everybody except [himself] about questions which [he] and only [he] could answer."<sup>2</sup> This expression shows Ellison's belief in individualism and the integrity of the person's mind as the basis on which one founds his/her identity. As Ernest Kaiser put it "*Invisible Man* was a contrived novel that supported the existential notion that each person must solve his own problems."<sup>3</sup> Hoberek considered the narrator's story as journey behind achieving his identity as an individual. He stated that narrator was:

*A young man, anxious to find creative and fulfilling mental labour, instead encounters mystified, conformist organizations that threaten to rob him of his individuality, agency, and autonomy. To offer an admittedly oversimplified formulation, the organization-man narrative is what gives form to the novel's African American content.*<sup>4</sup>

After getting out of the hospital of the paint factory the narrator found shelter in the house of a philanthropist women named Mary. He spent his time there while looking for another job. Mary expected and urged the narrator to become one of the leaders of the race. There is only one thing, the narrator says, he disliked about Mary is the fact that she thinks in collective terms. This is exactly what the narrator is fighting against. He wants to be 'visible' and this visibility cannot be gained unless he acts individually. The narrator says that "there are many things about people like Mary that I dislike. For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of "we" while I have always tended to

---

<sup>1</sup>Eddy, Beth. *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003. p.99.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Tracy, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>4</sup>Hoberek, op.cit., p. 31.

think in terms of "me" -- and that has caused some friction, even with my own family."<sup>1</sup> This is a clear statement about the narrator's or rather Ellison's belief in individualism as an essential way to forming one's identity and his refusal to be moulded by anyone other than himself. Not even his family members.

After declaring his hatred for those "people like Mary" who think always in terms of the group, the narrator finds himself in another group that thinks along the same lines, that was the Brotherhood. While Mary thinks in terms of racial identity. The members of the Brotherhood, as well think in terms of "we" but "it is a different, bigger 'we'"<sup>2</sup> They are a group that contains different races and colours. The narrator was given a new name and was asked to forget about his past identity. The process of changing the narrator's name can stand for a transition that the narrator made from his identity as an individual to that of the group. He accepted this but actually he did not forget his identity when he said "they believe that to call a thing by name is to make it so. And yet I am what they think I am."<sup>3</sup>

The narrator was invited back to New York when Clifton, one of the young black members of the Brotherhood, disappears. Clifton showed a rebellious way of achieving one's individual identity. He did not accept to be dominated neither by Ras "the black nationalist" nor by the Brotherhood. He turned out selling Sambo dolls in the streets of New York. The narrator was wondering why he was doing so. The scene of selling paper dolls has been analysed by many critics as a parody of the Brotherhood control over its members which are just like the puppets who are controlled by invisible strings. Clifton resisted a policeman who wanted to prevent him from selling the dolls and he was consequently shot.

The narrator's disagreement with the leaders of the Brotherhood about how to deal with Clifton's death shows much of the anti-individualistic views of the Brotherhood. The narrator said that the policeman did not care about "Clifton's

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 316.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

ideas" he shot him "mainly because he was black and because he resisted"<sup>1</sup>. Tobitt, one of the members of the Brotherhood, considered this as "racist nonsense"<sup>2</sup> Jack tells the narrator openly that here is no place for using your mind. He says to the narrator that "For all of us, the committee does the thinking. For all of us. And you were hired to talk."<sup>3</sup> The narrator insists "if I wish to express an idea?"<sup>4</sup> Jack affirms to him members of the committee "furnish all ideas. We have some acute ones. Ideas are part of our apparatus. Only the correct ideas for the correct occasion"<sup>5</sup> otherwise "keep saying the last thing you were told."<sup>6</sup>

The members of the Brotherhood seem to be blind to reality because of their beliefs. This was represented in the eye of Jack who said, proudly, that he lost it "in the line of duty"<sup>7</sup> and tells that narrator addressing him "Brother Personal Responsibility" that discipline is "sacrifice, sacrifice, SACRIFICE!"<sup>8</sup> The narrator or rather Ellison ironically thought "sacrifice...yes, and blindness"<sup>9</sup> even when leaving Jack he said "I looked at his eye. So he knows how I feel. Which eye is really the blind one?"<sup>10</sup> Around the end of the novel Ellison makes clear that individualism, is the solution of forming an identity when the narrator says "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."<sup>11</sup>

## **F- Identity and Self-expression:**

The African Americans were almost silenced throughout the American history. Even when slavery was abolished in 1865 the African Americans' identity was defined only through the eyes of the white majority. Slaves were scattered all over

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 470.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 470.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 470.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 470.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 474.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 478.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 559.



America and they came from different parts of Africa and each one was left alone to deal with the chaos. Therefore, the need for a unified African American identity was compelling. This cannot be gained unless the African Americans start telling their own story and defend themselves against the identity imposed on them by the mainstream literature and culture. Ralph Ellison has been greatly influenced by the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson whom he is named after. In his essay *The Poet*, Emerson stated that "all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love in art, in avarice, in politics, in labour, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression."<sup>1</sup> In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison shows the importance of self-expression to the definition of one's identity. As Albrecht put it:

*Ellison repeatedly voices the deeply Emersonian idea that expressing the complexity of one's experience is a moral duty that requires non-conformism. "I learned that nothing could go unchallenged," he relates, especially the "formulas" of "historians, politicians, sociologists," and even the "older generation of Negro leaders and writers," formulas that threatened to "deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity"*<sup>2</sup>

The theme of self-expression and how it contributes to self-definition and identity formation seems to be among the major themes of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. As Boyogoda puts it "Ellison uses *Invisible Man* to enact the "self-expression" and support the "cultural survival" that constitutes the positive form of a "culturalist" mobilization of group identity."<sup>3</sup> The narrator's ability to deliver good speeches was behind most of the things that were to happen to him later in the novel. The speech that the narrator delivered on his graduation day, though he did not believe in it, was delivered in a way that extracted a positive response from the audience. He says that

---

<sup>1</sup>Norbeg, Peter. *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004. p. 214.

<sup>2</sup>Albrecht, op. cit., p. 80.

<sup>3</sup>Boyogoda, op. cit., pp. 53-54.

it was "a triumph for the whole community."<sup>1</sup>The narrator is a good and eloquent speaker. This was put though ironically that "he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary."<sup>2</sup> He was consequently invited to repeat the speech in a public place.

The narrator, or rather Ellison, shows the importance and urgency of expressing oneself clearly during the Battle Royal, a battle that narrator had to go through before delivering his speech. All along the battle, the narrator was thinking about delivering the speech. The narrator interpreted all the things that were going on around him in relation to the speech he was about to deliver. He said that the "battle might distract from the dignity of [his] speech"<sup>3</sup> and even when the blind folds were put on his eyes he was still "going over [the] speech."<sup>4</sup> When fighting became fiercer the only thing that he was worried about is his speech and "wanted to deliver [his] speech more than anything else in the world."<sup>5</sup>By insisting on this speech and showing its urgency Ellison makes it clear that self-expression is life itself.

The speech that the narrator delivered on his graduation day did not actually reveal the narrator's true identity and what he actually thought. Only by changing one word the speech has taken a different direction "and sounds of displeasure filled the room."<sup>6</sup> Because the narrator "distracted by having to gallop down his blood"<sup>7</sup> used the word "social equality"<sup>8</sup> instead of "social responsibility."<sup>9</sup> The narrator confessed that it was a mistake. Though it was only one word but it made the difference. The narrator now knows his identity in the eyes of the audience. Moreover, this is proven by being given, as a gift, a scholarship to a segregated high school.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.18.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

The narrator is later expelled from college and goes to New York Harlem. There again it is through a speech that he is known and he is invited to join the Brotherhood. After passing through the electroshock therapy the narrator goes out in Harlem and finds that an old couple being evicted from their house and their furniture being thrown out, he stands up on top of the others and speaks in a way that stirred the crowd. It is in this place that he meets Brother Jack and joins the Brotherhood. The narrator's insistence of expressing his own views in the way he saw them has always put him in trouble with the members of Brotherhood. This shows the importance of self-expression both the projection and formation of one's identity.

The Invisible Man's quest for identity throughout the novel has been a conflict between the individual and the communal and between the past and the present. This was the case for all the African Americans or minorities worldwide. The members of minorities are always viewed as a representation of the whole group and not of themselves as individuals. They find themselves torn between two forces; their desire to achieve their own personal identity and the necessity to cooperate with the members of the minority since that is the only place where they belong and find meaning. One could not find meaning in his life only by joining a group. Ellison makes it clear that both factors are important for the formation of a stable identity. The latter should embrace both the value of the American national identity as well as those that define the African American racial identity. Moreover, the acceptance of, and taking pride in one's past is also important for a stable and solid identity.

## CONCLUSION

Twenty- seven years separated the publication of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). The titles of both novels invoke the question of identity; who is Gatsby? And who is Invisible Man? The titles seem to represent two opposite individuals; one is described as 'great' while the other is described as 'invisible.' Gatsby is of white working class origins while Invisible Man is black. Gatsby and Invisible Man are young Americans in quest for their identity in 1920's and 1930's respectively. The two novels seem to have a kind of similarity in many respects; however, they provide somewhat paradoxical views about the American identity both at communal and personal levels.

The question of the past is an essential factor in the quest for identity in both novels. Gatsby tried to break all the ties with his past in order to form a new identity, an identity of his own imagination that sprung from the "platonic conception of himself." He thought that he could achieve his greatness by denying his true past identity but that was not possible. His denial of his past made his present completely shallow and meaningless. Gatsby's achievements were merely material. His true inward or rather spiritual identity was in his past not in the dream-like life he was living. Gatsby lost both his family and the world he was dreaming of. He was in a state of loss. He connected himself to an unknowable future at the expense of his past and lost both.

The Invisible Man, on the contrary, is continuously tied to his past and his grandfather's advice. Even when he acts against it, he still takes it into account. When writing about *The Great Gatsby*, Ellison pointed out that "black readers could not make Gatsby's mistakes."<sup>1</sup> Ellison's novel opens the eyes of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Dickstein, Morris . "Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture" Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison. Ed. Bloom, Harold. New York: Chelsea House, 2010. p.62.

African Americans to the fact that the class mobility is simply a material disguise that cannot compensate for or erase their humiliating past. Ellison makes it clear that a connection with the past is necessary for the formation of a solid identity. To have a connection with the past does not mean to live in it, but to accept it as the basis on which to build one's identity and in order not to fall in a gap, once one has not achieved his ideals.

In both novels, there is a process of changing names. Changing the name means changing one's identity. The paradox is while Gatsby chose his own name and created his own past and history, the Invisible Man on the contrary, the name was imposed on him by the Brotherhood members. Moreover, the Invisible Man was supposed to forget about his past identity and did not willingly do that as Gatsby did. This can mean that Ellison alludes to fact that while Americans like Gatsby chose their own identity, African Americans' identity was imposed on them.

Individualism is one of the themes that are discussed in both novels. Gatsby did not accept to be hindered from achieving his dream even by his family and that why he disowned his parents and chose to live his personal life the way he perceived it. The same applies to the narrator of *Invisible Man*. He hated the people who thought in terms of "we", as he said, that this has caused him troubles even with his own family. Both novels seem to come to the conclusion that absolute individualism is not the solution to the formation of an identity. Some amount of collectivity and community is necessary. Gatsby and Invisible man failed to form their identity without taking into account the social and psychological barriers that stood in the face of forming their individual identities.

The question of national identity is one of the central questions in both novels. In both novels we have the multiracial view of the American national identity. Fitzgerald and Ellison are conscious of the different racial groups that constitute the American society and the clashes that arise from their differences. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shows the imperialistic White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant identity

personified in Tom. He makes it clear that (wasp) represents an impenetrable class in the American society even for people such as Gatsby let alone people like the Invisible Man. Despite all this, in both novels the American national identity is viewed with optimism. I think that this sense of optimism and that all things we turn right in the end I think is the secret of success both at the individual and communal or say national levels.

The American Dream is based on the premise that success is guaranteed if one works hard and follows the right path. An optimistic view of the future is also one of the factors that contribute to the formation of a stable present without neglecting the past that is the basis against which we measure our success or failure. In this respect, it would be illuminating to quote Rorty Richard who remarks in his *Achieving Our Country* (1998) "You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual."<sup>2</sup>

Being conscious of one's identity is, in fact, a very important factor in achieving spiritual stability and getting along with other people successfully. Identity is not merely a theme in literature but it is itself formed by literature. A good national literature that takes into account the past of the nation and urges people to go towards a prosperous future can greatly affect and unite a nation as diverse as America. Moreover, a certain amount of uncertainty seems to be necessary for the achievement of a strong identity. As Butler notes "Crises of identity, while painful at the time, are necessary to forge a stronger, more commanding self."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in, Cullen op. cit., p. IX.

<sup>3</sup>Butler, Bowdon Tom. *50 Psychology Classics*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing. 2007. p. 84.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### PRIMARY SOURCES:

ELLISON, Ralph Waldo. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1995.

FITZGERALD, F. Scott *The Great Gatsby*. England: Penguin Books, 1996.

### SECONDARY SOURCES:

#### BOOKS:

ALICIA, A. Kent. *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

ARGYLE, Michael. *Social Encounters: Readings in social Interaction*, Penguin Books. 1973.

BARBER, Kenneth. F. *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy: Descart to Kant*, N Y Press.1994.

Butler, Bowdon Tom. *50 Psychology Classics*. London: Nichlas Brealey Publishing, 2007.

BAYM, Nina. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed.7.Vol.A.2007.

BERCOVITCH, Sacvan. *etal. The Cambridge History of American Literature*. V.02. Cambridge University Press. 1995.

BERCOVITCH, Sacvan, *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. V.01. Cambridge University Press. 1994.

BERMAN, Ronald. *Fitzgerald-Wilson-Hemingway: language and Experience*, University of Alabama Press. USA. 2003.

BINET, Alfred. *The mind and the Brain*,London. 1907.

BLOOM, Harold *Bloom's Period Studies: The Harlem Renaissance*. Yale University. USA. 2004.

- BLOOM, Harold *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York. 2006.
- BLOOM, Harold *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison*. Infobase. 2010.
- BRADLEY, Sculley. *The Tradition in American Literature*. 3rd ed, vol. 1, New York. 1967.
- BROWN, Lois *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Literary Renaissance*, New York. 2006.
- BRUCCOLI, Matthew J. (ed). *New Essays on The Great Gatsby*; Cambridge University Press. 1985.
- BYOGODA, Randy. *Race, Immigration, and American Identity in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner*. Rautledge. 2008.
- CAMPBELL, Neil and Alasdair Kean *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* .2nd Ed. Routledge. 2006.
- CARLISLE, Rodney P. *Handbook to Life in America: The Roaring Twenties*, New York. 2009.
- CURNUTT, Kirk . *The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Cambridge University Press. 2007.
- DONSKIS, Leonidas (2009) *Troubled Identity in the Modern World*. USA.
- DOUGLASS, Frederick *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, USA. 2004
- DU BOIS, W. E. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.
- EYERMAN, Ron, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge University Press. 2003.
- FABRE, Geneviève and Michel Feith. *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at Harlem Renaissance*. Indiana University Press. 2001.
- FOUNTAIN, Daniel L *Slavery Civil War and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. USA. 2010.
- FANKLIN, Benjamin V: *A Research Guide to American Literature: Colonial Literature 1607- 1776*. USA. 2010.
- GIDDENS, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Age*. USA: Stanford University Press, 1991



- GRAY, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. USA: Blackwell Publishing.2004.
- HIGH, Peter B.. *An Outline of American Literature*. Longman. 1986.
- HILLI, Michael D. and Lena M. *Ralph Elliosn's Invisible Man: A Reference Guide*, Greenwood Press.2008.
- JIM, Cullen. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, Oxford University Press. 2003.
- KAZIN, Alfred. *On Native Ground: An interpretation of Modern American Literature*, New York.
- LAUTER, Paul. *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*. Wiley-Blackwell. 2010
- LEWIS, David Levering. *The Portable: Harlem Renaissance Reader*, Penguin Books (USA). 1994.
- MARSHELL, Boswell and Carl Rollyson. *The Encyclopedia of American Literature 1607 To Present*. New York: Facts On File.Inc., 2008
- MCDONALD, Gail. *American Literature and Culture 1900-1960*. Blackwell Publishing. 2007.
- MCKENNA, George. *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism*. USA: Yale University Press. 2007.
- MCNEESE, Tim. *Discovering US History: World War I and the Roaring Twenties 1914-1928*.Chelsea House. 2010.
- O'CALLAGHAN, Bryn. *An Illustrated History of USA*. Longman, London. 1990.
- O'DONELL, Patrick. *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980*, Wiley black well, 2010.
- PORTER, Horace A. *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America*. Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2001.
- STANELY, Linda C. *The Foreign Critical Reputation of F Scott Fitzgerald 1980 to 2000: An Analyses and Annotated Bibliography*. Green Wood Publishing. 2004.
- TESSITORE, John. *F. Scott Fitzgerald, the American Dreamer*. USA. 2001.
- TRACY, Steven C. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*. Oxford University Press. 2004

WHITFIELD, Stephen J. (2007) *A Companion to 20th Century America, USA*: Blackwell Publishing.

ZUNZ, Olivier (1998) *Why the American Century?*, Chicago.

## ARTICLES:

HOGG, Michael A. and Scott A. Reid "Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms." *International Communication Association*. 2006.

LANGMAN, F. H. (2012.) "Reconsidering *Invisible Man*." *The Critical Review* 18 (1976): 114-127. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Daniel G. Marowski and Roger Matuz. Vol. 54. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 7 Nov.

BETHANY, Klassen "Under Control: Patriarchal Gender Construction in The Great Gatsby", *Universal Journal* - [www.AYJW.org](http://www.AYJW.org) Parrot Forum Parrot Trick Training Parrot Wizard Store Truman Show.

SCHREIER, Benjamin. "Desire's second act: 'race' and The Great Gatsby's cynical Americanism." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.2 (2007): 153+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 4 July 2012.

WILL, Barbara, (Fall, 2005) "The Great Gatsby and the Obscene Word" *College Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 4.

KANG, Ning. (09/2009) "Puritanism and Its Impact upon American Values", *Review of European Studies*, V. 1, N. 2

MCDUGALL, Walter A. (2004) "The Colonial Origins of American Identity" this paper is based on his presentation to the FPRI History Institute, New Perspectives on the Genesis of the U.S.A., held June 5–6, 2004.

SETZER, Suzan. "Whitman, Transcendentalism and the American Dream: Alliance with Nature's Government through Language." *Modern and Vedic Science*. V. 9 N.1 1999. USA

### **ENCYCLOPEDIAS:**

Encyclopedia Americana: International Edition Complete in Thirty Volumes Connecticut, USA: Scholastic Library Publishing, 2006.

McDonogh Cary W., Robert Gregg and Cindy H. Wong. Encyclopedia of contemporary American Culture. New York: Routledge, 2001

Benton, William, et.al. Encyclopedia Britannica. 1943. V15.

### **WEBSITES:**

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=identity>. Online Etymology Dictionary consulted 25.11. 2013.

[http://www.alaindebenoist.com/pdf/on\\_identity.pdf](http://www.alaindebenoist.com/pdf/on_identity.pdf). De Benoist Alain, "On Identity " consulted on 25. 11. 2013.

[www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx](http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx), Armstrong, Karen. "Faith and Modernity" From the World Wisdom online library:. 2005 consulted on 11.12.2012.

<http://swppr.org/Textbook/Ch%209%20Erikson.pdf>. Fleming, James S., "Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Stages ",2004 available on consulted on 04/12/2013.

[http://www.oefg.at/text/veranstaltungen/wissenschaftstag/wissenschaftstag01/Beitrag\\_Schopfl](http://www.oefg.at/text/veranstaltungen/wissenschaftstag/wissenschaftstag01/Beitrag_Schopfl). George, Schöpflin "The construction of identity" consulted 25. 11. 2013.

## **Abstract**

The theme of identity is one of the mostly debated themes in America literature. Throughout the history of American literature, the different generations tried to answer the question; what is an American? The Puritans wanted it to be God's Kingdom on Earth. The generation of independence wanted it to be the place where all people were equal. In 1865 a Civil War broke out between the American North and South which gave birth to the class of the African Americans to whom the American ideals of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness did not apply. By the outbreak of the First World War many voices claimed their rights by taking part in the question of the American identity. African Americans and women were claiming their rights of equality. In this period all the ideals that America built as the basis of its identity were being challenged. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* are two examples of the wide literature that has been written about the theme of identity in that period. In both novels, light is shed on the contradictions that the Americans face in shaping their identities both at the personal and communal levels.

### **Key words:**

Identity; Past; Future; Individual; Communal; Materialism; Class; Race; Stereotypes; National; Personal.