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"Naw You Ain't No Man": Rereading the Patriarchal Phallocentrism in the Trueblood Episode of Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Christine Grogan
(University of South Florida)

> *"'How come you don't go on 'way and leave us?' is the first words Kate says to me. 'Ain't you done enough to me and this chile?'*
> *"'I caint leave you,' I says. 'I'm a man and man don't leave his family.'*
> *"She says, 'Naw you ain't no man. No man'd do what you did.'*
> *"'I'm still a man,' I says."*
>
> - Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (66)

In "Reconstructing Black Masculinity," bell hooks argues that black men have embraced patriarchal phallocentrism — ideals that privilege the masculine and maintain that masculinity is the central source of power and authority — to devastating effects (77). Instead of challenging a white-supremacist, sexist system that has denied them a satisfying manhood, hooks explains, they have reinscribed it. And instead of lashing out at white male domination, they have often

turned on women, using rape and incest as reactions against their inability to be "real men" as defined by the dominant culture (76). In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, an introspective literary exploration of black male identity, we encounter an unnamed narrator who comes of age before the Civil Rights Movement. During his journey to self-knowledge, Invisible Man meets many characters who shape his perspectives. One character he encounters early in his adventures is Jim Trueblood, a man who insists on staying with his family even after he allegedly committed father-daughter incest. Critics agree that Ellison is not writing a case for incest; however, what precisely he is doing in the second chapter of his epic novel and the importance of feminine values in his work have not been so obvious.

In her 2007 article, "Jim Trueblood and His Critic-Readers: Ralph Ellison's Rhetoric of Dramatic Irony and Tall Humor in the Mid-Century American Literary Public Sphere," Gillian Johns provides a rereading of the Trueblood episode to argue that Ellison's work should not be read as an accommodationist piece to appease his white readers, but as a novel that discreetly undermines "assumptions about the inferiority of black cultural values, knowledge, and authority" (231). One of Johns's most insightful observations is that Trueblood's story is a tall tale (not to mention a dirty joke), and thus, the actions that Trueblood describes with vivid details never happened. When viewed in this light, it becomes clear that Ellison is using this graphic story of father-daughter incest to challenge stereotypes about black male sexual desire and to exploit listeners' naïve biases. Moreover, Ellison employs paternal incest metaphorically to reverse the social raping of black men in an effort to make readers confront the trauma of racism that lies at the heart of American society.

As I argue in this article, despite his valiant efforts to work through the trauma of racism, Ellison fails to bear witness to the trauma of father-daughter incest. However, a careful rereading of Trueblood's dream indicates something that feminists would much later articulate — that the real social taboo is not incest. Father-daughter incest, as Ellison suggests, is a normal function of heteropatriarchy, not a breakdown in the social order. This essay examines Ellison's masculinist treatment of his female characters through a close reading of the Trueblood episode as it questions to what extent Trueblood's narrative reinforces male domination and reinscribes patriarchal phallocentrism. Although Trueblood's tale neglects to illustrate the trauma that plagues many incest victims, perhaps Ellison's account has been too harshly criticized.

Published on the eve of the Civil Rights Movement, *Invisible Man* was praised for its aesthetic and philosophical qualities and recognized as a landmark post-WWII novel central to American and African-American literary history. Its engagement with the politics of racism, however, sparked, and continues to elicit, impassioned debate. Some early reviewers claimed that because it did not fit in the vein of Richard Wright's "protest literature," it wasn't political enough (Hill 136). During the tumultuous 1960s era when the militant black power movement emerged, a new generation of black youth started to assert that the theme of invisibility did not apply, and the novel's apparent embrace of existential freedom was too abstract. The first book-length, single-author study of Ellison and his oeuvre was not published until almost 30 years after *Invisible Man*'s initial publication: Robert O'Meally's 1980 *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* contains as its central chapter a close reading of *Invisible Man*. By the

1990s, critics began to explore the ideological struggles at work in the novel as bold claims were made for its literary historical significance and political sensibilities. With the rise of poststructuralist theoretical approaches, the novel was praised for "opening up new technical and thematic possibilities for black fiction writers" (Butler xxxiii). The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the publication of two biographies of Ellison: Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (2002) and Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2007). The interest in Ellison's life has spawned more literary outpourings on *Invisible Man* that revisit a multitude of topics including Ellison's use of folk materials, the novel's modernist qualities, integration poetics, and, as I address in this article, gender dynamics.

Critics have noted the importance of the Trueblood episode, but only a few commented at length on the chapter. Selma Fraiberg explored Ellison's use of incest first in her 1961 "Two Modern Incest Heroes." As her title suggests, she praises Trueblood for rising above the Oedipus myth and casting off the pretense of innocence by acknowledging his unconscious motives. She concludes, "it is the myth that destroys" (661). Later that same decade, Peter Hays revisited the theme of incest in Ellison's novel, arguing that the Trueblood scene should be read as a satire: "Ellison is satirizing the prejudices of all who believe that any black, true-to-his-blood, regularly commits bestial acts like incest" (335). Hays maintains that Ellison employs incest as a metaphor for interpersonal and interracial relations in the novel. In his 1984 "To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode," Houston Baker added his voice to the discussion to

contend that Trueblood's narrative enables him to transcend the stereotypes that whites have imposed on him. He emerges as a creative and commercial man, capitalizing on his story of incest. Trueblood, claims Baker, successfully challenges the castrating effects of white philanthropy. By the end of the 1980s, as feminist scholars began to object to Ellison's depictions of female characters in *Invisible Man*, Hortense Spillers published "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight': In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers." She commented on how Trueblood's wife and daughter are silenced characters, concluding her essay by claiming that the incest taboo prevails for good reason. The publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and other incest narratives reinvigorated discussion of the Trueblood episode as critics such as Michael Awkward, Janice Doane, and Devon Hodges argue that Morrison consciously revises Ellison's chapter to foreground the daughter's experience of incest.

Understandably, few critics devote entire essays to the incest: *Invisible Man* is not centrally about father-daughter incest. In fact, the portrayal of incest is confined to the second chapter of the novel, a mere 35 pages in a book just shy of 600. The novel is not Trueblood's story, but is essentially the tale of a nameless black man who journeys from the rural south to Harlem, seeking personal identity. Aside from the Prologue and the Epilogue, the entire story is told in flashback, the reader learning about the many memorable, yet traumatic, events Invisible Man experiences.

Charting the novel's plot might indicate that the Trueblood chapter is a convenient device that furthers the storyline, for Invisible Man gets expelled from the university because, instead of showing one of the white college founders, Mr. Norton, evidence of racial

progress, Invisible Man showed him the shack of Trueblood, who so willingly shares his incest story. The episode is brief and Trueblood and his family are barely referred to in the rest of the novel. But, Ellison could have chosen any number of reasons to have his narrator expelled from college. He chose a story of father-daughter incest told from the perspective of a poor black farmer to a white, wealthy, seemingly-cultured Mr. Norton and to Invisible Man, who is chauffeuring Norton for the day. The novel as a whole can be read as a Bildungsroman that dramatizes Invisible Man's neo-mythic journey and transformation from innocence to experience/hipster-ism. The Trueblood episode is the initiating factor (more so than the first chapter's battle royal) that signifies Invisible Man's "loss of virginity" and true beginning of being educated in the ways of a racially-rigged male society that bonds together in fear of black male sexuality. Invisible Man's journey begins in earnest after he leaves the college founded and controlled by white men. For most of the novel, he grapples with reconciling the conflicting messages dealt to him by the Nortons and the Truebloods of society. This article first examines how the Trueblood episode complicates traditional white assumptions of black masculinity. The second part of the article discusses how female experience is a part of Ellison's vision.

"Such a monstrous thing": Rereading Trueblood's Tale

In chapter two, Ellison subtly defies the stereotypes that equate black masculinity with incestuous bestiality. He accomplishes this by suggesting that Trueblood may be a trickster figure, who weaves a tall tale satirizing white philanthropy's hypocrisy to

successfully shift power relations between white and black men. Often read as a literal story of father-daughter incest, the truthfulness of Trueblood's tale is questioned by Johns, who points out good reasons to doubt its validity and read it as a rhetorically-sophisticated game in which master storyteller and trickster figure Trueblood outsmarts his captive audience. As Invisible Man is made to entertain an audience of white men in the previous chapter during the battle royal, Trueblood also entertains the white man, in his case with a humorous, albeit crude, story of incest. Knowing that direct acts of aggression against whites are socially prohibited, he fashions a story that conforms to stereotypes of black male desire. Even before Invisible Man and Norton hear Trueblood's tale, Ellison drops subtle hints to suggest the story's fabrication. We are first told that Trueblood's reputation prior to the incest was one of hard worker and caring father. Moreover, we learn that Trueblood has a knack for storytelling: he was known as the "one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and magic that made them come alive" (46). When Trueblood is asked by Norton to talk with him, he complies "without surprise" (51) and begins his tale as if rehearsed — "as though he had told the story many, many times" (54). And, of course, one cannot gloss over Trueblood's wink as he glances from Invisible Man to Norton in the midst of his story: "Trueblood seemed to smile at me behind his eyes as he looked from the white man to me and continued" (61).

Such details do not account for daughter Matty Lou's pregnancy or the axe wound inflicted by wife Kate upon discovering the incest; however, it seems plausible that Matty Lou was

impregnated by the young boy who, Trueblood notes, has been "startin' to hang 'round her" and that the axe wound is a self-inflicted wound, a rather small price to pay when compared to the money the white folks give him after hearing his story (54). Moreover, we are told that when Invisible Man and Norton pull up to Trueblood's house, "[b]oth women moved with the weary, full-fronted motions of far-gone pregnancy," which suggests that both Kate and Matty Lou are in their final trimester (47). And yet, the axe wound that Trueblood claims he received the night of the incident has "[f]lies and fine white gnats" swarming around it, which suggests that the wound is still open (54). Did Kate really harm him so badly that months after its infliction, his wound is still gaping? It doesn't seem likely.

The story leading up to the story of incest is rife with contrasts that upset assumptions about "civilized" white patriarchal society. Skillfully, Ellison juxtaposes Trueblood's story with Norton's incestuous desire for his now-deceased daughter. As Invisible Man drives Norton around for the afternoon, Norton shares a story about his daughter, his own true blood. The white college benefactor explains to Invisible Man that his destiny is somehow connected with the destiny of black people. As Norton tries to make clear what he means by their shared destiny, he indulges in detailed description of his daughter who died while abroad with her father, a loss that consumes an aging Norton. Describing his daughter, Norton tells Invisible Man,

> "She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again . . . She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly." (42)

As heartfelt (and provocative) as Norton's evocation of his daughter might sound, his words take on new meaning in the context of the Trueblood episode. Commenting on Norton's peculiar relationship with his daughter, Robert Stepto affirms that "Appropriately enough, her image is not a photograph on the wall or a totem on the lawn, but a cameo of sorts which her father reverently carries on his person, as close to his waist as to his heart" (374). Curiously, this grieving father has yet to forgive himself for his daughter's death, or for his "fatal attraction" to her. Ostensibly moved by Norton's tale of his daughter, Invisible Man "[h]alf-consciously" veers off the beaten path and ends up at Trueblood's shack (46). With thoughts of his daughter on his mind and her photograph pressed to his person, Norton meets Trueblood, whose wife and daughter are both pregnant, allegedly by Trueblood. Upon seeing what he perceives as a monstrous demonstration of surfacing unbridled sexual urges, Norton is envious that Trueblood committed such an inconceivable act and is baffled that he is "unharmed": "'You did and are unharmed!' he shouted, his blues eyes blazing into the

black face with *something like envy* and indignation" (51, emphasis added).

The white patriarch's envy is hard to overlook in trying to make sense of the Trueblood episode in the grand scheme of *Invisible Man*'s epic design. Mary Rohrberger correctly observes, "Norton's interest in Trueblood's story is characterized by an urgency explainable only by the assumption that he must have shared a powerful attraction to his own daughter, now dead" (127). Hays is even more direct in his reading of the Norton/Trueblood pairing: "The word 'envy' above gives us a clue, if we need one: Trueblood has done what Norton had wanted to do" (336). Indeed, to vicariously experience the incest, Norton "almost [runs] across the road" to Trueblood's lawn (50). When questioned how he has "looked upon chaos" and has not been destroyed, Trueblood responds, "I'm all right, suh . . . . My eyes is all right too" (51). Trueblood's intriguing reply suggests that, unlike so many of the characters in the novel who are plagued by social blindness, Trueblood can see just fine, a stark contrast to Norton, who fails to see that he himself, the white patriarch, is deeply implicated in the story of father-daughter incest.

Trueblood seems well aware of how he is seen by society. His black male selfhood is defined as the image of the brute, which, in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks describes as "untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling" (xii). As hooks explains, in a "white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy," the black man is thought to have inferior intelligence and morality (xii). As such, he is believed predisposed to commit father-daughter incest. Invisible Man notes how easily Trueblood matches the assumptions

that breed institutional inter- and intra-racism: "We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies [the country quartet of the black-belt people] sang, but since the [white] visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet" (47). He is said to have earthy qualities and to emit animal noises. In sum, Ellison constructs him as living the stereotype of "the primitive." For most of the chapter, Trueblood as trickster figure presents himself in an unrefined, presocial state, almost bragging about how he violated the incest taboo.

Ellison further complicates the stereotypical image of the oversexed black male by having the incest result from a convoluted, coded, yet highly-suggestive dream that indicates that the real social taboo is not entry into one's daughter -- but entry into the white woman's bedroom, a synecdoche for trying to gain access to white men's power. Ellison recognizes that father-daughter incest — despite the prevalence of the incest taboo — is really a normal function of a white supremacist heteropatriarchy, in which rape is a means to maintain male power. Trueblood claims that the incest arises not from some conscious desire on his part, but rather, from a miscellaneous dream in which it becomes increasingly clear that Trueblood desires his daughter neither as much as Norton desired his own nor as much as Trueblood himself desires the white man's power. To conform to Norton's and other white men's expectations, Trueblood fills his story with sensual detail that evokes stereotypes of black male promiscuity to conceal Trueblood's true intentions. In the dream, Trueblood is scared of "one of them tall grandfather clocks" that strikes the time (57). He attempts to flee when out of the

clock steps a white lady who's "got on a nightgown of soft white silky stuff and nothin' else" (57-58). Too afraid to "touch her 'cause she's white," Trueblood throws her on the bed in a moment of frenzy (58). The white man who then enters the dream dismisses Trueblood's dilemma with the statement, "'They just nigguhs, leave 'em do it'" (58). Trueblood enters the door of the grandfather clock and runs off. After sharing his dream with Norton and Invisible Man, Trueblood next launches into details about the nightmare he claims to be unwittingly engaged in with his daughter, which completes Ellison's satire of black male barbarism. Trying to get himself out of a "tight spot," "to move *without* movin'," to "walk out" after "flyin' in," Trueblood states that he is struggling with conflicted emotions, with which Norton easily empathizes (59).

Not only does this chapter suggest that usurping power from white men is more socially prohibited than having sex with one's daughter, it also reveals the internal African-American class tensions and ensuing intra-racism. The oppressive white male society forecloses solidarity among the black community, something that was clearly illustrated in the battle royal chapter and is essential for maintaining the inequitable power dynamics as it thwarts effective cohesive struggles against the oppressor. Trueblood explains the uncertainty of his guilty: "I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty" (66). The black community certainly thinks that Trueblood is guilty. Upon learning of the incest, Kate, we're told, starts "talkin' the unknown tongue, like a wild woman" (61). She goes after Trueblood with a double-barrel shotgun, an iron, and finally an axe, reasoning that it is better to "spill [blood] than to foul" (62). Neither Kate nor Matty Lou

speak to Trueblood. Likewise, the black preacher doesn't believe that Trueblood is sorry and he "tells [him] to git out of his house, that [he's] the most wicked man he's ever seen and that [he] better go confess [his] sin and make [his] peace with God" (66). And, the "biggity school folks up on the hill" try to run him out of the county for being a disgrace to their community (52). Even Invisible Man, who admits to being "torn between humiliation and fascination" is upset by Trueblood's ability to talk so freely about incest in the presence of a respectable white man (68). Invisible Man thinks that in spite of the college's attempts to lift up Trueblood and the other "black-belt people," Trueblood "did everything it seemed to pull us down" (47). In the midst of his story, Invisible Man fears that Norton will find him guilty by implication: "How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things?" (58). At this point in his journey, Invisible Man does not understand why Trueblood would fashion a story of sexual violation.

In addition to exposing white men's incestuous desire, the Trueblood episode challenges white male domination as it shows power shifting, if only temporarily, from the white upper class to the black lower class, or what Ellison calls in his Epilogue, "the lower frequencies" (581). Contrasted with the way Trueblood is ostracized by the black community and disowned by his own family, he is rewarded by the white folks, which he claims he can't make sense of although the reader knows that he understands it quite well, even capitalizes on it. Trueblood notes that the white men "wanted to hear about the gal lots of times and they gimme somethin' to eat and drink and some tobacco" (53). Claiming to be scared of the white authorities at first, he then relaxes when he sees that "lotta folks is

curious and goes outta they way to help" (52). Instead of being outraged or perturbed, the whites want to keep the sharecropper among them, arguably for less than noble reasons. By helping Trueblood, the white community can maintain the hierarchal social structure and sublimate their desires. It is a way for them to assuage their own feelings of guilt, whether stemming from incestuous desires and/or from racism, and to reward Trueblood for showcasing the stereotypical traits of black masculinity as violent and bestial.

Trueblood's story seemingly confirms the culturally-dominant beliefs in the immorality of those racially othered, and thereby helps to justify the white community's own prejudices in a way they can cleverly disguise as charity. He tells Norton and Invisible Man that he is better now than ever before: "Why, I guess there ain't a colored man in the county who ever got to take so much of the white folkses' time as I did . . . . But best of all, suh, I got more work now than I ever did have before" (53). In addition to more jobs, Trueblood receives many handouts: "he and his family acquire new clothes and shoes, abundant food and work, long-needed eyeglasses, and even the means to reshingle their cabin" (Baker 80-81).

Instead of being chased out of the county, the white community give Trueblood more help "than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was" (67). Even, perhaps especially, Norton follows suit. When first hearing about the incest ("They say that her father did it"), Norton questions how Trueblood is faring and says, "Perhaps I could help" (52). At the end of the tale, a traumatized Norton, who has turned a whiter shade of pale, reaches into his "red Moroccan-leather wallet," not coincidentally pulling out the picture of his daughter, and hands

Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill, the exact amount that the "college folks" were going to give him to leave the county and settle elsewhere (69). Furthermore, in contrast to Invisible Man, who strives to do everything right, Trueblood "admits" to doing everything wrong and is rewarded. At the beginning of the chapter, Invisible Man had high hopes that Norton will give him "a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship next year" (38). At the end of the chapter, a defeated Invisible Man curses Trueblood: "I saw Jim Trueblood wave as I threw the car into gear. 'You bastard,' I said under my breath. 'You no-good bastard! *You* get a hundred-dollar bill!'" (69). As it turns out, Invisible Man gains nothing and seemingly loses everything that day. Because of the day's events, he is stripped of his scholarship and expelled from the university, receiving letters that ensure he won't meet with success any time soon.

Invisible Man and the Woman Question Revisited

Undoubtedly, Trueblood's cleverly-contrived narrative poses a challenge to the assumption that all African-American men are happily promiscuous, incestuous, or absent fathers. It can be argued that Ellison misleads naïve or not-yet-initiated readers into believing that the incest results in prosperity for Trueblood. Even though he gains financial wealth through the telling of his tale, his narrative is a commodity in which he, much like Invisible Man, and the other black males of the battle royal, is made to perform stereotypes of male blackness and entertain the white men. Moreover, Trueblood's "wealth" is dependent on the white people's charity, further solidifying the hierarchal structure that keeps blacks subservient to

whites. Indeed, the white men provide for Trueblood's family in a way he never could; thus, he is shown to be less of a man in a society that prides itself on having its male members fulfill the roles of provider and protector. Despite the challenges it poses to stereotypes of black masculinity, however, what does Trueblood's narrative tell us about femininity?

A troubling part of the Trueblood tale is that in working through the trauma of racism, Ellison has Trueblood invent a story of father-daughter incest that overlooks the traumatic potential for the daughter. Playing with the stereotypes of black masculinity and having Trueblood contrive a tall tale of familial sex, Ellison's character exploits the trauma of father-daughter incest. Writing at a time when ideas were deeply rooted in racist and misogynistic social structures, Ellison notes that to counteract feelings of emasculation and impotence brought on by a white male supremacist society that bonds together over racism, one of Trueblood's only alternatives is to demonstrate his potency through his seductive tale about how he impregnated his daughter and has not just one, but two women with child.

Trauma theorists Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra, among others, have argued that there is therapeutic potential to narrating one's story of trauma; this is not the case with Trueblood's female characters, as feminist critics have noted. Trueblood's tale provides him a voice, but the story he articulates is one in which his daughter and wife are objectified and retraumatized. Ellison denies Matty Lou and Kate self-representation by having them remain under Trueblood's narrative control. Ellison's treatment of women in general, and Matty Lou in particular, have

understandably been criticized as a male-centric narrative that represses and silences the black female voice. Female characters are few and far between, and those included in the novel are overwhelmingly stereotypes, as noted by Rohrberger and Spillers. Taking Ellison to task for his depiction of women, they argue that these "women are one-dimensional figures playing roles in a drama written by men" (Rohrberger 130). Commenting specifically on the female characters in the Trueblood chapter, Spillers states:

> For all intents and purposes, the wife/mother Kate and the daughter/surrogate love Matty Lou are deprived of speech, of tongue, since what they said and did and when are reported/translated through the medium of Trueblood. These silent figures, like materialized vectors in a field of force, are curiously silent. (132)

Since the entire tale of incest is told by Trueblood (and the rest of the novel told by Invisible Man), Matty Lou is deprived of speech, and the reader receives a limited account of the incest, never knowing the extent of her trauma — whether stemming from racism, familial abuse, or both.

To counter the charges leveled at Ellison for his complicated depiction of women, Claudia Tate contends that Ellison starts with female stereotypes but then transcends them to dramatize their humanity. Tate argues that Invisible Man's encounters with these women teach him lessons about himself and the world. Following Tate's line of thinking, I suggest that part of Ellison's agenda in the Trueblood chapter can be viewed as proto-feminist in that Ellison

hints at something that would not be fully articulated and acknowledged until the second-wave feminist movement — that the performance of violence, particularly in the sphere of the domestic, is central to maintaining the patriarchal order. In the late 1970s, feminists, such as Susan Brownmiller and Susan Griffin, questioned the existence of an incest taboo and noticed that the practice is not so much universally prohibited as selectively regulated. As these feminists pointed out, "incest is not the taboo, speaking about it is" (Doane and Hodges 1). Paternal incest began to be seen as a paradigm of female victimization, with sexual access to the female as basic to patriarchal right. Violence against females was seen by them as inherent in a patriarchal society, and rape and incest were viewed as ways to keep women in a state of fear by threatening their safety, limiting their mobility, and denigrating their self-worth.

In the second chapter of *Invisible Man*, Trueblood, who is smarter than Norton or even Invisible Man would be willing to admit, seems to understand that although incest is *said* to be an act of transgression, it is also a secretly-sanctioned way to gain access to patriarchal phallocentrism. Discussing the black man's (limited, if not outright denied) access to the patriarchal role, hooks argues in "Reconstructing Black Masculinity" that rape by black men should be viewed as a political action in which they act out their feelings of powerlessness in an attempt to gain entry into patriarchal culture (76). Although many have read the second chapter as an illustration of Trueblood's allegiance to patriarchal phallocentrism, this argument becomes complicated when we factor in that Trueblood most likely made up the entire story.

When thinking that Trueblood fashions his story, we might revisit the parts in which he casts Matty Lou as seductress and argue that he does so not necessarily to displace guilt and blame on the vulnerable female, but to expose the hypocrisy of the civilized white men, most of whom want to attribute incest to the abnormal, poor, or racially-othered. Trueblood seems to know that the prevalent thinking of that time held that girls were complicit in, if not encouraging, the incest: they were acting on their natural fantasies, as the leading psychiatric textbooks maintained. In addition to conforming to expectations of black masculinity, as we have already seen, Trueblood also seems to conform to the dominant story about incest. He understands that in these stories, the female must carry some of the blame. Upon waking from his vivid dream, Trueblood says that he suddenly realizes he is on top of Matty Lou, who is repeatedly crying out "Daddy" (59). At this point in his narrative, Trueblood notes that he thinks Matty Lou has just recently become sexually active. He then questions, "maybe sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore — you'all know that?" (59). Careful readers should note this is directed at Norton, who, if not already sympathizing with Trueblood, now becomes an ally. Further commenting on Matty Lou's complicity, Trueblood interprets her sleepy mumbles to be what "a woman says when she wants to tease and please a man" (56). When trying to end the incest, Trueblood states that he is not the only one struggling with conflicted emotions (59). According to Trueblood, "Matty Lou can't hold out no longer and gits to movin' herself" (60). Matty Lou, just like the white woman in his dream, grabs hold of him, and, as Trueblood says, "She didn't want me to go then — and to tell the honest-to-God truth I found out that I didn't want to go neither" (60). Cleverly, Trueblood

exploits Norton's guilt for desiring his own daughter by portraying himself as the perverse father whose lowly rank in society allows him to do, or claim to have done, what Norton and other white men wished they could.

Similarly, the casting of the wife Kate may not be initially viewed as much better than her daughter, but a careful reading shows her to be very important, perhaps even Ellison's mouthpiece. When Invisible Man and Norton pull up to the Trueblood cabin, a very pregnant Matty Lou and Kate are performing a typical female job — washing clothes. They set the stage nicely for Trueblood, who "airs the dirty laundry." As the women scurry off upon Invisible Man's and Norton's arrival, the implication is that these women are meant to be seen and not heard, a standard practice/role of the female in patriarchy. Emphasis is placed on their pregnant bodies, not on their voices, and one might think that Ellison is celebrating the poor farmer by making him the most fertile father in the entire novel and further subordinating the females by burdening them with the heavy motions of "far-gone pregnancy" (47).

However, Kate's actions and words bear another look for they reveal that she has the potential to be the moral center of the chapter and moreover, to pose the biggest challenge to patriarchal phallocentrism. As I quote in this article's title, Kate's response to her husband is significant. Upon discovering the incest, she tries to do what she can to punish her husband and protect her daughter, even literally taking action into her own hands. For instance, she charges at Trueblood with weapons, finally harming him with an axe. Realizing what Trueblood did to their daughter and what she in turn did to Trueblood, Kate prays "Lawd, have mercy!" (65). Kate calls on

God to help her family through the ordeal. Trueblood too claims to seek God for help, consulting the preacher for guidance, although we've seen how that ends. When thinking that Trueblood ran off for good, Kate surrounds her daughter with "a heap of women" and even calls Aunt Cloe to perform an abortion on Matty Lou's baby, reasoning that this is the most humane outcome (66). To conform to traditional expectations of patriarchal narratives, Trueblood claims to have come back to his home and claimed his rightful spot as head of the family: Trueblood says that he "made up [his] mind that [he] was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too" (66). Upon coming home, Kate confronts Trueblood, asking why he didn't just leave them alone. Despite Kate's protests, Trueblood insists that he is a man and "man don't leave his family" (66), which Doane and Hodges read as a "scary rather than responsible claim to power" (37).

However, I find Kate's next words to be a rare moment in the chapter when Ellison exposes the dangers of adhering to patriarchal phallocentrism. Kate cries, "Naw you ain't no man. No man'd do what you did" (66). With these few words, Kate challenges a system that has too often validated one's manhood when women are victimized. Because Trueblood includes this in his rendition to Norton, it can be read that Kate's words, filtered through Trueblood, question Norton's manhood by implicating a seemingly civilized white man who sexually longs for his own daughter. Cleverly, Trueblood gets away with such questioning because he gives these lines to Kate, a woman. Toward the end of his story, Trueblood explains that he runs off the heap of women and threatens to kill Cloe if she even touches a finger on any of "my womenfolks" (67). Not surprisingly, Trueblood makes it seem like Kate's only

alternative, like her daughter's, is to retreat in silence. And yet, it seems as if Trueblood, who successfully externalizes stereotypes of black masculinity to challenge its social constructions, begins to recognize that these ideals may be just as damaging to black females as stereotypes have been to black males.

As Trueblood tells his story of incest to a white man, Ellison tells his story of racism to a white audience. Said best by Toni Morrison, Ellison wrote for the "white gaze" (qtd. in Houston 252-53). Morrison questions, "invisible to whom?" (Houston 253). Not to her. She found Ellison to be "confronting the enemy; the enemy is a white guy, or the white establishment" (Houston 253). As the novel comes full circle, Ellison leaves his white readers to ponder white society's pervasive social blindness, which he juxtaposes with Invisible Man's newfound vision. In the final chapter Invisible Man has an epiphany in which he makes a connection between himself and Trueblood. Caught in a situation eerily similar to the one described by Trueblood in the second chapter, he says, "It was a state neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between, in which I was caught like Trueblood's jaybird that yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes" (568). In the second chapter, Trueblood first used the jaybird metaphor to explain to Invisible Man and Norton that he felt "frozen" once Kate discovered the incest: "I was just like a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung 'til he's paralyzed — but still alive in his eyes and he's watchin' 'em sting his body to death" (63). At the very end of the novel as the narrator reflects on his journey, he realizes that he is not that different from Trueblood: they are both immobilized yet clearly see their situation and can place it in a larger context.

Recognizing his alliance with Trueblood, Invisible Man discovers his distance from Norton, and thereby from the patriarchal phallocentrism he represents. In the Epilogue, the brief reunion between Invisible Man and Norton marks a turning point in Invisible Man's maturation in which Norton's persistent delusions contrast with his emerging perceptions. In the novel's concluding pages, Invisible Man runs into a disoriented Norton on a New York City subway. The "thinner," "wrinkled" Norton asks Invisible Man for directions to Centre Street (577). Invisible Man, however, is struck by Norton's lack of recognition for a man whom he claimed as his destiny. Upon questioning, "But don't you really know who I am?" Invisible Man is disheartened to learn he neither recognizes him nor remembers claiming him as his future (578). Furthermore, Norton is not in the least bit ashamed. At the end of their exchange, Invisible Man tells Norton that "if you don't know *where* you are, you probably don't know *who* you are" (578). "In the public space of the New York train," Johns writes, "the Invisible Man is at home with moral and social ambiguity, as well as verbal play, while Norton holds fast to the comparatively mechanical social privilege to which he is accustomed" (250). Seemingly, Invisible Man finally acknowledges that Trueblood is one of the invisible men who use the power of the spoken word to combat the trauma he experiences because of the color of his skin.

At the end of his overview of *Invisible Man*'s critical reception, Robert Butler states, "Certainly much more needs to be said about Ellison's envisioning of female experience and how feminine values are an important part of his vision" (xxxvii).

Undeniably seeing beyond the stereotypes of black masculinity, affirming black manhood, lies at the heart of Ellison's novel. *Invisible Man* is primarily concerned with how white society has failed to see the complexity of black male identity, nullifying and rendering it invisible. But we should also look closely to see why Ellison depicts his female characters as occupying subservient roles in patriarchal culture. Succeeding in challenging assumptions of black masculinity, the novel also contests white men's interests and privileges, especially those concerning the victimization of females. Just as Ellison uses Trueblood's lowly sharecropper position to disguise a subversive story directed at white males, he may also be strategically using females' lower ranks to challenge the ideals of patriarchal phallocentrism.

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Abstract **Christine Grogan**

In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, Robert J. Butler ends his overview of *Invisible Man*'s critical reception by stating, "Certainly much more needs to be said about Ellison's envisioning of female experience and how feminine values are an important part of his vision" (xxxvii). Much more needs to be said because Ellison's stance on the experiences of females has not been so clear, especially in his epic novel, *Invisible Man*. The question remains: Is Ellison's widely-read novel a critique of sexism in America or is the novel itself deeply marred by it? This article revisits the second chapter of *Invisible Man* — the "Trueblood episode" — to argue that Ellison has Jim Trueblood fashion a crude story of father-daughter incest to combat the impotence brought on by a white male supremacist society that bonds together over racism. Although many have correctly claimed that Trueblood's tall tale is told at the expense of his daughter, who, like most of the female characters in the book, is denied complexity and humanity, this article argues that Ellison's chapter subtly challenges patriarchal phallocentrism by hinting at a proto-feminist message in suggesting what some feminists would later claim — that father-daughter incest is a normal function of heteropatriarchy, not a breakdown in the social order.

Key Words: Ellison, *Invisible Man*, racism, trauma, patriarchal phallocentrism, masculinity, femininity, incest, Trueblood

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