

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

Racism is “the belief that humans are subdivided into distinct hereditary groups that are innately different in their social behavior and mental capacities and that therefore be ranked as superior and inferior” (Marger 24). In a country, the practice of racism will eventually lead to the act of segregation among its people. Segregation by definition is “the act or policy of separating people of different races, religions, or sexes and treating them in a different way” (“Segregation” def.1).

The United States, which claims to be a country of democracy that generally believes in the equality of opportunity where “each individual should have an equal chance for success” (Datesman 31), is no exception to the practice of racism in their society. Since the United States is a country with “great ethnic diversity” (3), the inequality between the majority ethnic group, the Anglo-Saxon, which is often ranked as the superior in the society and the minority ethnic groups such as African-

American, Hispanic and Asian which are often considered to be the inferior is inevitable.

With “slightly more than 12 percent of the population, African-Americans are the largest ethnic minority in the United States.” (Marger 221) Yet looking back at the history, the African American was to endure a long period of racism in the form of slavery for more than two centuries. When the Civil War ended, the African-Americans were supposed to be free and to be given equal opportunity as other citizens in the United States since the slavery institution had been abolished. However, with the segregation system, the white managed to maintain the position of the black as inferior members of the society. Segregation system in the United States is a system based on the Jim Crow law which is “the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s” (Pilgrim). With the notion “separate but equal”, the laws constitute the separation of the whites and the African-American in many aspects in society such as political, economical, social, and educational aspects. With this separation, the African-Americans are often put in disadvantageous position. This inevitably widens the social gap between the two races.

Richard Wright, being “the first African-American author whose work appears on the national bestseller lists” (Rozakis 305), openly shows his concern about the issue of racism related to the black people through his best-selling work *Native Son*, which was published in 1940. The novel is different in comparison with other protest novels written by other black authors at that time. “Until *Native Son*, black writers had always described blacks as victims of white violence” (High 215)

but Wright depicts the novel as “a brutal portrait of a poor black man spurred on to murder by the oppression and hatred of the white world” (Rozakis 305). Through the portrayal of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel which became a controversy at that time, Wright was aware that “the social situation of blacks causes them to become violent, too” (High 215). Bigger Thomas becomes a murderer “not out of choice, but as a result of the environmental influences beyond his control” (Senna 6).

Ralph Ellison is another African-American author who was also concerned about the situation that the African-American had to face at that time. Thus he clearly shows it in his one and only novel, *Invisible Man*, which was published in 1952. The novel “expounds the theme of black invisibility in an American society that willfully ignores black” (Rozakis 355). The book has won many awards and is often regarded as “an established classic of modern American literature” (Hoffman 295). Ellison shows his concern about “why most protagonists of Afro-American fiction (not to mention the black characters in fiction written by whites) were without intelligent depth. Too often they were figures caught up in the most intense forms of social struggle, subject to the most extreme forms of human predicament but yet seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them” (Ellison xix). In his novel Ellison creates the protagonist as a nameless narrator who “represents many intelligent young African-Americans of this generation” (356) He “dreams success through humility and hard work” (356) but in the end, he eventually must realize that the society itself prevents him from reaching it.

In order to reveal the criticism on racial issue that both authors are trying to convey, I will analyze the theme from the two novels. Theme in fiction is the

“controlling idea or its central insight” (Perrine 102) and both novels share similar ideas which emphasize the authors’ concern and criticism about the life of the African-American as minority that experience racism in form of segregation from the white society. I will reveal the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist since protagonist, which by definition is “the central character in the conflict, whether he be a sympathetic or unsympathetic person” (Perrine 44), holds central role in the novel. Both novels have the same setting of place and time, the United States in the 1940’s, a period when the segregation system is still in practice in the United States. Two themes which are related to racism can be obtained because the protagonists of both novels go through similar experience regarding segregation although they have different background and different way of coping with their experience. Moreover, both themes reveal the undeniable fact that the practice of racism in the form of segregation has negative effects on each protagonist as an individual in many aspects of his life.

### **Statement of the Problems**

1. What is the theme in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*?
2. What is the theme in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*?
3. How do the portrayals of the protagonists help in revealing the themes?

### **Purpose of the Study**

1. The purpose of the study is to reveal the theme in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.

2. The purpose of the study is to reveal the theme in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.
3. The purpose of the study is to show how the portrayals of the protagonists help in revealing the themes.

### **Method of Research**

I use the library research that includes reading and understanding the primary texts which are the novels and other references, in order to make an objective and a non-superficial analysis in the process of the study. Next, I analyze the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist in each of the novels. Lastly, I draw some conclusions from my analysis.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The organization of the thesis is divided into four chapters, which are preceded by Preface and Abstract. Chapter One is Introduction, which contains Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research, and Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two contains the analysis of the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Chapter Three contains the analysis of the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Chapter Four contains the conclusion of the analysis. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and Appendix, which consist of the summary of the two novels and the biography of the authors.