

# Extension of Mind in Narrative Form: The Trueblood Episode in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Meiling Fu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Primary School Affiliated to Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: 60 Xinghaidong Road, University Town, Panyu, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 511400, China

Received: September 10, 2023

Accepted: November 5, 2023

Online Published: November 17, 2023

doi:10.5539/ells.v13n4p43

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n4p43>

## Abstract

The Trueblood episode in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an embedded narrative that has garnered significant critical attention. However, despite extensive interpretations of this episode, the broader narrative structure of the novel has remained largely unexamined. This paper endeavors to delve into the role of the Trueblood episode in extending the cognitive capacities of the characters by drawing upon the cognitive theory of distributed minds. It argues that this narrative form facilitates the contrast and analogy across different time frames, thus emphasizing the division between the primary narrator and the experiencing self. In this manner, embedded narratives serve as cognitive tools for the characters. *Invisible Man*, being a bildungsroman, effectively employs this narrative form to offer a more profound portrayal of the protagonist's growth.

**Keywords:** Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, embedded narrative, distribution of minds

## 1. Introduction

Embedded narratives, commonly referred to as “stories within a story”, have a rich history in the realm of literature, dating back to ancient Greek epics. They have continued to be a prominent narrative technique adopted by many modernist authors, including luminaries such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In Ralph Ellison's bildungsroman, *Invisible Man*, the Trueblood episode stands out as a quintessential example of an embedded narrative, encompassing a substantial portion of Chapter 2. The unexpected oration delivered by Jim Trueblood perplexed not only Mr. Norton and the young African-American college student, who were immediate witnesses near the log cabin but also left a lasting impression on readers and literary critics alike. Michel Fabre (1985, p. 536) explored the episode, attempting to decipher the intended audience addressed within it. He unearthed the inherent ambiguity concerning the identification of the narratees. In a different vein, Bertram D. Ashe (2010, p. 95) delved into this episode by contextualizing it within the broader narrative of the novel, thereby shedding light on its role in the personal development of the protagonist. A. Timothy Spaulding (2004, p. 489) postulated that the narrator infused Trueblood's discourse with the melancholic tones of blues music, offering his own improvisation and commentary on the speech. While these interpretations provide valuable insights, they do not delve into the intricacies of the narrative layers at play. Consequently, they fall short of fully unraveling the complexity inherent in the Trueblood episode.

The analysis of narrative levels can be effectively enriched by incorporating cognitive concepts. This study aims to meticulously examine the Trueblood episode, employing a narratological perspective. Furthermore, it will draw upon the notion of the “distributed mind” to explore the cognitive aspects of this episode and its role in extending the cognitive capacities of the characters involved.

## 2. Narratology Inspired by Cognitive Science

The research on distributed intelligence, as a theoretical framework, can provide valuable insights for the analysis of narrative structures. In *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1978, p. 54) expresses the logical relationship between signs and tools by subsuming them under the mediated action. Narration, a sense-making activity, can be viewed as a form of mediated action. Based on the Vygotskian emphasis on mediated action, David Herman (2007, p. 273) studies how story structures interact with intelligent activities and points out that embedded narratives can be regarded as “an instrument of the mind” supporting intelligent behaviors. It should be noted that a Vygotskian approach to intelligent behavior usually goes beyond the individual and aims to understand the collaborative cognitive process. Herman (2007, p. 319) maintains that narration, as a multi-personal activity,

paves the way for the distribution of mind “across participants, places and times”. Similarly, in the Trueblood episode, an examination of the thematic focus and structural elements of the embedded narrative allows for a deeper comprehension of how temporal frames are juxtaposed within the discourse. This analysis illuminates the progression of the reading process and, in turn, facilitates an understanding of socially distributed cognition rooted in the unique context and specific domain.

### 3. Narrative Structure of Trueblood Episode

The description of “narrative levels” can be traced back to Gérard Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*. Genette (1983, p. 228) terms the highest level of narrative as the “extra-diegetic” level, while the events inside the first narrative are described as “diegetic” or “intradiegetic” and the events told in the second as “metadiegetic”. The organization technique in *Invisible Man* makes the analysis of Trueblood Episode more complicated. In the prologue, the anonymous primary narrator “I” is much wiser and older than the young protagonist “I” in the main chapters, thus indicating the first-person recollection in the novel. In Chapter 2, the narrator “I” retrospectively tells how the young experiencing “I” met Jim Trueblood before a log cabin with Mr. Norton. In this level, the voice belongs to the narrator “I” at present, while the focalizer is the experiencing “I” in the past who was a driver for the school sponsor Mr. Norton. Meanwhile, the storytelling acts performed by Trueblood constitute the intradiegetic narration. At the diegetic level, the experiencing “I” is a character who interacts with the narrator Trueblood. Trueblood’s acts of storytelling create an embedded narrative that is below the diegetic level. Then here comes the Trueblood episode, in which Trueblood told the experiencing “I” and Mr. Norton about his incest.

Like the previous narrator “I”, Trueblood also actively exploits the temporal structure inside the embedded narrative. He begins with his situation after the incest and wonders why those white people treat him better after his incest. This beginning is focused on by the experience of Trueblood at present. Then, he recalls the story of his sleep with his daughter Matty Lou, but he breaks the temporal sequence by inserting his recollection of Margaret in Mobile and the dream of Mr. Broadnax’s house. The focalizer in this insertion is changed from the experiencing Trueblood in the past to the experiencing one in the past of the past. After waking up from the dream, he continues the previous recalling of his sleep, his incest with his daughter, and his suffering from his wife Kate after the incest. Finally, he moves back to the beginning and repeats his previous wondering. It can be seen that the total temporal structure inside the Trueblood episode is a symmetrical one that starts from the present, the past to the distant past, gradually turns back to the past, and ends at the present.

### 4. The Effects of Embedded Narratives in Trueblood Episode

In this collection of different time frames, characters and objects can cross and recross the time and space axes to associate themselves with others. This association can be seen as a distributed mind of the narrator Trueblood. Matty Lou’s dream talk “Daddy” is an echo of Margaret’s saying “Daddy”: “Well, it was like that when I heard Matty Lou say, ‘Daddy’, and I knowed she...” (Ellison, 1995, p. 56). Drawing on this saying, Trueblood’s desire for women is gradually arisen but he tries to resist the desire for his daughter by moving away. Also, the meat grease in the bedroom stimulates Trueblood’s dream of going to Mr. Broadnax for some fatty meat. In Mr. Broadnax’s house, the incompetence and immovability before the white woman imply the crowded living situation of the bedroom. It says in the novel, “I tries to git out, but I don’t find the door; and all around me I can smell woman” (Ellison, 1995, p. 57). The loss of self-control in this dream is a reflection of the incestuous behavior outside the dream: “I runs and runs till I should be tired but ain’t tired but feelin’ more rested as I runs and runnin’” (Ellison, 1995, p. 59). The running in the dream seems to imply sexual behavior in reality. The relief after constant running in the tunnel in the dream turns out to be a disaster. As soon as he wakes up from the dream, he finds that: “And there I am, lookin’ straight in Matty Lou’s face and she’s beatin’ me and scratchin’ and tramblin’ and shakin’ and cryin’ all at the same time...” (Ellison, 1995, p. 59). Then he gets stuck in an immovable situation like that dream again. These clues show that the movement across the time frames is an extension of Trueblood’s mind. With the association between the characters and objects across time frames, the narrator Trueblood transforms the suffering at hand into a dreamy gorgeous bedroom, in which he can find relief from the pain. When Trueblood’s narration is located in a different time frame, he is likely to lose control of his behavior in the previous situated frame. It is the relief from the immovability he takes for regard in the dream that advances the immovability in reality. Such contrast is achieved through the design of multiple time frames inside the embedded narrative.

Not limited to the embedded narrative, the distribution of mind in the Trueblood episode can be stretched out as far as the novel ends. Ashe (2010, p. 95) maintains that “embedded narratives must be considered in the context of the events of the novel that happen before and after the storytelling event”. The Trueblood episode is

interrupted by the primary narrator “I” several times during the Trueblood’s narration. These interruptions drag the narration out of the metadiegetic level and present the interaction among the experiencing “I”, Mr. Norton, and Trueblood. This interaction is a part of the intradiegetic level, in which the experiencing “I” focalizes the storytelling act of Trueblood and the reaction of Mr. Norton to the story. The experience “I” initially focuses on Mr. Norton’s abrupt question to the stranger Trueblood: “Is it true... I mean did you?” (Ellison, 1995, p. 51). Mr. Norton wants to know about the details of the incestuous story. Trueblood is puzzled about the question, but Mr. Norton incessantly asks the same question: “You did and are unharmed!”, “You do?”, “Answer me!” (Ellison, 1995, p. 51). Then the primary narrator describes Trueblood’s and Mr. Norton’s appearance respectively and later inserts his thoughts on Trueblood’s story, such as “How can he tell this to white men, I thought” (Ellison, 1995, p. 57). When the experiencing “I” realizes that Trueblood will talk about the incestuous story, “I” tries to interrupt the communication at this key moment by saying, “Mr. Norton, sir, it’s time we were getting back to the campus...” (Ellison, 1995, p. 60). But Mr. Norton is so interested in listening to the incestuous story that he appears to be annoyed by the interruption and requires Trueblood to continue his narration. After Trueblood’s narration, Mr. Norton trembles and gives a banknote to Trueblood. It says in the novel, “Please take this and buy the children some toys for me” (Ellison, 1995, p. 69). This behavior is not only an echo of his ambiguous promise before Trueblood’s narration: “How are you faring now? Perhaps I could help” (Ellison, 1995, p. 52), but also an echo of the better treatment of the white people in Trueblood narration.

These details above reveal the latent desire of Mr. Norton for incestuous behavior, which forms a contrast with his love for her daughter. Before Mr. Norton meets Trueblood, he tells the protagonist “I” about his daughter's beauty and shows the miniature to the protagonist. But after the Trueblood episode, when he takes out the wallet to extend a banknote, it says in the novel, “the platinum-framed miniature came with it (the wallet), but he did not look at it this time” (Ellison, 1995, p. 69). However, even though these details are narrated at the intradiegetic level, the experiencing “I” does not recognize the hypocritical aspect of Mr. Norton and ironical sense in Trueblood’s telling. The experiencing “I” does not understand Trueblood’s narration and he only envies Trueblood’s getting “a hundred-dollar bill” (Ellison, 1995, p. 69). In a word, the interaction between the intradiegetic level and metadiegetic level enables the contrast which the experiencing “I” does not feel in the intradiegetic level, but the primary narrator “I”, who recalls the events in all of these levels, can feel the contrast. By consulting the distribution of minds across the levels, Ellison made it possible to present a situation where the protagonist as a primary narrator can reflect upon the experiencing self who knows little about what is happening. In this way, *Invisible Man*, as a bildungsroman, provides readers with a chance to glimpse the tangible growth of the protagonist.

Embedded narrative enables the extension of the mind and guides thinking beyond the immediate context in which it occurs. Trueblood is also a predictive “invisible man” when this episode is seen against the larger context of the whole novel. The narrative in this episode is not an isolated embedded segment in Chapter 2, because many events that Trueblood has encountered are analogous to the events in the following chapters. At the beginning of the episode, Trueblood talks of the note he received from Mr. Buchanan for his disgrace and he is required to take it to the sheriff. “I did that, jus’ like he tole me” (Ellison, 1995, p. 52). The practice of sending notes is quite similar to the letters that Dr. Bledsoe prepares to get the protagonist out of the school. In Chapter 6, Dr. Bledsoe decides to punish the protagonist for the disgrace that he brings to Mr. Norton by sending him “to New York for the summer and save your pride and your money” (Ellison, 1995, p. 145). Dr. Bledsoe purposefully mentions: “My secretary will give you some letters addressed to several friends of the school”, and “The letters will introduce you and request them to help you with a job” (Ellison, 1995, p. 149). Both Trueblood and the protagonist do as the command they have received and then get deceived. In Chapter 9, Mr. Emerson, the one who receives the letter, asks, “That you must tell me.... To what does he refer?” (Ellison, 1995, p. 191). This corresponds to Trueblood’s narration: “I went to the jailhouse and give Sheriff Barbour the note and he ask me to tell him what happen.... they made me to tell it again” (Ellison, 1995, pp. 52–53). Both of them are driven out of the school by sending a note or letter to another place.

This kind of close correspondence can also be seen in the surrealistic narration of immovability. Trueblood describes his feeling about the dream in Mr. Broadnax’s house: “I don’t know what to do. I want to run.... I can’t move and.... I tried to say somethin’, but I caint” (Ellison, 1995, p. 58). When the protagonist receives the treatment at the factory hospital in Chapter 11, he is subjected to electric shocks, “I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction” (Ellison, 1995, p. 243). Both of them want to escape from being controlled by others in the surrealistic scenes and their narrations suggest a sense of immovability in the face of control.

In this context, the act of narration, being inherently multi-personal, facilitates the collaborative construction of

mental states. Initially, the experiencing “I” struggles to comprehend Trueblood’s ordeal, as it harbors some degree of awareness influenced by the perspectives of white individuals. The primary narrator interrupts the focalization of the experiencing “I” ahead of the episode: “I didn’t understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear” (Ellison, 1995, p. 47). This interruption, as a review of the past, indicates the primary narrator’s criticism towards the experiencing “I”. Even if there was no intensive empathy between the young experiencing self and Trueblood when the protagonist is young, the embedded narrative has its durable distributed intelligence which crosses the limit of time and space. In Chapter 25, when the protagonist is stuck in the racial riot and feels extremely exhausted, he can describe his state by recalling Trueblood’s jaybird: “It was a state neither of dreaming nor walking, but somewhere in between, in which I was caught like Trueblood’s jaybird that yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes” (Ellison, 1995, p. 568). Only after these correspondences does the invisible protagonist realize that Trueblood was somewhat speaking for him as well in the Trueblood episode, just like what he asks at the end of the novel: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (Ellison, 1995, p. 581).

## 5. Conclusion

Trueblood episode, as an embedded narrative, features the distribution of mind across multiple narrative levels. Inside the episode, the narrator Trueblood exploits the temporal structure which enables the characters and objects to cross the time frames by building associations with each other. Not limited to the episode, the distribution of mind can be achieved in the interaction between the embedded narrative and the rest novel. This distribution across narrative levels highlights the division between the primary narrator “I” and the experiencing “I” by distinguishing their understanding of the embedded narrative. As the experiencing “I” grows up, more correspondences to the Trueblood episode can be perceived and the experiencing “I” gradually realizes that Trueblood somewhat speaks for “me”. This underscores the enduring impact of mind distribution through embedded narratives on the growth of the protagonist.

### Acknowledgments

Not applicable

### Authors contributions

Not applicable

### Funding

Not applicable

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Informed consent

Obtained.

### Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

The journal’s policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

### Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

### References

- Ashe, B. D. (2010). Listening to the Blues: Ralph Ellison’s Trueblood Episode in “Invisible Man”. In B. Harold (Ed.), *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Ralph Ellison* (new ed., pp. 95–112). New York: Infobase Publishing.

- Ellison, R. (1995). *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Fabre, M. (1985). The Narrator/Narratee Relationship in “Invisible Man”. *Callaloo*, 25, 535–543. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930824>
- Genette, G. (1983). *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Trans. Jane E. Lewin). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Herman, D. (2007). Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind: Cognitive Narratology, Discursive Psychology, and Narratives in Face-to-face Interaction. *Narrative*, 15(3), 306–334. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2007.0023>
- Herman, D. (2013). *Story Telling and The Science of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Spaulding, A. T. (2004). Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: The Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man”. *Callaloo*, 27(2), 481–501. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2004.0089>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author, with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).