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Erroneous Portrayal of Black National Question in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

This article examines the several contradictory aspects of American society that the unnamed black protagonist of Ralph Ellison's novel Invisible Man encounters and that cause him to descend into absurdity. The study has relevance to identify and deal with the different contradictory aspects of American society. The article addresses on the research problems concerning to the protagonist's sufferings and his inability to identify the causes of his sufferings. The study deals with the research problems by applying the research approach (methodology) of historical materialism. In a class-based society, the protagonist, who is of black nationality, is a member of the working class. He is suppressed not only by white people but even by wealthy black people. He receives assistance not only from black people but also from lower-class white people. But he lacks the ability to identify friends from enemies. He wants to free himself and the entire black nationality from all forms of oppression, injustice, and inequality because he is a member of the black race. As a result, he joins the Brotherhood (the communist party), but he quickly leaves because he does not understand its tenets. He declines to join the Black Nationalist party and is unable to identify any alternative organizations that could help end the persecution of black people on a national level. Finally, he loses all hope, starts to perceive disorder around, and makes the decision to leave society. However, while living apart from society, he still sees ways to benefit it, which is an absurdist notion itself. The study reveals that the protagonist's queer theory of absurdism, which he develops at the novel's conclusion, does nothing to further the cause of repressed Afro-Americans; rather, it only serves to fuel their frustration and pessimism.

Key Words: Absurdism, Black Nationalism, Brotherhood, Class Struggle, Invisibility, National Question

Introduction

The article seeks to answer the unresolved problems of black national question of America portrayed in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ellison is a well-known Black novelist and essayist. During his lifetime, he produced two novels. His most ambitious work, the second novel *Juneteenth*, was released after Ellison's passing in 1999. It followed the success of his first book *Invisible Man* (1952), which received numerous awards, including the National Book Award. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison addresses the Black National Question through the unnamed, underprivileged black protagonist. Because the black protagonist in the novel mostly mirrors Ellison himself in several

aspects, it might be considered a semi-biographical work. The protagonist of the novel travels from the south to the north in search of a job, an identity, and freedom. When he is unable to find any of these things, he grows dissatisfied, leaves society, and starts to live alone. While hiding underground and becoming an "Invisible Man" to society, the unnamed black boy relates his experience. He fell down a manhole at the end of his tale as he fled a race riot to save his life. He asserts that he has remained underground ever since, living in a coal cellar illuminated by 1,369 lamps. This location serves as a metaphor for how the unnamed black protagonist is invisible in the harsh American society. In order to unravel the origin and identify the remedy of black national oppression in America, this article seeks to understand the sorrow experienced by the protagonist, the agony of his battles, and the reasons for his failures.

Portrayal of the Issue

The novel takes place roughly between 1930 and 1950. The narrator stayed in his house in the south when he was a young man, in the late 1920s or the early 1930s. He is a member of the slave family and is quite destitute. Eighty five years ago, his grandparents were slaves. He accepts: "I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves." It seems like his granddad was a freedom fighter. He might have participated in the Civil War and carried weapons to free the slaves. He had remarked to the narrator's father on his deathbed: "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction" (*Invisible* 15, 16). The narrator's grandpa has described black life in America as a constant battle that must be won if they are to exist with honor. He personally carried a gun until he gave it up during the Reconstruction. The grandfather of the narrator is implying that American blacks have no future if they flee the conflict and give up fighting. Slaves were emancipated not just because Lincoln, the union leadership, and industrial capitalists thought highly of them, but also because many black slaves joined the union army and fought against their owners and the southern confederate forces. Paul Robeson and Amilcar Cabral write: "Around 186,000 Afro-American troops served in Northern armies. They came from working class and petty bourgeois circles in the North and from free and fugitive slave elements in the south. Others took up arms against their masters and confederate troops as the Union armies approached" (17). This is an evidence of black's energy in fighting that contributes in their freedom and the emancipation of America.

The words said by the narrator's grandfather on his deathbed give us insight into the triumphs, setbacks, and betrayals in the struggle of black Americans in America from enslavement to the Civil War and Reconstruction and beyond. His grandfather and black slaves had carried guns and they were freed but they were deceived by the compromise of 1877 when they surrendered their weapons during the Reconstruction era. Mao Tsetung mentions the plight of black Americans in the period of reconstruction and onwards: "Negroes are frequently and arbitrarily arrested, beaten up and murdered by US authorities at various levels and members of the Ku Klux Klan and other racists" (1). This implies

that his grandfather is aware of the struggle or fight that is connected with the life of American blacks and has witnessed their predicament. He has therefore provided his family with the most crucial hints about Afro-American life as he lies dying.

The narrator was unable to decipher his grandfather's hints. The narrator admits: "I could never be sure of what he meant." He was raised to be a revolutionary by his grandfather, but he has chosen to be a modest and obedient one instead: "On my graduation day I delivered an oration in which I showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (*Invisible* 16, 17). He believes that the reason his graduation address was requested to be repeated at a meeting of prominent white residents of the town is why his oration was successful. He views it as a victory for his entire community. He is unaware that it is a scandal for his community rather than a victory.

In front of upper class white individuals, he will give his speech. He claims: "I was shocked to see some of the most important men of the town quite tipsy. They were all there - bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors." They do not represent the lower class white citizens and the people of black community. He is made to watch a naked blonde dance in front of them before he is allowed to speak. She was being pursued by a hypnotic merchant while dancing, but some of the more sober people were able to help her get away. The narrator is then forced to battle with other nine impoverished black lads while wearing a blindfold. The ten underprivileged black youths participating in this "battle royal" are compared to beasts. Following the "battle royal," the wealthy white males make the underprivileged black youngsters rush over an electric rug to grab fake gold coins. The big belly white spectators yelled from above as the youngsters in poverty struggled to pick up the cash off the electrified rug: "Pick it up, goddamnit, pick it up!" someone called like a bass-voiced parrot. "Go on, get it!" (*Invisible* 18, 27). This is an example of inhuman treatment of rich whites upon the poor black people.

He is only permitted to give the speech in front of those from his adversary class and race after having been severely degraded. But he asserts: "I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability…" He is unaware that they are his fierce opponents based on their race and where he stands on class. They're going to give him a scholarship to a college for black people not because they enjoy the way he speaks, but rather because they want to exploit his oratory skills to pressure his people into listening to what they want him to say. The guys are addressed by the school superintendent, who says: "Gentlemen, you see that I did not over praise this boy. He makes a good speech and some day he'll lead his people in the proper paths" (*Invisible* 25, 32). For Superintendent, guiding his people down "the right pathways" entails persuading the black population to recognize the superiority of the ruling whites. Every word the narrator says throughout his speech is carefully considered by the audience. They dislike hearing the phrase "equality." Sounds of outrage flooded the crowd when the narrator mispronounced "responsibility" as "equality." The MC steps up and tells him to fix his error while also calling attention to himself:

> "you sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?"
>
> "Oh , yes, sir," I said. "I was swallowing blood."
> "Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech." (*Invisible* 31)

This serves as justification for the narrator's speech award. He is overjoyed to receive a scholarship to the state college for Black students: "I was so moved that I could hardly express my thanks." But his joy lacked the stability to endure for a long time. The following night, the narrator has a dream in which he runs into his grandfather, who tells him that his scholarship is actually a piece of paper that reads, "To Whom It May Concern... Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (Invisible 32, 33). This hints the fate of the protagonist.

In the end, what his grandfather tells him in his dream becomes a stark reality for him. He is dismissed from the college for an error he did not make. He enrolls in a Southern Negro College, which later turns out to be just another tool used to keep the white awareness of the ruling class peaceful while keeping the poor black men invisible. A wealthy white college trustee named Mr. Norton requests that the narrator chauffeur him around the campus. Norton talks nonstop about his daughter and displays an excessive amount of interest in the story of Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper and illiterate black man who fathered his own daughter. Even Mr. Norton felt an incestuous kinship with his own daughter. John Wakeman argues: "This episode includes a powerful and significant scene in which Norton, a visiting white philanthropist, meets a black sharecropper locally notorious as the father of his own daughter's child and, listening to the black man's story, vicariously fulfills his own secret incestuous urges" (439-40). Although Mr. Norton regularly states that a Negro is his fate, he does not mean it well. According to Jonathan Baumbach: "Underlying Norton's recurrent platitude that 'the Negro is my fate' (he means that they are his potency) is the same prurience that motivates the sadism of the white citizens in the preceding scene"(qtd. in Wakeman 440). The upper class white citizens in the "battle royal" scene, especially Mr. Norton, are terrible creatures to the lowly black people, including the narrator.

They were not recognizable to the narrator. He is not conscious of race or class. He had wanted to exploit Mr. Norton and other wealthy white people as a stepping stone for himself and his black community. He finds it difficult to comprehend that reality is simply the reverse. In this regard, Frank N. Magill elaborates: "At the Golden Day, the mad doctor shrewdly observes that the young hero, so dedicated to becoming a leader of his people, has already learned to suppress not only his feelings but his humanity, that he is an invisible, walking personification of negative man" (600). The relationship between the narrator and Mr. Norton is exposed for what it is by the mad doctor. Black people will be Mr. Norton's fate until he is able to control them and until the narrator accepts to live in the shadow of wealthy white people, believing that white is right and wealthy white people are everything for the impoverished black people. The mad doctor explains: "He

believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny" (*Invisible* 95). The mad doctor reveals the naked reality of the relationship between the whites and the blacks.

Upper class blacks are not the true victims of national oppression among those of the black nationality. Liu Chun declares: "People of the oppressed nationalities who truly experience national oppression are mostly the exploited and oppressed classes, including workers and large populations of laborers, the majority of whom are peasants." (5). The majority of the lower class members of the black nationality are exploited by the higher class blacks in collaboration with the upper class whites. Dr. Bledsoe, the college president, is of African American descent. He was just like the narrator in his formative years. He was a barefoot boy from a lower class, but through years of dedication to upper class white people, he was able to win their favor and rise to the position of college president. Now that his class status has altered, he no longer distinguishes himself from the college's upper class white trustees. As he is a member of the black community and has amassed wealth and influence comparable to that of other upper-class white people, the narrator and the impoverished and powerless members of the black community mistakenly believes him as their leader. The narrator admits: "To us he was more than just a president of a college. He was a leader, a 'Statesman' who carried our problems to those above us, even unto the White House . . . He was our coal-black daddy of whom we were afraid" (*Invisible* 116). This shows the bottomless faith of the poor black people to the rich ones.

Dr. Bledsoe neither serves as their coal-black daddy nor is the leader of the underprivileged black community. He is a member of their enemy class. Mr. Norton is not being taken to the Golden Day and the old slave quarters at the narrator's desire or decision. It is Mr. Norton's choice and will. When Mr. Norton visits and Dr. Bledsoe senses that he is highly agitated, Dr. Bledsoe exaggerates the situation to appease Mr. Norton. Dr. Bledsoe sings in Mr. Norton's presence: "Mr. Norton, *Mister Norton*! I'm so sorry ... I thought I had sent you a boy who was careful, a sensible young man! Why we've never had an accident before. Never, not in seventy five years. I assure you, sir, that he shall be disciplined, severely disciplined!" In contrast to Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton seems to be more accommodating to the narrator. Mr. Norton makes it clear that the incident was not a major accident and that the narrator was not to blame. Dr. Bledsoe, however, is not content to stop there. He forgets that he used to be a black man who lived in poverty, much like the narrator. As stated by Dr. Bledsoe: "Don't be kind sir . . . you can't be soft with these people. We mustn't pamper them. An accident to a guest of this college while he is in the charge of a student is without a question the student's fault. That's one of our strictest rules!" (*Invisible* 103, 104). This exhibits Dr. Bledsoe's class stand and his attitude towards the oppressed class of his own race.

The upper class whites, for Dr. Bledsoe, are God. Dr. Bledsoe has taken them everything, including the power source. He forces the narrator becoming submissive and surrender in front of the upper class whites. According to Dr. Bledsoe: "These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesman to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth." Dr. Bledsoe's guiding principle is to win over the higher class whites and maintain his position of power. He does not think twice about taking action for this. He could choose to shield the narrator and spare him from punishment for the offense he has not committed. What makes him save the narrator, though? He even does not think twice about lying to the wealthy and powerful white upper class people if it will help him maintain his hard-earned social status. He does not care about white people or black people. To maintain his class position is his top priority. Dr. Bledsoe declares: "I don't care. I wouldn't raise my little finger to stop you. Because I don't owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? Negroes don't control this school . . . nor white folk either. True they support it, but I control it. I's big and black . . . I'm still the king down here" (*Invisible* 143, 142). Dr. Bledsoe discloses his position of authority within the college administration, but he shows little desire to defend the narrator.

The narrator imagined himself at first as a possible Booker T. Washington. Former slave, educator, and author Booker T. Washington established Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. He is not Booker T. Washington, and after being kicked out of the Negro college, he must deal with financial difficulties. Dr. Bledsoe exhibits a false kindness to the narrator by handing him seven letters that will aid in his job search in New York City. These sealed letters are addressed to a number of the college's white trustees, and Dr. Bledsoe strongly cautions the narrator not to open them. These recommendation letters are useless. Finally, the narrator visits the office of Mr. Emerson, a trustee who was the recipient of one of his letters. He runs into Emerson's son there, who reads the letter and hands it to the narrator for him to read. To his astonishment, the letter did not include a job recommendation for him. The narrator has been duped; in reality, the letters from Bledsoe present the narrator as dishonest and unreliable. The narrator had intended to return to the college in the fall after saving up some money for tuition, but Dr. Bledsoe did not want him to. Dr. Bledsoe has a strategy to pursue him farther away. In the letter to Mr. Emerson, he has penned the following: "I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler" (*Invisible* 191). This is the hidden reality of Dr. Bledsoe, which is exposed by the letter to the narrator.

The narrator does not view Dr. Bledsoe as a person who belongs to the enemy race, but the black Dr. Bledsoe betrays him more than anyone else. After reading the letter, the narrator is able to see the truth for what it is: "I had seen the letter and it had practically ordered me killed by slow degrees…" The narrator exhibits humility and submission. He has not been taught how to employ force against an enemy, thus he does not know how. He has learned how to rise via humility and dedication to others, like Mr. Norton and Dr.

Bledsoe. But he is unable to maintain his humility and submission after reading Dr. Bledsoe's letter of reference. He feels a desire to exact vengeance on Dr. Bledsoe deep within. He recognizes the value of violence and has a basic understanding of the advice his grandfather gave him on his deathbed. The narrator makes a promise: "When I stopped, gasping for breath, I decided that I would go back and kill Bledsoe. Yes, I thought, I owe it to the race and to myself. I'll kill him" (*Invisible* 194). Bledsoe's letter only opens the eyes of the narrator and he realizes his mistake on his previous strategy on dealing with his enemies.

The narrator is unable to carry out his burning desire to exact revenge on Dr. Bledsoe because of his current circumstances. To survive in New York City is the narrator's top priority. In order to obtain a low-paying position at the Liberty Paints plant, whose signature hue is "Optic White," he seeks the young Emerson's assistance. Young white Emerson assists the narrator in finding employment, but he is forced to resign from that position due to black mischievous employee Lucius Brockway. The narrator serves as Lucius Brockway's assistant for a short while. This white paint is made by a black man named Lucius Brockway. Brockway turns against the narrator because he thinks he's joining union activities. The two men quarrel as the paint is being made; as a result, one of the unattended tanks bursts, knocking the narrator out cold. In the hospital at the paint plant, the narrator awakens. His memory and speech have been temporarily lost. The white doctors seize the chance to experiment on their unnamed black patient with electric shocks. The white doctors experiment on the black patients and make them forget their culture and lineage since they do not care about their humanity. According to Robert O' Meally: "In *Invisible Man*, the factory hospital is a metaphor for the modern industrialized city that fractures black folk-consciousness. There the white doctors, with shrieks and electric shocks, endeavor to force the young fellow to learn his place, to forget his history and identity, and to yield to the power of the cold, steely machine" (227). The black fellows are considered as insignificant objects for the whites and especially for the ruling class white people.

The narrator is forbidden from going back to work after he regains his memory in the hospital. He loses his job once more. Due to the black Dr. Bledsoe and the black mischievous employee Lucius Brockway, he is dismissed from college and forced to quit his employment, respectively. Although the narrator is black, the other two blacks abuse him. However, the majorities of lower class black people assists the narrator when he is in need and direct him in the proper direction. Because of his bodily weakness, the narrator collapses on the street after leaving the hospital. Some members of the black community accompany him to Mary Rambo's house, where she nourishes his sense of black history and offers him free housing in Harlem. The narrator is reminded by Marry Rambo: "It's you young folks what's going to make the changes . . .. 'Y' all's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher." Miss Marry seems like such a sweet and dear person to the narrator. Miss Marry, like his grandfather, not only assists the narrator when he is in need but also makes an effort to steer him in the right direction. For the narrator, Miss Marry is more than just a "friend." She serves as a steady, comforting

presence for him, keeping him from veering off. Miss Marry is admired by the narrator:" . . . Marry reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive" (*Invisible* 255, 258). This is the first time the narrator ever met a person who helps him from her inner heart. Miss Marry becomes his dear one racially and from the stand point of his class affiliation.

The narrator sees an old black couple being evicted from their Harlem residence one day. A large group of spectators is gathered in front of a building where two white guys are removing an impoverished elderly black couple from their flat. The narrator comes across these spectators. The black couple is defenseless. No one in the throng has ventured to attempt to assist them. The narrator is stirred by a heated, dark, swelling maelstrom of emotion as he observes the old couple's wretched state and unintentionally starts to yell: "Black men! Brothers! Black Brothers! . . ." The narrator calls on the populace to band together and fight back against the unfair treatment of the elderly Negro couple. The narrator screams: "Let's follow a leader, let's organize. Organize . . ." (*Invisible* 275, 276). The crowd soon becomes organized, as men, women, and kids start to pick up the items that have been tossed out and lug them back into the building. The elderly couple is able to regain possession of their residence and thanks to the organization of the populace and the narrator's support.

The persecution of the Negro Couple is ultimately a class tyranny, though it initially appears to be simply national in nature. Mao Tsetung makes the following observations regarding black national oppression in the US: "In the final analysis, a national struggle is a question of class struggle. In the United States, it is only the reactionary ruling clique among the whites which is oppressing the Negro people. They can in no way represent the workers, farmers, revolutionary intellectuals, and other enlightened persons who comprise the overwhelming majority of the white people" (3). The elderly woman believes that all white people are their enemy as she and her husband are being dragged from their apartment by the two white males. She groans, her eyes averted to the sky. "These white folks, Lord. These white folks." These two white males, however, do not necessarily speak for all white people. They serve as the official spokesman for the ruling whites. The first of the two white men says: "I don't want to do this, I *have* to do it. They sent me up here to do it. If it was left to me, you could stay here till hell freezes over . . ." (*Invisible* 270). One of the two white trusties is also lugging a chair back inside as the Negro couple's abandoned belongings are later being dragged back inside the building by the people. Other white men and women are also helping the elderly black couple bring their abandoned items back into the building in addition to him. The narrator finds it puzzling that they are assisting the black couple:

> "We're friends of the people," one of the white men called.
> "Friends of what people?" I called, prepared to jump down upon him if he answered, "*you* people."
> "We're friends of *all* the common people," he shouted.

"We came up to help." (*Invisible* 282)

These white individuals who are supporting the black couple are among the white population's majority of laborers, farmers, academics, and other progressives. Though they are whites, they no longer belong to the enemy class of the narrator or the oppressed black population.

The narrator is not aware of class, though he has grown to be aware of race. The eviction of the black couple is related to racial discrimination, according to the narrator. He believes that the elderly black couple was kicked out just because they were black. Therefore, he has only addressed the black brothers in his speech in an effort to counter the injustice done to the elderly Negro couple. The narrator discusses the benefits of aiding them with Brother Jack and gives the following reasons: "'Sure, we're both black,' I said, beginning to laugh. / He smiled, his eyes intense upon my face. / 'Seriously, are they your relatives?' / 'Sure, we were burned in the same oven,' I said" (*Invisible* 292). The narrator is aware that the elderly couple is black, but he is unaware of their extreme poverty and helplessness. If the elderly Black couple were wealthy, no one would make them vacate the flat. The narrator would not advocate for the elderly Negro couple if he belonged to the upper class black community, like Dr. Bledsoe. The elderly Negro couple experiences racial oppression, but they also experience class oppression because they are members of the oppressed class. In addition to sharing a racial identity, the narrator and the elderly Negro couple are intimate because they belong to the same downtrodden class.

The narrator obtains new opportunities in his life after he delivered speech protesting eviction. Brother Jack, a leader of a political group that purports to aid the socially underprivileged, overhears his speech and offers him a place as a spokesperson for the Brotherhood. It is said that the Brotherhood is an organization made up of all ordinary black and white people who work together for the betterment of all. One of the key figures in the Brotherhood is Brother Jack, a member of the white community. Brother Jack informs the narrator of the Brotherhood's purpose: "What are we doing? What is our mission? It's simple; we are working for a better world for all people. It's that simple. Too many have been dispossessed of their heritage, and we have banded together in Brotherhood so as to do something about it" (*Invisible* 304). Jack's explanation of the Brotherhood makes it quite evident that it is a group dedicated to assisting those who are subjected to social and economic oppression. Meally claims: "In the novel the Brotherhood stands, to a large extent, for the American communist party" (236). The narrator's interpretation of the Brotherhood after joining is as follows:

> I thought of Bledsoe and Norton and what they had done. By kicking me into the dark they'd made me see the possibility of achieving something greater and more important than I'd ever dreamed. Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white, but a way which, if one lived long enough and worked hard enough, could lead to the highest possible rewards. Here was a way to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really

> operated. For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the possibility existed. I had only to work and learn and survive in order to go to the top. (*Invisible* 354-55)

The Brotherhood, according to the narrator, is a place where blacks and whites can coexist. However, he sees the Brotherhood as a tool to help him achieve his personal goals and as a ladder to success. In the class struggle, the true communist party solely advocates for the oppressed class as a whole, not for any individual's personal gain. The communist party is the only group capable of uniting both black and white members of the oppressed class in order to put an end to all forms of societal oppression, especially black national oppression in the US. In the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx states: "The communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole" (49). The communist party was founded with the goal of eradicating all forms of oppression against people, not only making minor adjustments to the existing oppressive system. The Revolutionary Communist Party of the USA's Central Committee declares: “An actual revolution does not mean trying to make some changes *within* this system–it means *overthrowing* this system and bringing into being a radically different and far better system” (1). The communist party seeks to carry out an actual revolution that overthrows the existing system in favor of a new, better one rather than just talking about reforming the existing one. The narrator's sole choice if he wants to free himself and his race from national oppression is the Brotherhood, which looks to be a communist party in the novel. However, the narrator joins the Brotherhood with the incorrect belief that he can use the organization to further his own interests and aspirations.

The narrator is given responsibility for promoting the struggle in Harlem after joining the Brotherhood. The narrator gives speeches on various programs, rises to prominence in the Brotherhood, and takes pleasure in his work. But one day he gets an anonymous note telling him to keep in mind his status as a black man in the Brotherhood. Shortly after, Brother Wrestrum, a black Brotherhood member, accuses the narrator of trying to exploit the Brotherhood to further a self-centered aim for personal upliftment. Brother Wrestrum has blamed the narrator because he is too zealous to the achievements of the narrator and there is some validity to his charge as well. The Brotherhood transfers the narrator to another position as an advocate of women's rights while a committee looks into the allegations. The incident makes the narrator feel a little frustrated about his support for the Brotherhood. The narrator is upset:

> Brotherhood was something to which men could give themselves completely; that was its strength and my strength, and it was this sense of wholeness that guaranteed that it would change the course of history. This I had believed with all my being, but now, though still inwardly affirming that belief, I felt a blighting hurt which prevented me from trying further to defend myself. (*Invisible* 406)

The narrator's critical assessment of the Brotherhood is based on this minor episode. The Brotherhood eventually sends the narrator back to Harlem, where he finds that Clifton has vanished. Later, the narrator comes across Clifton selling dancing sambo dolls on the street. The sambo dolls stand in for the archetype of the obedient but lethargic slave. To sell his goods on the street, Clifton lacks a permit. He is detained by white police officers, who then kill him in front of the narrator and the others. The narrator arranges Clifton's funeral on his own initiative and delivers an eulogy in which he extols the virtues of his deceased friend, influencing public opinion in Clifton's favor. The Brotherhood is indignant with him for conducting the burial without permission and Jack strongly rebukes him: “The great tactician of *personal* responsibility regrets our absence...” (*Invisible* 464). The biggest criticism leveled against the narrator is that he took action without first seeking advice from the Brotherhood's top officials. The Brotherhood instructs the narrator to visit Brother Hambro in order to hear about the group's fresh tactics in Harlem.

The narrator's frustration with the Brotherhood grows when Brother Jack and the Brotherhood disagree on the issue of Tod Clifton's funeral. Within the communist party, disagreements over specific issues are normal, but they are resolved through internal conflict. The narrator, however, interprets it negatively and says: "Some of me, too, had died with Tod Clifton. So I would see Hambro for whatever it was worth." As he walks into his house, Brother Hambro tells the narrator that the Brotherhood has resolved to lessen the animosity of the Black community in Harlem. He learns from Hambro: "In fact, we now have to slow them down for their own good. It's a scientific necessity." Since Clifton's funeral, the unrest surrounding racial relations in Harlem has gotten worse. The narrator intends for a rapid outcome leading the agitation further. However, after examining the upheaval, the Brotherhood has decided that it would not be the ideal time to spearhead the movement further because doing so would undermine the Brotherhood's larger strategy. Hambro points out: "I mean only that they must be brought along more slowly. They can't be allowed to upset the tempo of the master plan. Timing is all important" (*Invisible* 478, 503, 504). Hambro's views contradict with the views of the narrator.

The narrator disagrees with Hambro's opinions and believes that the Brotherhood opposes the black movement in Harlem. The narrator also comes to the conclusion that the Brotherhood is a group of white men that oppresses black people. Even though the black member Brother Wrestrum criticizes the narrator for the first time in the Brotherhood, the narrator simply compares the Brotherhood to Brother Jack and the white members, saying that they are no different from Norton and Emerson. The narrator argues: "And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure" (*Invisible* 508). The narrator almost decides to leave the Brotherhood for this reason alone. Meally comments on the narrator's decision to leave the Brotherhood: "In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist's decision to renounce his whole hearted support for the Brotherhood is based on his discovery that the radical group is racist" (236). Since he is being used by Mr. Norton as a weapon to target blacks for their advantages, the narrator believes that the Brotherhood has also utilized him accordingly.

He concludes that the Brotherhood has employed him in accordance with the adage "use a nigger to catch a nigger" (Invisible 558).

If the narrator comes to the conclusion that the Brotherhood is racist, he has the option—though it is not a good option—of joining Ras the Exhorter's Black Nationalist movement. In the novel, Ras the Exhorter is the leader of a group that adhered to Black Nationalism's guiding principles. A bourgeois ideology known as "black nationalism" organizes all members of a nation's oppressor and victim classes against all other nations. Marxist Leninist revolutionary political organization writes: "All nationalism, both of the oppressor and the oppressed nations, is the ideology of the bourgeoisie. It is based on the idea of 'national unity' - the unity of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie of one nation against all other nations" (7). Ras the Exhorter has solely organized black people in his organization and views all members of the white nationality as his adversaries. Ras states: "We organize-organization is good - but we organize black. BLACK!" (373). Ras further states: "No! Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of the black people when the white folks have got what they wahnt and done gone off laughing in your face and you stinking and chocked up with white maggots" (*Invisible* 375). The narrator who joins the Brotherhood is criticized by Ras. Ras views the Brotherhood as an organization of white people and views it as an adversarial organization.

The narrator shares Ras the Exhorter's opinions towards the black movement, after he quits the Brotherhood, accusing it of being racist. However, the narrator does not get any closer to Ras the Exhorter's black movement. Ras the Exhorter, the leader of the race riot that begins in Harlem at the end of the story, is portrayed by the narrator as a tremendous terrorist. They are described by the narrator as:

> They moved in a tight-knit order, carrying sticks and clubs, shotguns and rifles, led by Ras the Exhorter become Ras the Destroyer upon a great black horse. A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem, than out of even this Harlem night, yet real, alive, alarming. (*Invisible* 556)

The narrator views racial movements as a form of extreme terrorism since he is unable to comprehend their essence. He believes that Ras's actions merely serve to frighten and frustrate the country's beleaguered black minority rather than bringing about any meaningful reforms.

The narrator descends into absurdity as a result of his incapacity to comprehend the various conflicting parts of the American society. The world is totally ludicrous in his eyes. He says: "And I realized that it was better to live out one's own folly than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's" (*Invisible* 559).The narrator is more drawn to Jim Trueblood and Rinehart, the icons of disorder, because of his confusion about how the world works. By getting his own daughter pregnant, Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper in the South, embraced chaos. Rinehart, a Harlem gambler, lover, priest, and seer, has

evolved into a master chaos manipulator. Meally claims: "Indeed, what these black men have most in common is those both has stood before teeming chaos and have survived" (244). The narrator chooses to accept disorder because, like these two black guys, he believes there are endless opportunities for improvement. In fact, the narrator makes the decision to live underground and isolate himself from society in order to explore these limitless possibilities. However, it is unclear what he means by these limitless possibilities and how he makes them happen. No matter how the narrator rationalizes his hypothesis of chaos, it just serves to highlight how little he knows about this intricate world. There are many inconsistencies in the world. Whites and Blacks, Upper Class and Lower Class Whites, Upper Class and Lower Class Blacks, Whites and Red Indians and Other Nationalities, Males and Females, and so on are all in antagonism to one another in American society. These opposing forces maintain unity relatively and are in a constant conflict. It is an unavoidable dialectical norm. Those who are not familiar with dialectics' rules start to notice chaos and absurdity everywhere. This is the situation involving the *Invisible Man*'s narrator.

Conclusion

This article comes to a conclusion on the narrator's growth that contradicts Ralph Ellison's assertion. In an interview with the Paris Review, Ellison asserts that in his novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light or from ignorance to enlightenment or from invisibility to visibility (qtd. in Callahan 41). However, the novel's plot demonstrates that the narrator's progression is one from blackness to blackness, or from ignorance to ignorance and from invisibility to invisibility. From the start to the conclusion, the narrator is the same naive black youngster. The narrator neither knew the path to his own independence or that of his black community at the beginning of the story nor does he discover it at the conclusion. His understanding of chaos tells him that neither the Brotherhood nor the Black Nationalist can free him or the entirety of his oppressed black ethnicity, and neither has he found any other forces, nor does he believe he can invent them on his own. He should shift into absurdism, according to his chaos theory. He creates an absurdist scheme in which he envisions limitless ways to serve society while living apart from it. The narrator rejects both the communist and nationalist ideas and embraces absurdism instead. His absurdist view of the black national question not only distorts the struggles of the oppressed Blacks but also strengthens the political position of the ruling whites by inciting frustration and despair in the group. In this regard, even though the novel brings up the subject of African Americans, it eventually speaks negatively of them. In this aspect, John Oliver Killens, an African American author, denounced the novel as a "vicious perversion of Negro life" (qtd. in Haley 367). Ellison not only shows how powerless blacks are in comparison to the world of the wealthy whites, but he also downplays the accomplishments of blacks in their fights since the end of the civil war.

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