



June 2014

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Recommended Citation

Elkins, Madison (2014) "The Blindness of an Invisible Man: An Exploration of Ellison's Female Characters," *Pursuit - The Journal of Undergraduate Research at The University of Tennessee*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/pursuit/vol5/iss1/9>

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The Blindness of an Invisible Man: An exploration of Ellison's female characters

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Questions have long been raised about the female characters in *Invisible Man* who often appear to be objectified or stereotyped. Especially in light of Ellison's professed opinions against the dangers of stereotyping as minority oppression, the depiction of his female characters seems to be fundamentally hypocritical. It is the dominant critical opinion among feminist scholars that Ellison's treatment of female characters is not only hopelessly misogynistic, but, more importantly, undermines the telos of the novel and enervates its social claims. While it is a valid exercise to analyze Ellison's female characters in this way, this opinion fails in two critical ways to assess the novel on its own terms. The invisible man's misogynistic attitude is not a male-centric novel's myopic flaw, but ultimately a device, a mechanism employed by Ellison to develop the protagonist and to brilliantly, if painfully, crystallize the theme of societal invisibility.

Introduction

The magnificent blonde of the battle royal stands naked, dancing in the middle of a room of men, and yet she is nearly invisible. She is an object to be owned, coveted, destroyed—much less than a human being. The young narrator describes her:

The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt. I felt a desire to spit upon her as my eyes brushed slowly over her body... [I wanted] to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her...

(*Invisible* 19)

The first detailed encounter with a woman in the novel is characterized by what seems to be an intensely negative objectification: rather than "her hair" or "her eyes" showing possession, "the hair," "the face," "the eyes," are separated from her being, objectifying her and implying that she cannot possess even her own body. Masked and hollow, the battle royal woman is invisible to the men for whom she dances, her sexuality engendering feelings of desire and murder alike.

Questions have long been raised about the female characters in *Invisible Man* who, as evinced in the excerpt above, often appear to be objectified or stereotyped. The protagonists' tendency to objectify women is, along this line of thought, often called upon as evidence of a misogynistic text. His reaction to the battle royal woman, for example, is intensely hostile: he desires to "spit upon her," "destroy" and "murder her" (19). His disdain for women, manifested in his reaction to the Woman Question, is clear: viewing the reassignment as a clear demotion, an "outrageous joke," he "[feels] as though [he] had been spun like a top" (406-407). Especially in light of Ellison's professed opinions against the dangers of stereotyping as a form of minority oppression, the depiction of his female characters may seem to be fundamentally hypocritical. It is, in fact, the dominant critical opinion among feminist scholars that Ellison's treatment of female characters is not only hopelessly misogynistic, but, more importantly, undermines the telos of the novel and enervates its social claims. This paper will show that, while it is a valid exercise to analyze Ellison's female characters with an eye towards their roles as members of a subjugated group, this opinion fails in critical ways to assess the novel on its own terms. I will argue that, as shown in the example of Mary Rambo, the narrator's misogynistic attitude is not a male-centric novel's myopic flaw, but ultimately a *device*, a mechanism employed by Ellison to develop the narrator and to brilliantly crystallize the theme of societal invisibility.

Dominant Critical Opinion: Invisible Women

The dominant critical opinion regarding *Invisible Man*'s female cast can be outlined in two prominent voices on the subject: Carolyn Sylvander and Ann Stanford. Sylvander postulates that Ellison denies his female characters full humanity, that "the narrator of *Invisible Man* in fact loses what slight recognition he has of woman-as-human at the beginning of the novel as he becomes more closely allied with manhood, Brotherhood, and his own personhood" (Sylvander 77). Stanford, in her article "He Speaks for Whom?: Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*," posits the question: "What happens to 'the second sex' in a novel as powerful as Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the trope of invisibility functions as a critique of racist American society?" (17). Critics like Stanford and Sylvander press the issue of the novel's hypocrisy: how we reconcile the perpetuation of the invisibility it seeks to undo? The narrator, in other words, extends the same discrimination that he encounters to the female sex. Sylvander's article focuses even more specifically on the hypocrisy of Ellison, who she says is guilty of a fault he openly opposes: that of perpetuating stereotypes and thereby perpetuating the oppression of a subjugated group.

If his goal or purpose is indeed to uproot the invisibility of the black man, Sylvander argues that the narrator's blindness to women undermines the sanctity and the effectiveness of Ellison's purpose. Sylvander may, ostensibly, have a point. If we consider Ellison's own words in his analysis of stereotyping, it may appear that "his woman characters," at least as they are cast in the eyes of the protagonist, "are not fully human" (Sylvander 77). In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison refers to Richard Wright's critics, recognizing the dehumanization process which stereotyping can represent: "They forget that human life possesses an innate dignity and the [human being] an innate sense of nobility, that all men possess the tendency to dream and the compulsion to make their dreams reality" (*Shadow* 81). If we apply these sensibilities to each female character of *Invisible Man*—Mary, Sybil, the battle royal woman, the slave women in his dream—none of these women seem to be afforded the depth and complexity of this definition of human life. While Ellison does depict and explore and evaluate the humanity of black men through his protagonist, Sylvander says, he remains blind to the humanity of his women characters. Ellison himself said that "the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word... For if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind, imprison, and destroy" (*Shadow* 79). If Ellison is opposed to

this stereotypical practice and claims it is an even more potent danger in the written form, it may seem that the treatment of the female characters of *Invisible Man* cannot be accounted for. Especially given Ellison's claim that "human life possesses an innate dignity," and that it is the artists' duty to reveal the dignity of minorities which are often oppressed, it would follow that he would apply this theory to women as well as African American men. Sylvander and Stanford would conclude that, unlike the male characters of the novel, Ellison's female minorities do not actualize their humanity, but are pawns, symbols, or flimsy, sexualized paper dolls. Given the profiles and actions of the female characters in *Invisible Man*, Ellison may ostensibly seem to be guilty of the same stereotyping and effacement that his works, both *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act*, denounce; but this is a hasty, reactionary criticism. Sylvander, Stanford, and critics like them fail to assess the novel on its own terms.

In Defense of Ellison

It must first be acknowledged that the "narrator" is not synonymous with the "author" these critics accuse. It is commonly understood that the two can, and often do, enact different streams of purpose. As Gérard Genette posits in his article "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," "rigorous identification" of author to narrator ($A = N$), "defines factual narrative, in which [...] the author assumes full responsibility for the assertions of his narrative... Conversely, their *disassociation* ($A \neq N$) defines fiction" (764, italics added). *Invisible Man*, defined as a work of fiction, must thus be understood in Genette's terms: the author and narrator are disassociated and are not to be identified as synonymous. Genette further specifies the nature of a fiction as "a type of narrative for the veracity of which the author does not seriously vouch" (764). Ellison is not necessarily guilty of the invisible man's behavior simply because he writes of it, just as Nabokov is not, *ipso facto*, a poetic pedophile. While Ellison's female characters may indeed appear as typified symbols or inhuman characters, they are cast through the eyes of the narrator, the invisible man; the author, however, should not be equated to him, indeed *cannot* be equated to him if we are to understand *Invisible Man* as a fictional work.

Another flaw in this collection of criticism is the assumption that disorder, namely hypocrisy, is by definition a negative trait. Aesthetically, the narrator's treatment of women does not detract from the brilliance of his character; on the contrary, it renders him more complex and realistic. More importantly, the narrator's contradictions are a valuable literary device that functions in the narrative as a whole. The fact that the narrator turns a blind eye to women, the eye of discrimination that he is himself reacting against, unifies Ellison's larger purpose: to show the pervasive quality of a cultural tendency to objectify minority groups. He is invisible even to himself at first—and this blindness extends not only to himself, but also to those "below" him in the social hierarchy instilled by a patriarchal system of white supremacy. This flaw in the protagonist extends the novel beyond a criticism of the social discrimination the narrator alone encounters from an individual problem to a pandemic one. It shows instead that this is a societal epidemic, internalized even by its victims and extended to every minority group. The narrator is the "other" to society; similarly, women become the ignored and invisible "other" to man. This misogynistic lens is an effective device, without which the novel would lose its applicability to the greater societal condition of invisibility, stereotypification, and resultant oppression.

An analysis of *Invisible Man* in terms of Ellison's purpose is vital for several reasons. Even though Sylvander and Stanford neglect some elements in their analyses, it remains a fruitful endeavor to consider his moral investment in his work not only as an author but also as an advocate for social equality. Yet this type of analysis can be useful only when his role as the author (not as the narrator himself) is kept in mind; it is a futile exercise when one becomes engrossed in disentangling Ellison from the narrator. It is, moreover, a far more productive critical analysis when one regards the invisible man's misogynistic attitude as a *device*, employed

by Ellison to further the theme of invisibility. It is in this possibility that the significance of the distinction between author and narrator is most obvious. Sylvander attempts to criticize the effectiveness of Ellison's purpose as an attempt to represent the underrepresented; perhaps Ellison's purpose is rather to comment on the greater system of discriminative thought. In this analysis, the invisible man's attitude towards women is not a fracture in the veneer of Ellison's philosophy, but rather one element of his literary endeavor to illustrate it. While a narrator can, of course, echo the author's sensibilities, he can just as easily act as a literary device rather than mouthpiece.

Ellison's own warning that the mind is not the heart can guide us in our examination of the stereotyped exteriors of his female characters. At face value, it may seem that many of the women of *Invisible Man* appear to be stereotyped; and, indeed, the narrator's voice is unforgiving. But there is one whose textual portrayal provides a compelling example of an autonomous woman. Superficially, Mary Rambo may seem to be a cartooned version of a "mammy" stereotype, but serves a designated purpose as a meaningful character who challenges and shapes the protagonist. The narrator's misogynistic opinion of her, on the other hand, illustrates that social oppression of the white patriarchy works not only in terms of black and white but also as a construction of power that exploits all subjugated groups—of gender as well as of color—as means to an end. Because of her deep impact on the protagonist and her deeper impact on the narrative, Mary demonstrates that Ellison's female characters may reach beyond their own seemingly superficial mold.

A Case Study: Mary Rambo

Mary Rambo, a mother-figure in the novel, serves as an example of a character who, ostensibly a stereotyped version of a woman, challenges and contours the narrator's path. I will first examine common critical discussions of Mary as a stereotyped, cursory mother-figure, invoking the arguments of Sylvander and Stanford as well as Alice Walker and Trudier Harris, who comment on the epidemic of the mother-saint convention in African American literature. Ellison, however, had bigger plans for Mary; a comparison of this character to the version of Mary originally written for *Invisible Man* will show Ellison's intentions and ability to create an effective female character, indicating that Ellison did not necessarily default to misogynistic or stereotypical representations of women. A close examination of the published Mary will confirm that, even in her pared-down portrayal, she is nonetheless a meaningful force in the novel. Far from being a saint-like Aunt Jemima, Mary represents an autonomous woman who not only thinks for herself but is a significant catalyst for the narrator's action. Despite the narrator's stereotyped descriptions of Mary, she is not represented *in the text itself* as a dehumanized, pasteboard mixture of feminine conventions but as a woman whose ideas and aspirations directly challenge and influence the narrator. Herein lies a crucial distinction: there is a divide between what the text presents as Mary and what the narrator presents as Mary—a divide that many have overlooked. The *text* presents a strong woman, whereas the *narrator* remains blind to her strength. In the textual representation of Mary, we can therefore see the narrative device coming full circle; the protagonist's misogynistic attitude extends even to a female character of humanity and dignity. Mary, in other words, functions as a sort of litmus test, proof that the narrator has fully internalized the blindness that renders him invisible.

Mary Rambo is described in her first encounter with our protagonist as a comfortably sexless "large dark woman" with a husky voice and motherly disposition. In the published version of *Invisible Man*, Mary Rambo is often viewed by discerning critics as a rather featureless maternal prototype, a stereotyped woman who is but a symptom of a larger problem: Ellison's inability, or unwillingness, to recognize human worth in a female character. She is "Mary, mother of God, sanctified as receiver of Male-God conception; Mary, mother without

sexuality, sanctified because it is impossible that sinless Son be born of woman with sin; Mary Rambo, with echoes of Sambo, less advanced in race consciousness than our narrator..." (Sylvander 79). As Sylvander puts it, she is "not a real person in the book," but rather "a super-human force of good, of salvation, of virtue and hope, the means by which the narrator is born anew into his Brotherhood identity, but of no interest in and of herself" as a character or human (78). The narrator's opinion of her indicates that he indeed does not see her as a person,

nor did I think of Mary as a "friend"; she was something more—a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive.

Mary Rambo is a manifestation of Alice Walker's "saint-women," African American mothers and grandmothers who, "instead of being perceived as whole persons [...] became shrines" in their communities (233). Trudier Harris examines these characteristics of the stereotypical black woman of literature, arguing that her strength, in essence a disease, becomes her defining and ultimately effacing characteristic. "Against the backdrop of unwritten taboos and efforts to avoid stereotypes," Harris argues, "black writers inadvertently created another stereotype—that of the black woman who was more suprahuman than human, more introspective than involved" (111). Mary Rambo is a strong, maternal figure to the invisible man, and her strength precludes any option of change—her situation will not improve. She will continue to persevere in her circumstances, hoping to earn enough money, Harris jokes, to purchase something better than cabbage. Other critics, such as Stanford, view Mary as a "shapeless" character, arguing that Ellison not only denies Mary depth and complexity, but treats her as an angelic, non-human force who, especially in light of the narrator's later derogatory comments on "the woman question," represents yet another facet of the protagonist's misogyny. Such critics would argue that Ellison is falling prey to the very system he criticized—that of treating women with the same shallow stereotypification that African American males have been unjustly faced with.

And yet the Mary we encounter in the published version of the novel is not the Mary that Ellison would have given us, had he more creative space. A significant portion of *Invisible Man* was edited out of the original manuscript and published separately ten years later as "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar," in the anthology *Soon One Morning*. This episode depicts a more detailed account of the narrator's experience in the hospital during his recovery from the explosion at the Liberty Paint Factory. Mary Rambo, who in this narrative is in charge of cleaning the hospital ward, descends upon the protagonist as a heroine, reviving him and helping him escape to Harlem. Mary's character is afforded much more development, and, consequently, more depth and autonomy than she possesses in the published account. The protagonist's first sight of Mary in this narrative, when he awakens confined in a machine, is described in vivid, strong language, her physical depiction a striking contrast from the "large dark woman" of the published version:

Her newly straightened hair gleamed glossily in the intense light, her blue uniform freshly ironed and stiffly starched. Seeing me awake she shook her head and grinned. I tensed, expecting a trick. But not this time. Instead, she tried seriously to communicate with me. ("Out" 244)

Mary attempts to understand the reason behind his confinement in the hospital, and, once satisfied he is not a criminal, she frees him by prying off the machine's heavy glass lid. She is shown to be a strong, willful woman. She distrusts the narrator, and he must gain her

confidence and trust before she will aid him; she challenges the narrator to “stop being such a sissy;” she revives his atrophied muscles with an herbal mixture she obtained from her mother, who “knows more about roots and herbs and midwifery than anybody you ever seen” (262). In this excerpt, two women, strong, intelligent, purposeful, are given full attention as complex, autonomous human beings. The narrator escapes the hospital, and it is only through Mary’s fearless determination that the narrator succeeds.

In this narrative, Mary is a physically strong woman, a healer and rescuer of the narrator in distress. She is given a history, an intelligent mother who “useta sing alto” and grows “the best crops in the country”; she is given knowledge as a successful healer; she is given a quickness of wit and a forcefulness of speech that the later Mary cannot claim (261). One is struck at the difference between the two Mary’s, and it is undeniable that Ellison’s first Mary is a stronger, more actualized character than the second. It may seem futile to consider elements of a novel that are, in fact, no longer a part of the novel; even though Ellison believed that Mary “deserved more space in the novel and would, I think, have made it a better book,” the published version is nonetheless the final artistic product and must be assessed as such (243). But the fact that Mary’s character development follows this arc, and that Ellison prefers the earlier version, is a significant detail to consider if the text is approached from an intentionalist standpoint. Melvin Dixon, in his article “O Mary Rambo, Don’t You Weep,” argues that this earlier episode “reveals Ellison’s appreciation for [Mary’s] femininity and strength” (100). It is clear that Ellison did not wish to promote a Mary who was shallow and stereotyped as an angelic caregiver, but rather was forced by spatial constraints to minimize the space allotted to her character development. The argument that Ellison’s treatment of female characters is characterized by his stereotypification of them therefore loses some of its indignant grit.

More importantly, however, it remains that the published Mary Rambo is not entirely a flimsy, stereotyped woman, as she plays an integral part in the narrator’s development. Stanford, who holds the opinion that Mary is only a stereotyped version of a woman, admits that “Ellison’s text has a momentary rupture in which Mary emerges demonstrating considerable sagacity and wit,” (22) as shown in Mary’s advice to the narrator:

It’s you young folks what’s going to make the changes [...] And I tell you something else, it’s the ones from the South that’s got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits. They finds a place for theyselves and forgits the ones on bottom [...] And you have to take care of yourself, son. Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don’t git corrupted. (*Invisible* 255)

Mary’s opinions here illustrate the pressure she places on the narrator to stimulate change in the world, to work for “the race” and “the ones on bottom.” As the narrator’s heroine and progenitor of his race consciousness, Mary possesses considerable power in the narrative. At the literal heart of the novel, she spurs the narrator on to his first act of resistance, his rally at the street eviction, and on to his involvement with the Brotherhood.

The protagonist’s attitude towards Mary is always misogynistic; he refuses to view her as an autonomous force, and stereotypes her as a female version of Sambo, an “old Mary.” It is for this reason, perhaps, that the published version of Mary seems to be “Mary, mother of God, sanctified as receiver of Male-God conception; Mary, mother without sexuality, sanctified because it is impossible that sinless Son be born of woman with sin; Mary Rambo, with echoes of Sambo, less advanced in race consciousness than our narrator...” (Sylvander 79). The reader (and critic) is easily lulled into the language of the narrator; lulled into the impression that Mary’s role in the narrative, the *novel*, is synonymous with the narrator’s opinion of her. The narrator consistently fails to recognize his female counterparts as fully human, just as the Brotherhood and Dr. Bledsoe fail to see the narrator. His internalization of the white-centric

patriarchy is evinced in his blindness of himself as well as other female characters; and his treatment of Mary is no exception. Rather, it serves to strengthen the effect. Even when faced with such a heroine as Mary, undeniably autonomous, opinionated, and shrewd, the protagonist is nevertheless blinded by the values and prejudices instilled in him by the social order around him.

The Narrator's Blindness: A Conclusion

Blindness constitutes a major motif in *Invisible Man*, both as a literal handicap and a figurative inability to see others. The battle royal is fought in blindness, as the boys wear blindfolds and the white spectators look on. Reverend Homer A. Barbee, who romanticizes and admires the college founder, is revealed to be physically blind. Brother Jack is found to have a glass eye which, in a nightmarish moment, "erupts out of his face" in the very moment his antagonism is made clear (474). The protagonist is infected with the same blindness that renders him invisible, and it is this greater flaw that brings the book beyond a criticism of the treatment of one man as a character, but shows that this is a societal epidemic, internalized even by its victims.

Ellison succeeds in showing the pervasiveness of invisibility, as well as its potency as a poison. Were the narrator incapable of such a misogynistic opinion as he extends to Mary, he would be merely a victim— even if a more pleasant one. In creating a character who is guilty of the same crime by which he himself suffers, Ellison has concocted a marvelously conflicted man of contradiction and complexity. Caught in the miasma of a Caucasian patriarchy, the invisible man is not only ill equipped to resist it, but he contributes to its perpetuation. The social oppression of the white patriarchy, Ellison cautions, functions not only on the level of black and white but more generally as a construction of power built to exploit minorities, whether of gender or color. *Invisible Man* details, in part, the struggles of a victim. Yet it attains its highest value in the perfect manifestation of the blindness of an invisible man.

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