# "I should have gone to Mary's": Filling the Void in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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**Abstract:**
Following the latest direction of the study on *Invisible Man*, this article further examines the complex relationship between race and sexuality in Ellison's novel. Racism and sexism are intermingled in the novel, and they serve as the driving forces of the narrative dominated by male characters. The men in Ellison's novel blindly pursue the same ideal masculinity, which is defined as the combination of social power and sexual prowess. Assuming that their masculinity is incomplete in one way or another, the male characters chase each other desiring the ideal, which renders the men even more insecure about their masculinity. As the characters do not see the complete masculinity in themselves, the novel as a whole seems to be devoid of the ideal 'Man.' However, the 'Man' decidedly exists in the novel, but not in one person. African-American and Caucasian male characters collectively create the complete form of the ideal 'Man' and exert oppressive power over African-American women. Focusing on the perspective of the narrator, this article first examines how African-American and Caucasian men give chase to each other in search of an ideal masculinity. Next, the ways in which African-American women are overshadowed as a result of the men's blind chase are discussed. Finally, this article looks at how these doubly oppressed women can fill a void in the novel which is faced with an impasse as the male characters struggle to reach the perfect masculinity.

1 Since its publication in 1952, the criticism of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has continuously shifted its focus. Following an African-American narrator who starts as an eloquent, promising scholarship awardee and ends as a threat to his college and to the society, the novel suggests both microcosmic and macrocosmic views on America in the 1930s. Ellison's earlier critics argued that the novel distinctively presents a universal humanist vision through the narrator's individual *Bildungsroman*. Kenneth Burke, comparing *Invisible Man* to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, defines Ellison's novel as an "epoch-making book" which "reconstructs its time and takes on a universal poignancy" (79). Taking a similar approach, Joseph Frank states that Ellison's novel is a "negative Bildungsroman" where the "narrator-hero learns that everything he has been taught to believe […] is actually false and treacherous" (37). Recently, critics have focused more on the novel's racial discourse. Jack Turner argues that without "awakening to race," the narrator cannot achieve the "liberal democratic character" in the novel by which the earlier critics of Ellison meant the narrator's individual selfhood seen from the universal humanist vision (655). The discussion of the novel also turned to gender issues. In *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* (2005), Daniel Y. Kim states that in *Invisible Man*, "the black man signifies for the white man all the

masculine plenitude he feels himself to lack" and that the black townsman named Trueblood in particular, who rapes his own daughter and proudly talks about it to Caucasian male audiences, demonstrates how "the Negrophobic white man is, at bottom, both a Negrophile and a homosexual" (142). Given that some African-American male characters in the novel become a symbol of masculinity to which Caucasian male characters feel inferior, Kim's argument holds much truth. However, it should also be noted that there are a few African-American male characters who envy the Caucasian male characters' masculinity in terms of social power. Additionally, it is clear how self-conscious the narrator is of his skin color which makes him feel socially inferior to characters like Jack and Mr. Norton, thus supporting Turner's argument about the novel's fundamental racial awareness.

2 Following the latest direction of the study on *Invisible Man*, this article will further examine the complex relationship between race and sexuality presented in Ellison's novel. Racism and sexism are intermingled in the novel, and they are the driving forces of the narrative dominated by male characters. In the novel, Caucasian male characters indirectly fulfill their sexual desire by socially dominating African-American male characters, and the latter in turn compensate for the sense of social inferiority by exerting sexual prowess over the wives of the former. The men in Ellison's novel blindly pursue the same ideal masculinity, which is defined as the combination of social power and virility. Assuming that their masculinity is incomplete in one way or another, the male characters chase each other desiring the ideal, which renders the men even more insecure. As the characters do not see the complete masculinity in themselves, the novel as a whole seems to be devoid of the ideal 'Man.' However, the 'Man' decidedly exists in the novel, just not in one person. African-American and Caucasian male characters collectively form the complete form of the ideal 'Man' and exert oppressive power over African-American female characters. In the hierarchical structure drawn from the racist and sexist society of America in the 1930s, the group in power would be Caucasian males, who possessed both social power and gender dominance. Although drawing the comparison between Caucasian women and African-American men in terms of their social strata would be tricky and require further deliberate exploration, it is obvious that African-American women, discriminated against their race and sexuality simultaneously, would be placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy.[1] In Ellison's

[1] The novel is set in the American South as well as in Harlem, New York, in the 1930s. In New York, women were enfranchised in 1917, but the anti-suffragist movement continued until the 1920s, exerting pressure on the burgeoning rights of Caucasian women. Meanwhile, the de jure segregation of the Jim Crow Laws was continued until the mid-1960s in which the Voting Rights Acts was signed and realized what C. Vann Woodward called "unparalleled legislative achievement for civil rights" (186). Considering the history of

novel, the African-American women are doubly oppressed by the society, i.e. racially and sexually, and their presence and potential are overlooked. Focusing on the perspective of the narrator, this article will first examine how African-American and Caucasian men give chase to each other in search of an ideal masculinity. Next, the way in which African-American women are overshadowed as a result of the men's blind chase will be discussed. Finally, this article will look at how these doubly oppressed women can fill a void in the novel which is faced with an impasse as the male characters struggle to reach the perfect masculinity.

3 In *Invisible Man*, Caucasian male characters project the stereotypes of large physique, violence, and sexual prowess onto African-American men. Among these stereotypes, African-American men's sexual prowess is idolized by Caucasian men as illustrated in Norton's encounter with Trueblood. Compared to Trueblood who impregnates his own daughter, Mr. Norton cannot act upon the incestuous desire he and Trueblood share. Reminiscing about his daughter, Mr. Norton describes her as "more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet" (Ellison, *Invisible* 42). Mr. Norton's strong affection makes him deny the father-daughter relationship. What makes Mr. Norton's fascination even greater is probably the fact that his daughter passed away and therefore Mr. Norton can never see her again. Introduced to Trueblood's incestuous history, Mr. Norton insists that he should talk to the African-American man for more anecdotal details. Here, Trueblood is used for Mr. Norton's vicarious satisfaction of making love with one's own daughter. Mr. Norton immerses himself in Trueblood's incest narrative, so much so that the narrator, although wishing to leave, hesitates to interrupt the spellbound Caucasian man. Trueblood's extreme virility leads to Mr. Norton's indirect, aural voyeurism, allowing the Caucasian man alternative pleasure.

4 It is worth noting that Mr. Norton is not the only one who idealizes Trueblood's masculinity. Trueblood "had told the story many, many times" to the Caucasian men who also seek vicarious pleasure (54). The visitors to Trueblood's house represent the Caucasian men's pursuit of an extremely virile masculinity. Trueblood says that some of his audiences even pay for the story: "they gimme more help [money] than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. […] [T]he Caucasian folks treats me fine" (67-68). Trueblood's masculinity, the virility in particular, becomes the object of admiration, for

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women's suffrage movement and Jim Crow law's enduring influence, it would require arduous research in order to determine the social strata of Caucasian women and African-American men in the 1930s. For more detailed information, please consult "The Strange Career of Jim Crow" (2001) by C. Vann Woodward and "The Concise History of Woman Suffrage" (2005) by Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle. In this article, the ninth paragraph discusses the ambiguous power relation between African-American men and Caucasian women.

which the Caucasian audience has to pay. Sexuality here becomes a currency, momentarily determining the power relations between African-American and Caucasian characters. "[S]taring intensely at Trueblood," Mr. Norton also pays Trueblood a hundred dollars, because his hidden desire is fulfilled (69). At the same time, Mr. Norton realizes his inferiority to the African-American man, "his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation" (51). As the narrator perceives, Mr. Norton's blue eyes and Trueblood's black face represent the general stereotyping of African-American men's masculinity and the Caucasian men's collective envy of it. In addition to the social power they already have, the Caucasian men desire African-American men's sexual prowess in order to reach the ideal masculinity.

5 In an effort to compensate for his sense of inferiority, Mr. Norton uses the social power he has as one of the "white trustees" of the college the narrator attends. In the slave quarters where Trueblood lives, Mr. Norton keeps reeling along the road while repeatedly blaming the hot weather. After meeting Trueblood, Mr. Norton faints and cannot recover until he enlists the help of a doctor in the Golden Day, a bar and brothel frequented by African-American veterans. Similar to Trueblood's house, the Golden Day is a place in which African-American men's masculinity is predominant. Once he returns to the college campus, Mr. Norton becomes a socially influential figure as a Caucasian trustee. Although Mr. Norton tells the narrator that everything is going to be fine, his nonchalant face betrays his true intention of punishing the narrator. Like a child and a parent, the narrator and Mr. Norton create the picture of an African-American slave and a Caucasian master, further supported by the atmosphere of Mr. Norton's lodging, "with white pillars like those of an old plantation manor house," which resembles a Southern mansion from the times of American Slavery (100). In this way, Mr. Norton substitutes social power for his ineffective virility and compensates for the humility he feels in the slave quarters.

6 The narrator also seeks compensation for his undermined masculinity. What he is shown as lacking in social power, the narrator tries to make up for in a heightened sexuality. Expelled from the college, the narrator arrives in Harlem, New York, where he learns about his inferior social status as an African-American man. Once he feels an urge to fight for his own freedom, the narrator joins the Brotherhood, a civil rights organization led by a Caucasian man named Jack.[2] Notwithstanding the organization's apparent dedication to the

[2] The Brotherhood in which the narrator participates as its spokesperson is comprised of both Caucasian and African-American people. The organization is apparently committed to the betterment of African-American people's social circumstances. Christopher Z. Hobson suggests that the readers can easily associate "the

betterment of African-American people's lot, there is yet another hierarchy within the Brotherhood which ultimately places the African-American narrator under the Caucasian members like Jack, depriving him of "a chance to speak" (308). Determined to compromise the Brotherhood, the narrator approaches Caucasian men's wives using his masculinity.

7 Unlike their Caucasian husbands, the narrator sexually appeals to the Caucasian women. A case in point would be Hubert, one of the Caucasian members of the Brotherhood, who is always outside and does not sleep with his wife who instead seduces the narrator. In a way, the narrator gives the husband-less wife the feeling of security. Moreover, the physical manifestation of the narrator's masculinity is "so powerful, so – so *primitive*!" (413). His interracial affair with Hubert's wife is an attempt to regain some of the social power he feels he has lost. Hubert may be influential as a Caucasian man in the public sphere, but in terms of sexual power and domestic influence, the narrator is more successful than Hubert, being appraised and admired by the wife. In addition, enticing Hubert's wife with his prominent display of sexuality, the narrator reemphasizes the Caucasian men's insecure masculinity. In consequence, the narrator's sense of social inferiority is compensated.

8 The narrator's exertion of sexual prowess culminates when he seduces Sybil, "one of the big shots' [most influential Caucasian men's] wives" (516). Calling herself as a "nymphomaniac" (519), Sybil indicates that her sexual fantasy and desire cannot be fulfilled by her husband who is often absent from the house much like Hubert. In place of her husband, Sybil wants the narrator to fulfil her rape fantasy. When an intoxicated Sybil soon falls asleep, the narrator does not sleep with her; when she wakes up, however, the narrator lies that he did. "I leaped straight out of the wall," the narrator says to Sybil, "I overpowered you in the empty lobby – remember? I smothered your terrified screams" (524). Sybil shows her satisfaction by demanding to stay with him all night long. When the narrator sends Sybil home in a husband-like manner and Sybil follows the instruction, he succeeds in taking the Caucasian man's place as a husband and as the manifestation of masculinity.

9 It is interesting how the narrator's attempt to substitute sexual prowess for the feeling of social inferiority falls short. Attracting Caucasian women, the narrator uses the "primitive" image of masculinity, which exists in the Caucasian women's imagination as a stereotypical African-American men's sexuality. Therefore, the narrator's strategy to lure the women emphasizes the bestiality of his masculinity. This may be linked to the case of Trueblood where the farmer's incestuous narrative is encouraged and financially supported by a number

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Brotherhood" with the Communist Party in America during the 1930s and that through the narrator's "political education and transition," Ellison presents the evolution of African-American "leftists" (57).

of Caucasian men; Trueblood's masculinity is the manifestation of uncontrolled sexual desire. It is important to note that during the imaginary intercourse with Sybil, the narrator's individual identity is not considered: "Was she [Sybil] calling me beautiful or boogieful, beautiful or sublime … What'd either mean? I am invisible" (529). The narrator realizes that he is merely one of the African-American men with 'primitive' sexual prowess He may use Sybil for his psychological compensation, but Sybil also uses him to fulfill her own fantasy about African-American men. Similarly, Hubert's wife desires the narrator's perceived primitiveness in her husband's absence. In this fashion, the narrator senses the ambiguous power relation between him and the Caucasian wives and wonders "[w]ho's taking revenge on whom?" (520). In brief, the narrator's roundabout way of being superior to the Caucasian men could actually undermine his masculinity, demonstrating only that his pursuit of the ideal may be self-defeating.

10 In the end, the narrator's last move to compensate for the sense of inferiority is to hide his masculinity altogether from the racist and sexist world. As Ellison's earlier critics pointed out, the novel presents the narrator's rites of passage as he goes through the sociopolitical transitions.[3] In regard to reaching the perfect, ideal masculinity, the narrator realizes the futility of the pursuit. The narrator's masculinity is compromised in terms of both social power and virility; his social impact cannot override that of Caucasian male characters like Mr. Norton and Jack, and his sexuality is only interpreted as primitive and bestial. In one way or another, the narrator's masculinity is manipulated by Caucasian characters. Cast out from the Brotherhood and inopportunely chased by two police officers, the narrator accidentally falls into an uncovered manhole, in which he makes up his mind that he will never be above ground again. This, according to the narrator, is the only "way to destroy" the Caucasian manipulators (564). When above ground, his masculinity does not help the narrator, who fails to use it fully and effectively. Instead, it helps the Caucasian figures, who use the African-American men for fulfilling their sexual desire and for the sense of social superiority. In the manhole, however, the narrator's masculinity is invisible, not allowing anyone to make use of sexual and social parts of it. The expected results of hiding are, therefore, freeing the narrator's masculinity from Caucasian men and women's manipulation and, subsequently, revealing the Caucasian men's insecurity. Imagining the Caucasian men aboveground, who are now bereft of the much-abused, socially-constructed African-American masculinity, the

[3] In "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded Bildungsroman," his letter to Ellison, Kenneth Burke states that the novel puts the narrator through "the transformation needed to present the entire inventory of the 'ambiguities' the author had to confront in the process of growing up" (68).

narrator is contented. Indeed, to hide underground seems to be the best and only way the narrator can find to revenge on the domination and manipulation above ground.

11 The narrator's conviction that Caucasian men also possess an incomplete masculinity is ascertained by his dream. Some might argue that the narrator's dream about being castrated by Jack symbolizes the narrator's own fear of losing his masculinity, because eventually, it is the narrator who is desexualized. Such an argument would be only partially true. Projected by Ellison onto the narrator's subconscious, the dream includes the narrator's hope to reemphasize Caucasian men's sense of insecurity. Pointing at his removed testes, the narrator explains to Jack how his own body part can represent their mutual fear of imperfect masculinity: "That there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water […] But *your* sun […] And *your* moon […] *Your* world" (570; emphasis added). While the narrator explicates why their "generation" is altogether in danger due to the castration, the bridge, beneath the arch of which the narrator's testes are hanging, turns into a moving robot and disappears with the emblem of masculinity. The narrator shouts to the monster that is receding with the symbolic testicles, "No, no, *we* must stop him!" (570; emphasis added). In the dream, the narrator laughs at the people who demand his castration, and this laughter shocks the audience, including Jack and Mr. Norton. The laughter is derived from the narrator's realization of the crowds' mutual fear of having incomplete masculinity. By castrating the narrator, Jack eliminates African-American men's masculinity to which his own masculinity is not comparable. In consequence, the narrator's dream shows the Caucasian man Jack's fear of being an imperfect 'Man.' Hence the narrator's dream reveals the male characters' common pursuit and common insecurity. The narrator finds himself remaining intact after the allegedly fatal dream: "I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was *whole*" (571; emphasis added). In the end, the narrator confidently refers to his "hibernation" underground as the "greatest social crime" (581), which represents the narrator's rebellion against the white supremacy.

12 As Caucasian and African-American male characters feel insecure about their masculinity, it seems that the novel does not show the (perfect form of the) ideal masculinity. However, the novel as a whole, not in one individual character, assumes the ideal masculinity, the Caucasian male characters accounting for the social power, and the African-American male characters embodying the virility. Together, these male characters form the idealized masculinity while still chasing each other to make up for their perceived weaknesses. In other words, the ideal 'Man' is only invisible but clearly exists in the novel. The narrator realizes how an African-American man like himself can be "*part of them*

[Caucasian men] as well as apart from them" (575). Some might argue that the racially stereotyped masculinity, i.e. social power in Caucasian men and virility in African-American men, is itself racist. However, as already discussed, the novel presents remarkably racist-stereotyped rendering of the characters. In chapter 1, the narrator is forced to participate in a battle royal in which African-American men are made to fight against each other, before which a naked Caucasian woman appears to mesmerize the fighters. According to Kim, the African-American men "assume a heightened masculinity," because the "black male body" not only serves as an agent of violence but also "display[s] a sexual arousal" in place of Caucasian men" (53).[4] While Caucasian men are sitting outside the boxing ring enjoying the fight, the narrator and other African-American men are ordered to look at the naked woman. In this way, the African-American male characters are highly sexualized along with the Caucasian female characters. On the other hand, social power is not endowed to these men, especially when they are under Caucasian men's authority, they do not have any social influence. Even the college president Dr. Bledsoe, who is probably the most socially powerful African-American figure in the novel, is humbled in front of the "white visitors," "refusing to sit down, […] his hat in his hand, […] then leaving with a humble bow" (Ellison 106). Clearly, the novel provides racially stereotyped male characterizations while not allowing the ideal masculinity to any individual character. Instead, the novel presents perfect masculinity, when combining the Caucasian and African-American male characters, as being comprised of both social power and sexual prowess.

13 Once created, the complete masculinity overshadows the existence of African-American women, rendering their role merely functional. Unlike the Caucasian women characters whose social status is ambiguous, African-American female characters clearly show that they are at the bottom of the social pyramid, discriminated against their race as well as sexuality.[5] When Mr. Norton and the narrator get out of their car with the intention of talking with Trueblood, the social power of a Caucasian man's masculinity and the sexual prowess of an African-American man's masculinity are combined. With the introduction of the complete form of 'Man,' Trueblood's wife and daughter literally disappear from the scene

[4] In fact, Kim states that African-American men in Ellison's novel, including the narrator, possess ambiguous sexuality, displaying both masculine and feminine traits. For more explication, please refer to Kim's book "Writing Manhood", especially to chapter 1, "Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and Its Homophobic Critique in Invisible Man."

[5] Caucasian women characters' presence is limited to domestic spheres, and they are not allowed much influence in the outer world where male characters lead. Nonetheless, Caucasian women hold an ambiguous rank in the novel's social hierarchy and give the readers a hint that they may use African-American men for their own benefit, manipulating the men into fulfilling their sexual fantasy.

as the narrator sees “the two women turn and run frantically behind the house, their movements heavy and flatfooted” (50). To the two male visitors, Trueblood’s wife and daughter are only seen as proof of Trueblood’s excessive sexual prowess. Similarly, the “big woman” at the Brotherhood meeting exists in order to evidence the masculinity completed by Caucasian leader Jack and African-American member Tod Clifton whose “very black and very handsome” figure assuredly draws “the quick intake of a woman’s pleasurable sigh” (363). Not given a name, let alone called “Sister,” the “big woman” is disregarded as part of the meeting and literally removed from the narrative. The “big woman” insightfully warns that Ras the Exhorter, a radical Black Nationalist leader, and his followers “would attack and denounce the white meat of a roasted chicken,” meaning that the Caucasian members of the Brotherhood could be in danger (365). However, her warning is only laughed at, and without much response, the “Brothers” (including the narrator) remain quiet until Clifton concludes her opinion by saying, “We’ll take care of that” (365). After that, the “big woman” is neither described nor given any voice. As Trueblood’s women go behind the house when they finish emphasizing men’s completed masculinity, the “big woman” does not come into view again once she reinforces the power of ‘Man,’ remaining unseen and anonymous until the end. In brief, these African-American women are backgrounds to highlight masculinity and, accordingly, are eliminated from the narrative after carrying out their role.

14 When an African-American woman makes frequent appearances, like Mary Rambo does, Ellison projects the stereotypical characterization of an African-American mother onto her. While staying at home and shunning social involvement, Mary mainly concerns herself with the narrator’s physical and emotional well-being. When the narrator has no place to stay in Harlem at first, Mary insists that he should live in her house. Although he is unable to pay the rent, the narrator stays with Mary who worries about his meal most of the time: “Soon’s I’ve had mine [my coffee], I’ll see what kind of breakfast I can whip together” (323). Even when the narrator tries to discuss the issue of rent, Mary turns back to the matter of food: “I’m not worried ’cause when you get it [money] I know you’ll pay me. Meanwhile you forget it. Nobody in this house is going to starve” (323). According to Ann Folwell Stanford, Mary is one of “the mother/mammy/Madonna figures in *Invisible Man*” (20). Treating the narrator as if he is her own son, Mary becomes a domesticated mammy archetype, an enslaved African-American nanny or mother in the old South. There are quite a few anonymous male residents in Mary’s house, in and out of which they freely come, and Mary shows unrequited affection for the “boys.” Unlike the narrator who goes through eventful, step-by-step personal growth, Mary does not experience much character development, thus

remaining as a flat character. Stanford states that “Mary Rambo joins a long line of textual representations of women as ‘helpers,’ ‘caretakers,’ and ‘nurturers’” (22). While she encourages the narrator to go out and fight for the rights of African-American people, she does not participate in the social movement. Mary thus reinforces her stereotypical role by believing that an African-American man like the narrator needs her as “a woman to keep an eye on [him]” (Ellison, *Invisible* 252). When the narrator recovers, Mary’s duty as a mother is finished, and she is out of the novel’s prime focus just as Trueblood’s women and the “big woman” are.

15 In Mary’s case, the female character’s potential is presented through the very stereotype projected onto her. Because Mary does not possess social power outside her apartment, let alone shows sexual prowess, the narrator tries to detach himself from her when he becomes part of the Brotherhood. No matter how incomplete she appears to the male character’s perspective, Mary is a powerful mother figure with the power of healing and with enough sustenance to feed the homeless colored boys. She is a breadwinner and a leading motivator. Not only does she own a house and receive African-American men into it, but she also encourages them to make changes in the world. When the narrator leaves her house and falls deep into the manhole, Mary haunts his mind: “In the morning I’ll remove the lid … Mary, I should have gone to Mary’s” (567). Mary’s encouragement and the warmth leave a significant impact on the narrator. A second look at her may reveal that Mary is not a mere landlady or a nanny, but an influential leader figure with caring motherliness.

16 Although the narrator becomes part of the men overshadowing African-American women, he sees several clues as to how much potential the women have. Indeed, the images of colored women are distorted, but when examined closely, they uncover different aspects of Ellison’s novel. First of all, Trueblood’s “women” are both child bearers, appearing “with the weary, full-fronted motions of far-gone pregnancy” (47). Nonetheless, they are vigorous enough to take care of the run-down domestic space, in a dilapidated house in the slave-quarter section. When the narrator and Mr. Norton visit the house, the women are laboring in the domestic space, “washing clothes in an iron pot” (47). They are making life go on while being ready to create the next generation. Trueblood’s women could be the originators of such a new generation as the narrator, who will continue to “keep up the good fight” and “[l]earn it to the young’uns,” fulfilling the deathbed will of the narrator’s grandfather (16). Secondly, the “big woman” from the Brotherhood meeting also shows potential. The remarks she makes are made up either of tongue slips, mistaking Ras the Exhorter as “Extortor,” or of humorous culinary expressions, comparing the Caucasian members of the Brotherhood to

"the white meat of a roasted chicken" (365). Nonetheless, her observation is right to the point. Indeed, Ras is an "extorter" who advocates violence while leading an extremist movement to change the lot of the African descendants in America, especially those from Ethiopia. One of the historically realistic figures that could be linked to Ras is Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a famous Jamaican activist who supported Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism during the 1920s and 30s.[6] Like Ras, Garvey emphasized the solidarity of African descendants and despised African-American activists' cooperation with Caucasian people.[7] Despite the similarities, Ellison makes it clear that he is not referring to Garvey in the novel. Clifton explains to the narrator how "he [Garvey] didn't last" and no one in the novel has seen the legendary figure (367). Even if this historical activist is only a vague model for Ras, the main reason why Ras disapproves of the narrator and other African-American Brotherhood members is that they cooperate with Caucasian men like Jack. Even though it is the "big woman" who first identifies the point, the woman's argument only convinces the male Brotherhood members that the place she must be present is her kitchen, not the Brotherhood meeting room.

17 When the narrator finally realizes the African-American women's potential and tries to escape the dark man-hole, he cannot go back to Mary's. In the first place, the cover of the manhole is opened. The narrator was "in strange territory" and "someone, for some reason, had removed the manhole cover and I felt myself plunge down, down" (565). While the author chose to open the manhole when the narrator is fleeing from two police officers, it is also him who confines the narrator to the darkness permanently by eliminating the means of escape. The narrator realizes his powerlessness, and at the moment of realization, the narrator comes to understand his reliance on Mary:

> But I was never to reach Mary's, and I was over-optimistic about removing the steel cap in the morning. Great invisible waves of time flowed over me, but that morning never came. There was no morning nor light of any kind to awaken me and I slept on and on until finally I was aroused by *hunger*. […] I tried to reach above me but found only space, unbroken and impenetrable. (567; emphasis added)

[6] For more information on Garvey's autobiography, Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey (1978) could be recommended; it is the compilation of Garvey's speeches and articles, edited by Amy Jacques Garvey. Although there is an official biography of Garvey written by Tony Martin, Marcus Garvey, Hero: A First Biography (1983), it would be better to go directly for Garvey's Philosophy and Opinions, since Martin's book may not provide impartial views on Garvey's political ideas. For a better understanding of the conflict among the African-American activists in Ellison's novel, Elliott M. Rudwick's article, "DuBois versus Garvey: Race Propagandists at War," would be useful; Rudwick's article offers an interesting comparison between Garvey and DuBois' political approaches.

[7] Eric J. Sundquist points out that "[j]ust as Ellison's figure of the Founder in Invisible Man is not Booker T. Washington, so his Ras the Exhorter cannot be tied directly to Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore […] or Garvey himself" all of whom were West Indian black nationalists (179).

Woken up by hunger, the narrator needs to be fed by Mary. However, he cannot get out of the hole unless he is given a ladder. The author assures the narrator of his final decision, with his resolution conveyed to the narrator as an unknown voice: "Then, finally, when I could barely move, something seemed to say, 'That's enough, don't kill yourself. You've run enough, you're through with them at last,' and I collapsed" (568). His desire and effort notwithstanding, the narrator cannot get back to the African-American woman.

18 By not letting the narrator return to the mother figure Mary, Ellison seems to say that an individual must break away from the past and be born again, recreating one's self, on one's own. It should be noted that Ellison intended to write a novel that transcends the boundaries of race or gender. In an interview with David L. Carson, Ellison suggested that the narrator is not "a great hero," but he goes beyond "any narrow concepts of race" (207). "[T]he form in which I try to express myself," Ellison stated in the interview, "is not a 'racial' form" (207). The narrator is not a protestor for African-American people, but a messenger for every human being. In another interview with Arlene Crewdson and Rita Thomson, Ellison emphasized that the novel is universal, arguing that he could stand for "all the men and all the women" whatever age they are (264). By confining the narrator to the pitch-black manhole, Ellison seems to obfuscate the narrator's racial and sexual traits. In order to find his way out, the narrator decides to make a torch by lighting such documents as his high-school diploma and a slip on which his Brotherhood name is written. The narrator once cherished these papers in the briefcase, because they defined who he was. However, when the narrator awakes "in the blackness," the old labels have to be burned, and the narrator realizes that he cannot return to "any part of [his] old life" (Ellison, *Invisible* 571). Although his break with the past seems lamentable, the narrator is eligible to stand for the universal in the novel after all of the documents are burned, finally suggesting that he may "speak for you," that is to say, he could represent any individual whatever history he or she may have (581). The narrator's hard experience of coming of age becomes an illustration of any individual's personal development, of his or her ontological quest. What Ellison wanted to convey in the narrator, according to his interview with Crewdson and Thomson, is "one's own most intimate and hopeful sense of human value and possibly human predicament" (Ellison, "Interview" 264). Certainly, the narrator is intended by the author to speak for the universal human questions, including those of one's existential consciousness.

19 Nevertheless, the novel's realization diverges from Ellison's intention. Firstly, the narrator involves himself in even greater sexism and racism as he goes through the passage Ellison has prepared for him. Ellison explained in his interview with Chester and Howard that

"the universal" in his novel can be "reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance" (9). Unlike the author's motive, the circumstance in which the narrator is thrown is so specific that it is inseparable from the racist and sexist social milieu. Concentrating on the ideal masculinity with social power and sexual prowess, the novel employs the male characters of both races as the driving force of its narrative. Chasing each other in search of compensation and revenge, the men conjointly manifest their ideal form of masculinity and exert its power upon African-American women. As part of the chase, the narrator learns to overlook the presence of the women of color. As Carolyn W. Sylvander argues, the narrator "loses what slight recognition he has of woman-as-human at the beginning of the novel as he becomes more closely allied with manhood, Brotherhood, and his own personhood" (77). As he follows the patriarchal leaders such as Mr. Norton, Jack, and Mr. Emerson, the narrator is trained to obsess himself over the ideal masculinity. One paradox created in this process is that the narrator, running away from the racist and sexist society, maintains the system he tries to escape. He convinces himself that he is taking revenge by hiding underground. However, the narrator draws an unheroic conclusion while gradually forgetting the African-American women who must still be suffering double oppression on the ground: "They [all the male characters in his dream] were all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world. Well, let them. I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole" (Ellison, *Invisible* 571). Ultimately, the narrator becomes not only an observer, but also an agent sustaining the racist and sexist society led by the male characters. Deviating from Ellison's design for the universality of the novel, the narrator involves himself in the racism and sexism to a greater extent.

20 In order to convey the universal human questions, it seems that the novel should allow more space for the female characters to reappear. Without the rise of African-American women and the achievement of true equality regardless of race and gender, the novel would not be eligible for universality. Simply put, the novel would not be able to pose a universal human question while its focal point is not universal, but partial to one gender. It is interesting that Ellison seems to regret obscuring Mary's presence. Ellison stated that Mary "deserve[s] more space in [*Invisible Man*] and would, I think, have made it a better book" (Conner 181). What the narrator finally sees is the distance between himself and Mary, between himself and the potential remaining in the world aboveground. Completely exhausted from the quest for perfect masculinity, the narrator has to reach Mary's and recover energy with her healing power. Nevertheless, Mary is not given much space in the final manuscript of the novel. Ellison's regret is clearly reflected on the narrator's mind when

he worries himself before leaving Mary's house: "Why can't I just tell her [Mary] that I'm leaving and pay her and go on off? She was a landlady, I was a tenant – No, there was more to it" (Ellison, *Invisible* 322). Both Ellison and the narrator cannot miss the woman's potential. Mary certainly could have been a motivator, guide, and a mother, yet Ellison limits her power and belatedly regrets his final decision that determines the narrator's destiny. The narrator's longing for Mary reminds the readers that women of color will still continue their doubly-oppressed life and the racist and sexist society will continue to prevail in the narrative. Indeed, what could make the novel universal or a "better book," as Ellison admitted, would be the better character development for Mary or the narrator's reunion with other African-American women. The novel's grand quest for the universality would end in vain otherwise.

21 In the end, the interpretation of the novel is open to the readers. As Ellison intended, *Invisible Man* contains more than the African-American people's struggle against racism. Sexuality, interlaced with the issue of race, is posed to the readers as a significant question. Ellison limits the African-American female characters' presence in front of the narrator and yet the women's potential is revealed in very subtle ways. Whether it is intended by Ellison or not, the novel contains its own "hole," that is, the absence of fully-developed African-American female characters. However, the novel also shows what power these women can have. Indeed, one should not jump to conclusions by regarding the novel as misogynistic. The novel does not provide any definite answers to the readers. After all, the narrator's last destination is not Mary's house, but a manhole in complete darkness. The readers are left along with the narrator to muse over how to look at the racist and sexist society. Like the narrator looking for the way out, the readers have to find their own way to understand the complex relationship between race and gender, the interaction between racism and sexism. How the narrator could better African-American women's lot while being confined in the "man-hole" would be yet another question posed to the readers. All in all, the novel explores rather than gives answers.

22 As this article has discussed so far, Ellison's novel is one of great profundity. The novel concerns African-American and Caucasian men who blindly pursue the ideal masculinity which determines their social power and sexual prowess. Substituting one power for another, the men compensate for the sense of incompleteness and the subsequent feeling of inferiority. While struggling for their ideal, the men jointly create an ideal form of masculinity—the Caucasian men demonstrating the patriarchal social power, and the African-American men manifesting sexual prowess. As a result, the African-American women are

thrown into the hole of obscurity, eclipsed by the ‘Man.’ Even though their presence is overshadowed, the colored women’s potential is not totally overlooked. Ellison’s novel, in its roundabout yet prudent way, presents the African-American women as the hidden source of power, and it is possible that they will be the solution for the chaotic world aboveground. Without concrete solutions to the narrator’s struggle, the novel invites the readers to its fathomless darkness.

23 At first it seems that the readers are thrown into the inescapable void of a hole, but they are left with possibilities of change. At the end of his epilogue, the narrator repeats “I must come out, I must emerge” (581). The fact that the narrator prepares himself for a rebirth in the manhole renders the significance of colored women even greater. It is ironic how the narrator feels whole again underground without the influence of racism and sexism, that is, with the absence of social power and sexual virility. Nonetheless, the rebirth he imagines is impossible, since the narrator is trapped in the darkness of his own accord. As the narrator concludes, “[t]he end [is] in the beginning” and as a result, the beginning and the end of his journey converge. As his narrative takes the form of a circle, there is not a break allowed for the narrator to escape. In order to break away from the “warm hole” and become the “Easter chick breaking from its shell,” the narrator needs mother figures like Mary or Trueblood’s women to help his rebirth, not in a physical, but in a spiritual sense (6). If the narrator, who now understands the African-American women’s potential, could stop hibernating underground, go back to Mary’s, and re-enable his ability to move people and lead change, the novel might take a more dynamic turn. As Ellison closes the manhole and opens the possibilities, he renders his narrative more far-sighted and his message more profound. The novel is in itself alive with potential, but only when the readers strive to see the invisible ‘Man’ and find the obscured women, while seeking the way out in the underground labyrinth as the narrator does. If the narrator’s escape is possible, then the readers may be able to ask how the narrator can find the universal human value in the society marred by visible racism and sexism. They also might be asking how people of both races and genders could identify and remove the racist as well as sexist motives in their everyday life, when these motives are in fact deeply ingrained in the universal human nature.

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