

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a Misreading of Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Dr. Djellouli Ismail

University Ahmed Draia, Adrar, Algeria dje.ismail@univ-adrar.edu.dz

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Abstract: In light of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, Ralph Ellison is viewed as Richard Wright's "artist-son" who diverges from his precursor to carve out his own "imaginative space" and assert the originality of his work. While their novels share similarities, notable differences emerge as Ellison rebels against Wright to establish his own literary identity. Ellison departs from Wright's Marxist ideology and focus on harsh Negro realities, instead embracing the Harlem Renaissance aesthetics and seeing Negro culture as a "healer of the soul." Despite admiring Wright, Ellison avoids merely imitating him, reflecting their different aesthetic and ideological alignments.

Keywords: Influence; Precursor; Ideology; Identity; Aesthetics

Introduction

In light of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, Ralph Ellison is seen as Richard Wright's "artist-son" who diverges from his precursor to create "imaginative space for himself" (Bloom, 1973:05) and assert the originality of his work. Reading the two novels reveals both stark similarities and differences. The differences arise because the "belated" artist, Ralph Ellison, rebels against his precursor Richard Wright to establish his own literary identity and selfhood. In doing so, he takes a different approach from Wright regarding Marxist ideology and folklore.

Despite Richard Wright being a sort of "literary god" to Ralph Ellison, due to Ellison's great admiration for Wright's literary style, Ellison avoids the trap of blindly imitating his mentor. This divergence is facilitated by their different aesthetic and ideological alignments; Richard Wright aligns with the Marxist school, while Ralph Ellison embraces the Harlem Renaissance aesthetics. Wright, as a Marxist, focuses on ideology and views literature as a reflection of harsh and horrifying Negro reality. In contrast, Ellison, as a modernist, prioritizes aesthetics and sees Negro culture as a "healer of the soul,"

infusing his work with a nostalgic appreciation for the Harlem Renaissance.

A) The Writers' Divergent Perspectives on Communist Ideology

Communism as an ideology advocates for the collective welfare of the community and promotes equal opportunities for everyone, irrespective of race. In terms of literature, Communism opposes the notion of "art for art's sake," which suggests that literary works should be detached from their historical context. Communist literary critics view any literary work as a tool to fight against all forms of oppression and exploitation, aiming for a society that embodies the ideal of communal living. Regarding the Marxist perspective on literature, John F. Callahan states:

Marxism puts forth that all literature is propaganda, or becomes propaganda when it enters the social sphere. And, as propaganda, it is implicitly a reflection of class attitudes. The role of the revolutionary writer in the Marxist context is, therefore, to extol the virtues of the proletariat, to sharpen its class consciousness in order that it may overthrow the ruling classes and finally take control of the means of production. (John, 2004:82)

My study of *Native Son* reveals that Richard Wright was profoundly influenced by Communist ideology, which views literature as a tool to serve the masses and the working class. (John, 2004:82) Wright was not only a supporter of the Communist Party but also a member from 1932 to 1942. This decade-long affiliation had a significant impact on his literary work, particularly on *Native Son*. This influence is evident in Wright's use of the Communist perspective on racial oppression and his creation of strong Communist characters like Max, whose extensive 24-page speech during the trial in Book Three turns the novel into a clear piece of propaganda for Communist party policies.

In *Native Son*, the entire narrative leans towards a pro-communist perspective. Richard Wright appears to act as a propagandist for the American Communist Party, dedicating almost a third of the novel to the Communist characters Jan and Max. Jan is Mary's boyfriend, while Max is a Communist lawyer who defends Bigger after Mary's accidental death. Jan is initially portrayed as kind-

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hearted and friendly, with good intentions and high ideals. However, Jan's first encounter with Bigger makes him uncomfortable because, like Mary, Jan disregards the social taboos that govern relationships between whites and blacks. On Bigger's first day working at the Daltons' house, Mary and Jan ask him to drive them to a restaurant on the South Side of Chicago. To demonstrate their Communist ideals and tolerance, they insist that Bigger join them at the same table for a drink. This unconventional behavior embarrasses Bigger, who is unaccustomed to such treatment from white people.

Wright's incorporation of Marxist ideology in his literary work drew criticism from several critics, including James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. The latter, in particular, criticized his literary mentor, Wright, for using literature as a vehicle for Marxist propaganda. From the beginning of his literary career in 1937, under Wright's guidance, Ellison maintained a strained relationship with the American Communist Party. Although he began publishing his work in the Marxist magazine *New Masses*, this did not lead him to embrace Marxist ideas. In fact, Ralph Ellison rejected Richard Wright's adoption of naturalism and Marxist determinism, which were central to Wright's development of characters like Bigger Thomas. Steven C. Tracy emphasizes this point as follows:

Ellison had come to reject Wright's theory of naturalism as well as his Marxist ideology. Instead, he turned toward a reality opposite to Wright's, one where social determinism was not the focus. His work would include conscious, self-examining characters unencumbered by the limitations of social determinism.(Tracy, 2004:35)

In *Native Son*, Max and Jan are depicted as independent individuals, whereas in *Invisible Man*, the representatives of the Communist Party-Brotherhood appear to be their complete opposites. While most members of the Brotherhood act in alignment with the organization's agenda, exceptions like Jack, Brother Hambro, and to a lesser extent, Brother Wrestrum, exist. However, the prevailing atmosphere suggests that everyone is indoctrinated by the Brotherhood's leaders,

prioritizing the organization's interests and long-term sustainability above all other considerations. As an example, Brother Jack enlists the Invisible Man as a spokesperson for the Brotherhood due to his innate speaking abilities. He does so with the sole intention of promoting and firmly establishing the Brotherhood's policies within the African American community. This aspect becomes evident when Jack reprimands the Invisible Man for his role in leading Clifton's funeral: "You were not hired to think. Had you forgotten that? If so, you were not hired to think."(469). In doing so, Jack aims to utilize the narrator's eagerness to assist those in need. However, Jack believes that the Invisible Man's actions ultimately undermine the Brotherhood's goals.

In contrast to Richard Wright's didactic approach in *Native Son* (1940), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) does not carry a didactic message. The Invisible Man's primary objective is to reclaim his identity in the world without compromising his dignity. He endeavors to avoid mistreatment from his white counterparts to the best of his ability. Despite facing seemingly hopeless situations, Ralph Ellison does not extinguish the Invisible Man's hope. Unlike his predecessor and mentor Richard Wright, Ellison rejects the didactic social theory underlying Communist ideology. Instead, he distances himself from Communist principles to prioritize the portrayal of aesthetic qualities over ideological messages, aiming to give structure to chaos. (John,2004:17). In the midst of the tumultuous world depicted in *Invisible Man*, Ellison consistently presents opportunities for healing and redemption through the embrace of Negro culture and folklore. As a passionate advocate of the Harlem literary tradition, Ellison emphasizes the significance of Negro heritage as a means to alleviate the suffering of African American people.

Ralph Ellison opposes Wright's use of violence in literature, as he believes it undermines the portrayal of African Americans in mainstream American literature. In this respect, Ellison shares the sentiments of his fellow writer and friend James Baldwin, who also criticizes Wright for his Marxist approach and the excessive use of violence in his literary works. While James Baldwin praises Wright's depiction of African American "rage," he views Wright's use of violence and the creation of a pessimistic atmosphere in *Native Son* as

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"gratuitous and compulsive because the root of the violence is never explained." (**Hakutani, 2006:07**)

Both Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin dismiss the use of social science as a means to address the challenges faced by African Americans through literature. They argue that the "social approach" advocated by certain white scholars and some black Americans lacks the nuance needed to understand the complexities of the African American experience in America. While both Ellison and Baldwin attribute the ongoing struggles of African Americans to environmental factors, Ellison emphasizes the novelist's responsibility to act as a moralist seeking solutions for society's problems, rather than simply highlighting its issues without offering potential remedies for its deep-seated wounds.(**Eddy, 2003:22**).In this aspect, Ellison holds a contrasting perspective to his predecessor Wright, who "makes fiction out of rage itself" while Ellison "tries to penetrate and analyze that rage and convert it into a recognizable and human action."(**Charney,1963:03-04**)

As a novelist, Ellison believes he has an important role to play in narrowing the growing divide between the two races: black and white. Unlike Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison primarily sees himself as a creative writer tasked with giving "form to chaos," or as Kenneth Burke puts it, providing readers with essential "equipment for living."(**Eddy,2003:179**) While Ellison acknowledges the chaotic world of African Americans, he aims to shape that chaos through the utilization of Negro heritage such as folklore, including Black music, Negro sayings, and dialect.

B-Ellison's Incorporation of Folklore

Ellison's use of Negro folklore in *Invisible Man* stands out as a prominent feature of the novel. Through this approach, he urges fellow black artists to embrace and celebrate their black heritage, which, in his view, connects them to their past and strengthens their presence. Ellison aims to connect his readers, especially black readers, with their heritage, providing insight into their ancestors' history to reinforce their sense of identity and belonging. He contends that

experiences shared through Negro folklore aid individuals in understanding and solidifying their sense of self.

Ralph Ellison deeply values folklore and its profound impact. He stresses that black folklore empowers African Americans, providing them with the ability to express themselves boldly and share their experiences without fear or a feeling of inadequacy. In one of his portrayals of African American folklore, Ellison views it as a

an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him.
(Quoted by Dadey,2006:36)

Viewing folklore as a bold and appropriate form of expression, Ralph Ellison positions himself in intellectual departure and conflict with his predecessor Richard Wright. Ellison remains loyal to the black aesthetics revitalized during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. *Invisible Man* can be seen as Ralph Ellison's endeavor to revive the black aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance by integrating them into mainstream American literature, where the presence of black culture had been misrepresented or disregarded. Through *Invisible Man*, Ellison strives to present a positive portrayal of Negro culture in American literature because, in his view, Negro folklore enriches not only black culture but also American culture as a whole.

Unlike Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is richly infused with black folklore, encompassing music, expressions, dialects, and cuisine. These elements form integral parts of Negro folk culture and black identity, distinguishing the cultural presence of African Americans in America.

1-Ellison's Appropriation of Black Music in *Invisible Man*

The author's deep appreciation for black music motivated him to honor his ancestors by weaving their cultural heritage into the literary narrative, with the aim of assisting African Americans in embracing their identity and finding pride in their heritage. He values Negro music as a powerful tool for healing, self-discovery and self-definition. In fact, he wishes that "if he were to produce anything of

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quality as a novelist, music was the only art form that offered him some possibility for self-definition" (Anelli, Law, 2008:86)

In contrast to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison favors black folklore, particularly the blues, over tragedy because it enables individuals to overcome their struggles. The blues, a form of Negro self-expression, allows individuals to express their feelings of sadness and melancholy, serving as a method of relieving burdens. Ernest Ansernet defines the blues as:

The blues occurs when the Negro is sad, when he is far from his home, his mother, or his sweetheart. Then he thinks of a motif or a preferred rhythm and takes his trombone, or his drum, or else he sings, or simply dances. An on the chosen motif, he plumbs the depths of his imagination, this make his sadness pass away, it is the blues.(Hughes, 1954:95)

In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison incorporates the blues to connect his protagonist, the Invisible Man, with his heritage, particularly during moments of desperation. While Richard Wright's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, turns to extreme violence in reaction to the absurdity of his world, Ellison's *Invisible Man* discovers solace in the magic of music. Unlike Wright's Bigger Thomas, the Invisible Man is portrayed as

more adaptable and humane. He confronts life's challenges with flexibility and gentleness rather than rigidity. Regarding Ralph Ellison's choice of the blues, Beth Eddy comments: I believe Ellison chooses the blues in part for piety's sake, because he knows where he comes from and the sources of his being, but also because he believes that the blues, with its comic component, has more resources for coping with the absurdities left over after making as much meaning as possible, than does tragedy. (Eddy,2003:170)

Through a thorough analysis of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, De Romanet J estimates that there are over fifty mentions of black music. When alone and grappling with his inner emotions, the narrator

turns to the blues. For instance, in the prologue during the basement scene, he resorts to stealing electricity to power his phonograph and and listen to Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue" (7). The influence of music on his mental state is significant; thus, he desires to obtain five phonographs instead of just one to fully immerse himself in the vibrations of the music throughout his body. In fact, listening to Armstrong's blues aids him "to discover unrecognizable compulsion of [his] being – even though [he] could not answer 'yes' to their prompting." (15) He also experiences relief when he listens to music on his way from Emerson's office after discovering Bledsoe's betrayal against him.

Ralph Ellison's integration of black heritage in his work stems from his exposure to both black and white artistic traditions. During his studies at Tuskegee from 1933 to 1936, he was particularly inspired by black folklore and its aesthetics, discovering the richness of black music. He showed great interest in this field, studying the cornet and trumpet. Simultaneously, Ellison familiarized himself with Western aesthetics, particularly through the works of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. These writers inspired him to take an innovative approach by incorporating black folklore into literature. Ellison acknowledges his literary debt to these two prominent modernist novelists as follows: "I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary values of my folk inheritance." (Quoted by Hill, 2008:131)

2- Negro sayings

In addition to incorporating Negro music in *Invisible Man*, Ellison weaves in oral folklore through the use of Negro sayings, which are part of oral traditions passed down through generations. These sayings help individuals uncover the deeper meaning of situations. For example, after Brockway emphasizes the importance of whiteness in creating the Paint Factory's trademark, Optic White, the Invisible Man understands Brockway's glorification of white as a symbol of dominance and prevalence. The pervasive presence of whiteness in "Optic White" represents the dominance of white power in American society. To critique Brockway's strong attachment to whiteness, the Invisible Man uses a Negro saying to ironically highlight the absurdity of this fact, saying: " If you're white you're

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right" (177) resonates with the Negro saying: " If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right."

Another reference to Negro sayings occurs during the discussion between the butter seller and the Invisible Man. When the Invisible Man asks the seller not to convince him of the butter's goodness based solely on its appearance, the seller replies: "You right, but everything what looks good ain't necessarily good,"(214) This saying cautions the Invisible Man against trusting appearances, which are often misleading and deceptive. It also foreshadows his negative experiences with the Brotherhood, stemming from his illusions about outward appearances. Moreover, it highlights how the Negro individual uses oral heritage to clarify situations.

The use of Negro sayings is evident during the debate between the Invisible Man and Ras the Exhorter regarding the necessity of freedom and the appropriate course of action to achieve it. With his assertive and rebellious demeanor, Ras The Exhorter argues that the Negro cannot regain their freedom without resorting to a violent conflict against the whites, citing the adage "Blood calls for blood"(303). This saying, deeply embedded in Negro oral traditions, underscores Ras's advocacy for violence as a means to reclaim the freedom denied to Negroes for centuries. Similar to Marcus Garvey, Ras the Exhorter believes in the efficacy of violence as a tool to restore human dignity, asserting that what has been forcibly taken can only be reclaimed through force. This saying once again highlights the proficiency of Negro individuals in leveraging their oral tradition to convey significant meaning.

3- Incorporation of black dialect

In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison incorporates vernacular language alongside Negro music and sayings to demonstrate that his black characters have their own daily means of communication and interaction. Ellison fully embraces the tradition of Afro-American vernacular in the novel, making his use of dialect one of its most prominent features. Unlike Richard Wright, Ellison views vernacular language as a powerful form of expression, considering it a "high style" that reflects the depth of American culture. He argues that the

vernacular, much like the blues, serves as a reflection of American identity. Ellison emphasizes how the fusion of black vernacular with American culture has played a role in preserving American identity to some extent. Additionally, he contends that American vernacular signifies the richness of American culture and identity. In discussing Ellison's admiration for American vernacular, Beth Eddy highlights:

Instead of pounding at the democratic door and arguing that blacks are a vital part of American culture, Ellison turns the tables. He assumes as much and argues instead that all Americans, even white Americans, are culturally part African-American. Ellison claimed that vernacular resources drawn from American slaves and ex-slaves were valuable not only to African Americans but also to Americans, period. White Americans were culturally part black, whether they chose to acknowledge their debts or not. (Eddy, 2003:124)

The majority of the Negro characters in *Invisible Man* utilize dialect to convey their thoughts and feelings. Through the use of dialect, Ellison confronts the conventions of mainstream American literature, which predominantly relies on standard English for literary expression. A notable instance of dialect in the novel occurs during a conversation between Trueblood and Mr. Norton, where Trueblood voices his grievances about the unjust treatment in American society by declaring: “We ain't doing so bad, suh. 'Fore they heard 'bout what happen to us out here I couldn't git no help from nobody. Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help. Even the biggity school folks up on the hill, only there was a catch to it”(47)

Ellison's utilization of vernacular language brings to mind Mark Twain's incorporation of American Southern dialect in his *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Like Twain, Ellison employs dialect to imbue the first-person narrator “With a range of diction that could play upon the richness of [Americans]’s readily shared vernacular speech and construct a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American types as they operated on various level of society.” (Quoted by Zuckert, 2003:15)

In much of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison follows a similar approach to Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* by steering clear of an

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overreliance on standard English. Ellison's intent is to illustrate that the vernacular is not a degraded form of expression, but rather a practical oral tool for communication among Negroes.

Conclusion

Wright writes with a didactic intent, focusing on ideology rather than aesthetics. As a Marxist and social scientist, he embeds his text within its historical context of the 1930s, a period when socialist realism was prominent worldwide. Wright's adherence to Marxist ideology shapes his interpretation of human actions within the social environment and leads him to critique white society for its treatment of Negroes like Bigger, who resort to violence when hope seems elusive. Wright views Bigger's heinous act as a form of "creation," guided by the Marxist principle that "actual existence creates consciousness."(**Grimm, 2004:11**) Hence, Max, embodying Wright's perspective in the novel, justifies Bigger's actions through dialectical arguments, linking his brutality to the circumstances of his life.

Unlike his literary precursor Wright, Ellison is a modernist writer who places significant emphasis on aesthetics, particularly black aesthetics and folklore, which he sees as integral components of American identity rather than solely black identity. Ellison embraces the diversity of American culture and aims to create a work like "Invisible Man" that appeals to both white and black readers alike, reflecting a cosmopolitan outlook.

Ralph Ellison's primary objective appears to be the integration of black heritage into mainstream American culture. He seeks to elevate black culture to a prominent position within American literature and the literary canon. His overarching goal is to bridge the divide between black and white communities by showcasing the artistic richness of black heritage, particularly through folklore, which he views as an essential aspect of the nation's identity. (**Fisher,1994:132**)

Ellison's integration of folklore in *Invisible Man* sets his work apart from his predecessor's *Native Son* and allows him to establish the distinctiveness of his own literary voice. While initially following Wright's literary trajectory, Ellison eventually diverges from it,

seeking to "correct" his precursor's perspective. Ellison challenges Wright's assertion of the inadequacy of Negro culture, instead emphasizing the significance of individual cultural identity over social reality, a departure from Wright's approach.

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