

The Woman Question : Gender and Power in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Michelle R. Heeter

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, women characters also show evidence of a certain invisibility. Women are, for the most part, shadowy or impermanent presences, like Rhinehart's girlfriend, the majorettes in the Harlem parade, the pregnant teenager sent away weeping from the burning tenement, the woman who bumps into Invisible Man on the street and provokes a powerful but fleeting sexual attraction. Women characters whom Ellison chooses to develop more fully are often monstrous or uncomfortable caricatures, such as the racist and perverse Sybil. Even the most positive female character is problematic. Mary Rambo provides for Invisible Man when he badly needs shelter and care, but she seems less an individual than an emblem of black motherhood.

Critics have rightly sensed more than mere stereotype in Ellison's female characters; in particular, they have discussed characters of both gender in terms of their archetypal significance.¹⁾ I believe, though, that archetypal readings of the novel have ignored two important functions of female characters. The women of *Invisible Man* serve a peculiar narrative function, affecting the plot in such a way as to push the protagonist away from mainstream society. Rather than active enemies or plotters (the more fleshed-out male characters serve this purpose), they are often symbols of forces that block or oppose Invisible Man at various points in the novel.

In addition to this narrative significance, the women of *Invisible Man* have another function, which is perhaps their most important. *Invisible Man* is about power. American society, supposedly composed of equals, is a web of power relationships, and many of those encountered by Invisible Man are conducted according to sexist principles, as well as racist ones. Indeed, in Ellison's world, there is ultimately no distinction between racial and sexual politics, only a grim repetition of power unfairly denied men and women. By creating victimized and victimizing female characters, Ellison illustrates the exploitative quality that is inevitably a part of all relationships between unequals.

The first troubling female presence occurs in the Battle Royal scene in Chapter One. At this point, the protagonist is a young man, a new high school graduate, and a model black citizen. Although his grandfather's subversive instructions linger in his memory, he accepts the values of white society. He is alienated from other blacks taking part in the ritual, and probably from a good many blacks in town, who resent his aspiring to more that they will ever achieve. The blond dancer, draped in red, white, and blue, and gold, symbolizes the promises of American democracy and capitalism. Since Invisible Man is leaving, both physically and psychologically, the community of poor blacks, he naturally imagines a prosperous future. A closer look at the dancer, however, warns otherwise :

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. . . . I wanted at one and the same time to caress and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke her where below the small American flag tattooed on her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (19)

She appears to be a tease, one who proffers yet withholds, but it is actually

the white men who are the teases, holding her before the boys, then whisking her offstage, after roughing her up. She functions as an object whom those in power can humiliate, and whom they can use to humiliate others. Invisible Man is aroused yet indecisive, torn between attraction and repugnance. He does not transfer his anger from the symbol to its referent, as he has not yet realized that the white big shots are responsible for his humiliation. Instead, he displaces his aggression toward other blacks, concentrating on hitting Tatlock, his high school rival. At the end of the Battle Royal, swallowing blood and shaky from shocks given off by an electrified rug, Invisible Man gives a speech, during which he is interrupted and rebuked for his mention of black equality. He is presented with a briefcase, thinking that he is experiencing a proud moment in front of the leaders of the white community. Despite Ellison's explanation of the Battle Royal as an initiation rite,²⁾ the incident seems also an expulsion rite, severing Invisible Man's ties to the black and white communities of his hometown. The subservient and vulnerable status of the blond dancer parallels that of the protagonist, and her cool, then frightened compliance is a grim indication to Invisible Man of the limited options of those outsiders who try to win acceptance from the white male establishment. Invisible Man, however, is incapable of decoding the message. Despite the degradation he has endured, the protagonist is still a believer in all the showy lady represents.

In the second chapter, the victims of the mirror incest situations form the next group of unsettling female presences. At this point, Invisible Man, a student at an all-black college, is not as naive as he was on the night of the Battle Royal, when he thought he simply had to prove himself and his efforts would be rewarded. While he still believes the opportunity for success is open to him and other educated blacks, he has become more shrewd in his approach, as when he chauffeurs a rich white college

patron around campus :

“Have you seen all the campus, sir? ”

“Yes, I think so. I was one of the original founders, you know.”

“Gee, I didn't know that, sir. Then I'll have to try some of the roads.”

Of course, I knew he was a founder, but I also knew that it was advantageous to flatter rich white folks. Perhaps he'd give me a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship for next year. (38)

With this attitude, he risks becoming the same sort of player as Doctor Bledsoe, the college president, who has achieved a measure of authority and influence, but only by renouncing his cultural heritage and manipulating whites. His work at the college is no longer a quest to help young blacks, but a megalomaniacal drive to expand his own influence.

But *Invisible Man's* toadying intentions are upset by Mr. Norton's encounter with Jim Trueblood. Norton, curious about the old slave quarters, asks *Invisible Man* to stop the car so he can talk to the poor blacks who now live in the shacks. *Invisible Man* resists stopping the car, but when Norton insists, *Invisible Man* reluctantly tells him about the Trueblood family. Trueblood, a sharecropper, has brought disgrace on the black community by impregnating his daughter during an erotic dream. Norton himself reveals an unnatural attachment to his deceased daughter :

“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.” (42)

Norton has masked the sensual nature of the attachment in idealistic language, and sublimated his obsession by immersing himself in philan-

thropic work. (He says that his work with the college is a tribute to his daughter.) His incestuous desires, despite his efforts, lurk close enough to his conscious thought to provoke a strong physical reaction when confronted with even the few facts about Trueblood that he can extort from the reluctant protagonist. He gasps, turns white, and falls back in his seat. “ ‘No, no, no!’ ” he cries, his voice reflecting pain and horror (49). Norton demands that Invisible Man stop the car at the Trueblood shack, and Invisible Man, unskilled at subservient manipulation, obeys Norton's request.

Norton draws the whole sordid story out of Trueblood, but his reaction to the tale is ambiguous. He gives Trueblood one hundred dollars, perhaps as a reward for confirming his feelings of racial superiority, perhaps for acting out what Norton only fantasized. He is profoundly upset and requests a drink, causing Invisible Man to commit a further blunder in transporting him to the Golden Day, a seedy bar and whorehouse frequented by the inmates of a black veterans' mental hospital. At the Golden Day, Norton witnesses the insane veterans (representing the id) overpowering their guard, Supercargo (superego). Norton collapses from his encounter with the seething disorder he has fought so hard to repress. but one of the lunatics seals Invisible Man's fall from grace by telling Norton outright that he is a pretentious phony, “ ‘To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man ; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing’ ” (93). Norton tries to conceal his anger, but Dr. Bledsoe understands the danger of alienating a white benefactor, and punishes Invisible Man by expelling him in a particularly cruel and deceptive manner. Norton's nameless daughter, though reduced to an ethereal picture in a silver frame, sparks the chain of events that steers Invisible Man away from a future of subservience by alienating him from the black educational establishment.

While Norton's daughter is the ultimate passive object of desire, removed from the immediate action of the story, Kate Trueblood, as recounted by Jim Trueblood, demonstrates the potential, if not the actual ability, to re-order female existence after the trauma of incest. Kate, waking to find her husband lying on top of their weeping daughter, picks up a shotgun, but cannot quite bring herself to shoot Trueblood. Nor is she physically strong enough to lift the sledge hammer and use it as a weapon. Instead, she throws an iron at him, and nearly kills him with an ax. Trueblood, ashamed at his " 'dream-sin,' " wills himself to stand still for the punishment, but instinctively swerves aside at the crucial moment. Though Trueblood escapes Kate's death sentence, she manages to shame him into leaving home, and plans abortions for herself and her daughter, both pregnant by Trueblood. After being scorned by the black community and castigated by the minister, Trueblood, trying to pray but unable to voice anything except a blues song, comes to a pivotal realization: " 'I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen' " (66). Trueblood returns home and asserts control of his family, forbidding Kate and Mattie to have abortions and threatening to kill the old midwife/abortionist if she comes near his wife or daughter.

Critics have discussed, even applauded, Trueblood's return to the cabin as a refusal to allow himself to be metaphorically castrated,³ but rarely mentioned is the pain Trueblood causes. The women, in this incident, seem to suffer in order that Trueblood can retain his place in a society where he has nowhere else to go. Though Ellison seems to commend Trueblood's self-knowledge, something not yet acquired by the protagonist, he also acknowledges that even a righteous assertion of power is often at the expense of a weaker party, as well as any oppressors. Indeed, the real culprits of the Trueblood family tragedy, the exploitative

sharecropping system and institutionalized racism, remain untouched by Trueblood's defiance. Besides fulfilling the narrative requirements for Trueblood's disgrace and Invisible Man's subsequent banishment, Kate's failure against her husband's stronger will underlines the truth that there was an American minority enduring more pain and humiliation than the black male: the black female.

The status of Kate and Mattie, not even free enough to abort the unwanted offspring of an incest-driven father, is strangely opposed by the conduct of the prostitutes in the Golden Day. In a very different way, these women reflect the constraints imposed on the men around them, and on the protagonist. Even lower on the social scale than wives and daughters of sharecroppers, the black prostitutes manage to sass Mr. Norton with impunity. One of the Golden Day prostitutes drunkenly addresses him as " 'White-Folks baby' " and pats him familiarly on the cheek, but this does not worry Invisible Man so much as one mental patient's lack of deference in addressing Mr. Norton. "With the girl it was different," the narrator remembers. "A woman usually got away with things a man never could" (91).

Women, especially black women, were not taken seriously enough to seem threatening to white men, so within their low status they had a certain freedom. Black men, by contrast, had to stay firmly in their subordinate place, like Trueblood, or try to obtain the education and professions previously off-limits to blacks, while not achieving so much as to seem "uppity." It is significant that many of the black inmates of the insane asylum are former professionals, including doctors, lawyers, a chemist, even a psychiatrist. Invisible Man mentions his unease at knowing that these men were members of the professions to which he had dreamed of belonging. Though shell-shock is primarily responsible for the inmates' insanity, surely Ellison includes so many black professionals

in the crazy group to underline the double-bind situation presented to blacks who want to succeed: they suffer if they don't aim to better themselves, and are punished by threatened whites if they do. One can deal with this impossible situation by simply refusing to acknowledge the contradiction, as Invisible Man persists in believing in the triumph of his speech at the Battle Royal, though his subconscious tells him in a dream that the ritual was a mockery. While Invisible Man is still trying to fulfill all the contradictory requirements of the double-bind, the vets have broken down under this and other stresses and thrown off all restraints demanded by society. Supercargo/Superego may call for order, but these men have returned to the seething illogic of Freud's id. The shady women of the Golden Day, through the seeming paradox of their low station and flagrant, unpunished violation of social rules, indicate the perils awaiting those who attempt to leave the social ranks assigned to blacks.

After the shock of the Golden Day episode, the protagonist, sensing his inevitable punishment, returns to campus and a more muted collection of female characters. A student receptionist laughingly gives Invisible Man a coded message for her boyfriend; a girl sings with a sort of mournful power at the chapel service; Susie Gresham, former slave, observes the flirtations of two students. While Invisible Man is at the university, women function as relics of the past, nostalgic or haunting presences, objects of and possessors of desire, but once again seem outside the core of action. Notable, though, is Invisible Man's strong feelings toward these peripheral characters. The receptionist is happily infatuated, and he responds to her optimism by cynically imagining that she will be sent home pregnant, demonstrating his first lapse into bitterness and his first awareness of cycles that futilely repeat themselves. As George E. Kent suggests, Susie Gresham is important as a figure of Afro-

American folklore and tradition. She “brings the warmth and tragic knowledge of the folk—and their high hopes—to this colorful but ineffective ritual.”⁴⁾ Invisible Man is beginning to sense this ineffectiveness, but he cannot yet realize or verbalize the enormity of the college’s charade, as he does when recounting his story, when he describes the students as attending chapel with their “uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eyes blind like those of robots. . . (35–36). He can respond to Susie not with the cool irony of his older narrator–self, but only in a rush of not–quite–coherent anger. The service begins with an a capella performance by a girl who offers more than a standard hymn :

She began softly, as though singing to herself of emotions of utmost privacy, a sound not addressed to the gathering, but which they overheard almost against her will. Gradually she increased its volume, until at times the voice seemed to become a disembodied force that sought to enter her, to violate her, shaking her, rocking her rhythmically. . . . (114)

Appropriately, it is not the singer’s words that move him, but the emotive, pre–lingual power of her voice. She, too, is taking part in a farce, a black Horatio Alger story. Though the white guests and college administrators nod approvingly after her performance, Invisible Man interprets her song as a complex mixture of “sublimated anguish,” “nostalgia, regret, and repentance” that he, and she, and the other students, are too naive to fully comprehend or express. The singer’s non–verbal power is perfectly countered by the Rev. Homer Barbee’s flowery, overlong speech, but Invisible Man’s quickness in falling for Barbee’s bombast indicates the fragility of his new–found defiance. The college is pulsing, like the big black powerhouse, with black people’s energy and talent, but it cannot offer its students more than an Edenic campus and empty rhetoric. Though Invisible Man represses his anger and leaves the college in hopes in

returning, and though he will seek to carve a niche for himself in New York City and in the Brotherhood, his reactions to the university women indicate that he will never again endow institutions with idealized trust.

Once Invisible Man arrives in New York City, women become more prominent, but still fleeting. He is pressed against a fat woman in the Harlem subway, flooded with the fear of the woman screaming. Across the aisle from him in another train, a platinum blonde eats a red delicious apple. A black nun dressed in white and a white nun dressed in black look at each other's crucifixes. These women move around Invisible Man but do not interact with him. While Kerry McSweeney regards some of these appearances as clumsily presented and a failure of Ellison's art,⁵ perhaps these ladies do serve to remind us of the uncertain nature of Invisible Man's life upon his arrival in New York City. In particular, they may represent the rewards and punishments of the value system from which he has not yet freed himself. He is no longer in the segregated South, but is still afraid of punishment for touching a white woman. The blond, colored in red and platinum, seems a muted echo of the stripper in Chapter One. Despite his fall from grace at the college, Invisible Man still believes in the rewards proffered by the showy dancer. He is determined to make himself acceptable to whites, and to him, that means casting off his southern ways and regarding unsophisticated blacks with disdain. He plans to present an immaculate physical appearance, making sure, among other things, always to apply deodorant: "You couldn't allow them to think *all* of us smelled bad" (155) and always to be punctual: "you couldn't bring them any slow c. p. (colored people's) time" (160).

This rather smug attitude is quickly shattered, and followed by the appearance of female characters who do succeed in engaging the protagonist: the mothers. The mothers, and the mother-figures, begin appearing in the novel after a series of brutal and disillusioning experiences. The

protagonist has discovered that Dr. Bledsoe's letters of recommendation were actually malicious, and that he has no chance of ever returning to the college. The person who informs him of this is not a disinterested benefactor, but an emotionally disturbed homosexual who desires Invisible Man's companionship, perhaps for sexual reasons, perhaps to annoy his authoritarian father. He finds a job in a paint factory, where he is accused of being a spy by trade unionists and assaulted by a fanatical anti-unionist who irrationally decides that Invisible Man is pro-union. After the explosion in the paint factory, he wakes to find himself in a hospital where the "cure" for his injuries consists of a series of painful experiments including shock treatments, which damage his memory. At this stage, the protagonist, jobless, disoriented, his sense of personal history and meaning reduced to a few scraps of half-remembered tradition and folklore, seems without a single point of affiliation in the still-unfamiliar city.

These betrayals might seem ample provocation for Invisible Man to retreat from society and ponder the best method of subversion against a hostile world, but he needs more knowledge before he can make his decision to go underground. Mary Rambo is the first of the New York City women who temporarily draw the protagonist back toward the human community, and ultimately, though unwittingly, provide him with the knowledge he needs to make an informed retreat from the world. Mary discovers Invisible Man fainting as he emerges from the subway, and insists that he come to her house to recover. He follows her, "inwardly rejecting and yet accepting her bossiness"(246). He awakes from his faint, accepts a meal from Mary and returns to the Men's House, where he is confronted with the panorama of pompous frauds, among them, broken old men who affect the manners of southern gentlemen, bowing "like senile old roosters," janitors and messengers who dress like Wall Street brokers, "with their orthodox and passionate argument as to what

was the correct tie to wear with what shirt, what shade of gray was correct for spats and what would the Prince of Wales wear at a certain seasonal event. . .(250). Invisible Man, still wearing his paint factory overalls, is ashamed at his failures at college and in the New York business world, but also enraged at the sham gentlemen's pretentiousness. He is so overwrought that he mistakes a visiting preacher for Doctor Bledsoe and pours a spittoon full of tobacco juice on him before realizing his mistake, and must flee to Mary's. He has learned the dangers of false pride and self-deception, but Mary must teach him the limits of another method of advancing oneself.

Mary provides for Invisible Man when he badly needs shelter and care, but her maternalism and social conservatism threaten to retard his political awareness. Mary's attitude toward the advancement of blacks resembles that of Booker T. Washington, who urged a course of responsibility and achievement tempered with an acceptance of blacks' subordinate role in American society. While grateful for her kindness, Invisible Man immediately begins to chafe against Mary's expectations for him to become a leader and a credit to the black race. He does not think of Mary as his 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" (252). Mary's resignation to her fate, so ingrained that she hesitates to accept a hundred-dollar bill, certain that the white people at the bank will suspect her of stealing it, seems painfully outdated and inadequate to Invisible Man. His visions, though vague, are of revenge, not compromise :

Somewhere beneath the load of the emotion-freezing ice which my life had conditioned my brain to produce, a spot of black anger glowed and threw off a hot red light. . . . A remote explosion had occurred somewhere, perhaps back at Emerson's or that night in Bledsoe's

office, and it had caused the ice cap to melt and shift the slightest bit (253).

He feels torn between his newly-acknowledged resentment and the self-control in which he has been indoctrinated. He feels the urge to make speeches, but, aside from his own personal wounds, he has no subject.

A mother will give him the material he needs to begin his final attempt to find a place in the human community. He is first inspired to speak publicly by the sight of an elderly woman being evicted from her apartment, her possessions identifying her as a mother and grandmother. The pathetic scene calls forth in his mind a picture of his own mother, prompting a wave of painful nostalgia, nausea, and finally, anger. After a few false starts, he succeeds in arousing the crowd to interfere with the eviction. Though he is a bit taken aback at the effectiveness of his speech, he is noticed and recruited by Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, a organization resembling the Communist Party.

Invisible Man is initially suspicious of the Brotherhood, with good reason. Jack is openly callous toward the old evicted couple, referring to them as “dead limbs that must be pruned away” (284). Jack and the Brotherhood see the people of Harlem as abstractions, as pawns in their political scheme. Invisible Man, though, is not yet wise enough to grasp the enormity of the Brotherhood’s goals. “He was too complicated for me,” he thinks. (286) “I hadn’t understood much of what he said, only that he had spoken with great confidence” (287). He refuses Jack’s job offer out of vague distrust, then accepts it a few hours later, prompted by guilt over the many months of rent payments he owes to Mary.

By and large, the women of the Brotherhood function as handmaids, refilling drinks at parties, showing Invisible Man his new apartment, and performing other small errands. Despite their relative unimportance, they pose a particular threat to Invisible Man’s autonomy. Invisible Man

becomes more involved with the Brotherhood women after a fellow party member jealously accuses him of opportunism. The committee, pending an investigation of Invisible Man's loyalty to the Brotherhood, removes him from his work in the volatile Harlem area and assigns him to speak on the topic, "The Woman Question." Women's rights are a non-issue in the Brotherhood, and the assignment is little more than busy-work to keep Invisible Man out of Harlem, where his growing influence and visibility are beginning to interfere with the party's more subversive goals. From the beginning, Ellison uses sly humor to lampoon the parade of bored, oversexed dilettantes who feign interest in the Brotherhood's politics. After his speech on "The Woman Question," Invisible Man is approached by a woman who "glows as though consciously acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility"(399). Invisible Man is attracted to her and guides her away from the rest of the crowd, conversing with her next to "a partly uncoiled firehose hanging beside the entrance" (400).

Mockery of a few idle women, however, is not Ellison's aim in detailing Invisible Man's sexual misadventures. At this point, Invisible Man is clinging to his faith in the Brotherhood, wanting to believe that he has found an institution that will appreciate his talents. Though instantly suspicious of "The Woman Question" assignment, he convinces himself that the party is showing a new interest in women's issues, and that he can speak as effectively on women's rights as on eviction.

During and after his tryst with the unnamed wealthy woman, Invisible Man feels used and tricked. "And if I were really free(...) I'd get the hell out of here," he thinks as the woman inches closer to him on the sofa. (404) He is haunted by the taboo against interracial sex, and bewildered when the woman's husband appears in the middle of the night and fails to show anger or surprise. While Invisible Man overestimates the importance of the incident, frantically imagining a plot set by his

enemies, he has begun, though vaguely, to sense the exploitative quality of male/female relationships in the Brotherhood, and in white society in general :

Why did they have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman : socially, politically, economically. Why, goddamit, why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them—all human motives? (408)

The unpleasant truth about women in the brotherhood may well be spoken by Ras the Exhorter, a fanatical black separatist. After violently disrupting one of Invisible Man's Harlem speeches, he berates Invisible Man and Brother Tod Clifton for colluding with and being duped by the white leadership of the Brotherhood. Sex with white women, Ras says, is the poor reward thrown to black men who do the Brotherhood's dirty work. "He take one them strumpets and tell the black mahn his freedom lie between her skinny legs—while that son of a gun, *he* take all the power and the capital and don't leave the black man not' ing" (364). Seemingly contemptuous of white women, Ras suggests that they too are victims of white male hypocrisy and exploitation : "The good white women he tell the black mahn is a rapist and keep them locked up and ignorant while he makes the black mahn a race of bahstards" (364). The truth of much of Ras' outrage is discovered first by Tod Clifton, whose good looks have made him a target of the Brotherhood women's lust, then by Invisible Man, in his comic adventures with Sybil.

Invisible Man seeks a closer involvement with the Brotherhood women after being reprimanded for organizing a funeral for Tod Clifton, who deserted the Brotherhood after realizing his own exploitation. Invisible Man, when assigned to "the Woman Question," had accepted the rebuke and vowed total honesty to the committee in order to redeem

himself. After the Brotherhood leaders berate him for mourning Clifton, he rebels and decides to carry out a subversive plan against the Brotherhood. To accomplish this, however, he needs information about the Brotherhood's hidden agenda, never discussed at any of the official meetings. Invisible Man, raging against his own manipulation and his slowness in grasping it, resolves to make use of the Brotherhood women. Surely they know what their men are up to, he reasons. He is doubly mistaken in this course of action. During his abortive encounter with Sybil, Invisible Man finds that she knows nothing of the secret workings of the party, so his attempt to pump her for information is both futile and unethical.

Sybil is the ugly twin of the dancer in Chapter One, the booby prize for cooperation for white men. The offering is still flashy, but it now appears bloated and sloppy: "She would soon be a biddy, stout, with a little double chin and a three-ply girdle. A thin gold chain showed around a thickening ankle" (508). Despite Ras the Exhorter's outburst, and despite the self-incriminating behavior of these women, Invisible Man does not blame white women for their racism or for their attempts to use him sexually. "But why be surprised, when that's what they hear all their lives. When it's made into a great power and they're taught to worship all types of power?" he asks himself, even as the ridiculous Sybil expounds on her rape fantasies. (509)

In refusing to take advantage of Sybil, or to let her take advantage of him by acting out her grotesque fantasy, Invisible Man frees himself from both ends of the exploiter/exploited situation. Most of the women who are interested in Invisible Man are not as offensive as Sybil, but they pose the same danger as Emerson's homosexual son, who wanted the protagonist to join his circle at the "Calamus": they threaten to distract Invisible Man from his quest for individuality, and provide a false point of affilia-

tion. Invisible Man's interactions with these women indicate his growth in perception, as he comes to realize that these guarded prizes aren't terribly desirable, and that in the Brotherhood, sex is inextricably, inevitably bound up with the white power structure. "How did I guess there was a woman in it," he thinks, when pompous Tobbitt plays his trump card of having a black wife. (457)

The final effect of Invisible Man's assignment to "The Woman Question" is not sexual liberation or betrayal, but alienation from Harlem, as he finds when two men react angrily at his calling them "brother." Invisible Man has blundered twice in his dealings with the Brotherhood women : first in blindly accepting the "Woman Question" assignment, then in believing he can use the women for his own purposes. But while he has been giving speeches uptown, downtown landlords have resumed throwing tenants out in the street. When he escapes the flabby arms arms of Sybil and hits the streets of Harlem, he walks into a race riot he might have prevented, had he not been preoccupied with his private vendetta against the Brotherhood. Once again, Invisible Man has been kept running.

Shocked at the destruction he is at least partly responsible for, Invisible Man, panicking, tries to find his way back to Mary's house. Mary, however, represents maternalism, which Invisible Man has already realized is inadequate. On his way to Mary's, he encounters a woman who makes clear the necessity of his separation from the female sex. After Invisible Man has been nicked by a bullet, a group of men stops to help him. "I looked at the thin man, feeling a surge of friendship. He didn't know me, his help was disinterested" (526). Finally, Invisible Man is accepted into a group because of his humanity, not because of his potential utility. He follows the group as they smash and loot Harlem shops, but their camaraderie doesn't last long. Scofield, the leader, drives a pregnant girl away from her tenement home despite her pleas, because

he is intent on setting fire to the ill-maintained, white-owned building, where two of his children died from tuberculosis. Brutal as this incident may seem, it underlines the fact that radical social change is sometimes incompatible with the demands of family life. Encumbered by a mother-figure or wife, Invisible Man's options in subverting white authority might be limited.

Claudia Tate maintains that Invisible Man needs Mary to mother him after his painful and disillusioning experiences. Drawing attention to the womblike environment of Invisible Man's subterranean home, Tate further suggests that Invisible Man's lack of a mother will prevent him from emerging from his isolation: ". . . the Invisible Man's efforts to leave the underground, though valiant, will be aborted time and time again, since he has no mother to give him birth."⁶ Though Invisible Man indeed recovers after sustained nurturing from Mary and suffers emotionally when he cannot return to her, I suggest that Mary's ability to help Invisible Man ends when she has nursed him back to physical and emotional health. The mother-son relationship is simply another web of distracting obligations. Like every other relationship in the novel, teacher-student, benefactor-recipient, boyfriend-girlfriend, Invisible Man must break away from it if he hopes to form his own personality.

Invisible Man has been widely discussed in terms of the hero's search for identity. Invisible Man needs to give birth to himself, rather than have a woman do it for him. In this novel, to submit to the mothering influence is to capitulate to a dominating, if well-intentioned, force. Though Ellison's hero must escape women if he is to have a chance of creating his own identity, the novel can in no way be construed as misogynistic. Ellison's women, used, ignorant, and sad, create a powerful statement against the subjugation and mis-education of women.

Notes

- 1) For Ralph Ellison's views on the limits of archetypal interpretation, see his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke."
- 2) Ellison, "The Art of Fiction : An Interview," 174.
- 3) Houston A. Baker, in "To Move Without Moving : An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode," views Trueblood's acts as ensuring both "an authentic African American lineage" and "the survival of the clan." (Baker, 329)
- 4) Kent, 100.
- 5) McSweeney, 35-36.
- 6) Tate, 171.

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要 約

The Woman Question : ラルフ・エリスンの *Invisible Man* に於ける 性と権力

ミッシェル・ヒーター

Ralph Ellison の *Invisible Man* では、女性達も又、目に見えないものとして扱われていることがわかる。Ellison の書く多くの女性は、陰のように、はかない。そして Ellison が、より完全に描き込もうとした女性の殆どは、醜く、不愉快なステレオタイプである。

Ellison の描く女性の登場人物に、単なるステレオタイプ以上のものを読み取る批評家達の姿勢は正しいといえる。彼らは多くの場合、彼女達の原型について論じている。しかし、このような方法は、Ellison の女性が果たす他の2つの重要な役割を見逃していると、私は確信する。*Invisible Man* に登場する女性達は、主人公を社会の本流から脇に追いやる筋だてに一役かっている。この小説の様々な箇所、彼女達は、活動的な敵対者や陰謀者としてではなく、invisible manを封じ込める、あるいは彼に対抗する力の象徴になっている。

そのような物語の構成上の役割に加えて、この小説の女性達は、Ellison の人間間と同じく男女間にも見られる権力関係の追求に、また別の役割を果たしているといえる。本論は Ellison の世界に於いては、究極的には人種差別と男女差別の政策の間に大差はなく、男性、女性を不当に否定する残酷な権力があるのみであることを、示そうと試みるものである。犠牲にされ、また、他者を犠牲にする女の登場人物を創り出すことによって、Ellison は、不平等な者どうしの関係に必然的に介在する搾取の現実を例証しようとした。