



## Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

Treball de Fi de Grau

Curs 2016-2017

# Female Characters in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Role and Purpose

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Barcelona, 2017/09/08

## **Abstract**

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the role and purpose of female characters in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in order to determine whether his social denunciation regarding the black community's rights includes not only men, but also women. To do so, the novel will be analyzed and five different articles on the topic will be used to support the drawn conclusions. After a brief explanation of the novel's historical and social context, the analysis of the interactions between female characters and the narrator will serve as the base to establish the women's role and purpose in the story. Finally, examining how they participate in Ellison's portrayal and denounce of the numerous stereotypes that white society had about black men will help determine what use the author makes of his female creations.

Key words: Black community, Stereotypes, White Society, Female Characters, Role

## **Resum**

L'objectiu d'aquest estudi és examinar el paper i propòsit dels personatges femenins de *Invisible Man*, de Ralph Ellison, per tal de determinar si la seva denúncia social sobre els drets de la comunitat afro americana també inclou a les dones, i no tan sols als homes. Per tal d'aconseguir-ho, s'analitzarà la novel·la, i cinc diferents articles seran utilitzats per tal de recolzar les conclusions tretes. Després d'una breu explicació sobre el context social i històric de la novel·la, l'anàlisi de les interaccions entre els personatges femenins i el narrador serviran com a base per a establir el paper i propòsit de les dones dins la història. Finalment, examinar com els personatges femenins participen en la representació i denúncia que Ellison duu a terme sobre els nombrosos estereotips de la societat envers els homes afro americans ajudarà a determinar l'ús que l'autor fa de les seves creacions femenines.

Paraules clau: Comunitat Afro Americana, Estereotips, Societat, Personatges Femenins, Paper

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The African American community constitutes a major pillar in the history of the United States. In order to try to understand its insight, it is interesting to analyse the literature of that time. Novels written by African American authors in the 1920s seem to be a wonderful option when studying the situation of the black community in the 20<sup>th</sup> century US.

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison offers a first person narration of the daily life of a young black male in the American society of the 1920s. Through the encounters and interactions of the nameless protagonist, the reader is able to see the world through the eyes of a black man standing against the control and dominance of white society. The story follows his journey towards visibility as he fights to find and defend the identity that whites try to steal from him and from all members of the black community. Social and racial inequality is a major topic in Ellison's novel. However, gender inequality remains untouched.

As it has happened in history from the very beginning, gender equality has never been a priority. Discourses of human rights have always applied mainly to men, and often to only the privileged race. However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, race started to be the target of those who fought for social equality. Statements such as "white and black men have the same rights" started being popularized, and members of the minority groups adopted an active role in the fight for their rights. However, women were never taken into account. Even for brave, educated men involved in the social denunciation of the time, those human rights did not seem to apply to women. Therefore, it is only natural that novels like *Invisible Man* would not include women in their demand for social rights. Ellison, as the majority of men of that time, might not have been an advocate for gender equality. This fact might influence contemporary readers when analysing and judging the novel and its message.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The objective of this paper is to explore the role of female characters –both black and white- in *Invisible Man*, an analysis that will be possible after a brief summary of the historical and social context of the novel regarding the situation of the African American community in the US. Doing so will hopefully prove that despite the author’s efforts to represent and reclaim the stereotypes about black men in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US, he fails to represent and reclaim the stereotypes about black and white women. Therefore, although he succeeds in giving “visibility” to the protagonist –and by extension to all African American men- he uses female characters as a mere tool for that goal, leaving them in the dark; invisible, voiceless and without and identity for themselves.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The first step on this research will be the reading of *Invisible Man* and annotations of any passage or quotation that might be useful to support the paper’s objectives. Secondly, the author will proceed to the reading and analysis of articles related to the novel and the topics covered in this paper, such as Shelly Jarenski’s “Invisibility Embraced: The Abject as a Site of Agency in Ellison's *Invisible Man*”, Belinda Robnett’s “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization”, Caroline Sylvander’s “Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Female Stereotypes”, Ifrah Mohamed’s “Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Women*: A Comparison of Invisibility Between the *Invisible Man* and Selected Female Characters in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” and Shanna Greene’s “There’s Something about Mary: Female Wisdom and the Folk Presence in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”. These articles will be used to support the ideas presented in the paper. Some of the articles might be used for the final part of the introduction; the social and historical context of the novel, and the rest for the analysis of the novel in reference to the ideas proposed in this research. Furthermore, an online interview with Professor R. Lambert (lecturer of a course on *Invisible Man* in Kyoto University) will help providing a more professional view on the subject.

#### 4. SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *INVISIBLE MAN*

*Invisible Man* is set in the United States scenario of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a time when the African-American community went through major changes. Between 1954 and 1968 the African-American Civil Rights Movement made an enormous impact on the community.

Daphne Wood states in “Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” that that social movement started with the goal of putting an end to the racial segregation and the discrimination that the African-Americans were subjected to. In order to fight for equality and for the community’s rights, African-American activists conducted nonviolent demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, which often caused confrontations with the government officials. The community finally taking a step forward and actively fighting for their rights was decisive in order to change the harsh reality that African-Americans were facing.

As Shelly Jarenski explains in her article “Invisibility Embraced: The Object as a Site of Agency in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”, during those decades the only way for African-Americans to “exist” in the eyes of white people was through artistic and cultural performances, which usually led to black people seen as mere entertainers;

Ellison’s novel appears at a key moment in the racial history of the US, as a crossover music industry fused with the emergence of television. This fusion created a context in which visibility was possible for black bodies only when they performed the role of “other” for white culture. Even more often, “seeing race” acted merely as a conduit for white culture’s appropriation and commodification of black cultural forms. (2010: 85)

This is reflected in the novel during the Battle Royal -where black boys are asked to fight for the public’s entertainment- and with the many references to the physical strength and dancing skills of black man as their only appeal to white society.

At the beginning of the novel we are introduced to Tuskegee University, where the protagonist is studying. Wood indicated that the private university, founded on 1881 in Alabama, was aimed to provide higher education for black men in order for them to integrate in the white society system. The university, however, was based on the ideals of Booker T. Washington, the founder, who firmly believed that it was necessary for African-Americans to accept and fulfil the role that white society had assigned to the community. He believed that through respect, obedience and hard work, African-Americans would be able to integrate and gain the respect of white society, which was necessary in order to advance as a community. Although he was highly respected and praised for his ideals and contributions, not everyone

in the community supported his methods. His most relevant opponent, DuBois, claimed that Washington was fomenting segregation rather than fighting for the social rights of his people. Being his methods far more radical than those of Washington, he created a civil rights movement<sup>1</sup> aimed to attain political representation and social equality through rather violent ways, as portrayed in the novel by the Harlem riots. Some members of the community found both methods unsuitable, leading to alienation not only from white culture, but also their own.

The radical differences of both parties created dissonance and separatism amongst the African-American community. The protagonist, who starts as a supporter and admirer of Washington's cause and ideals, often faces the reproaches of people who are unconnected to the university. The novel shows how the mindset and reality of the two parties are opposite to the extreme that two different worlds are born inside the same community. The division and discrepancies that the community faced are one of the main points of the novel, which explores the evolution and changes in the protagonist's mindset. Although he started as a firm supporter of Washington's ideals, the harsh reality of his community and the urge to make a difference finally pushes him into abandoning his passivity and taking a more active role in the fight against discrimination. Belinda Robnett draws a picture of the division of the community in her article "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization":

As this article illustrates, the development and sustenance of a collective identity within the civil rights movement was anything but non-problematic. Not all African-Americans were eager to join the movement or even knew about the movement. Particularly in rural pockets of the South, any media coverage portrayed the movement as Communist backed. Many rural African-Americans believed that the "outsiders," who were stirring up trouble in their communities, were going to get them killed. Specific methods of recruitment were employed to persuade the masses to risk their lives for the movement. Often, the purveyors of the movement's message were women. The gendered organization of the civil rights movement defined the social location of African-American women in the movement context and created a particular substructure of leadership, which became a critical recruitment and mobilizing force for the movement. (Robnett 1996: 1663)

In this passage Robnett is expressing how, apart from the division between Washington's and DuBois' supporters, ordinary members of the community were afraid that the methods of the radical activists would put their lives in danger, an idea fomented by the representation of the movement in the media. She also points out that the women of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Niagara Movement, founded by DuBois. Of nationalistic nature, the movement encouraged African-Americans to embrace their origins and actively fight for their rights.

community had a relevant and very active role in the movement, fact often ignored or omitted by the media and history books.



## 5. FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

When analyzing the role and purpose of female characters in the novel, the first thing to point out is the fact that of the main characters in the novel, only two are female. Neither Mary nor Sybil have a considerably long appearance in the novel, and they do not interact with each other or with any other feminine figure. As a consequence, it could be said that *Invisible Man* fails the Bechdel test, a test applied to movies, films, comics and other forms of art in order to determine if there are at least two or more female characters in a story and whether those characters interact with each other or only with men. In the case of this novel, there are more than two female characters but they are often secondary, with very short appearances and very superficial interventions. Moreover, the few times they do interact with each other the subject of the conversation is men.

### 5.1 Mary and the eviction lady

The most relevant feminine character in the novel, Mary, makes her first appearance in chapter 12, when she takes pity on the protagonist and gives him a place to stay. While doing so, she encourages him to take action and to fight the injustices that the black community is facing, as we see in the following piece of dialogue from the novel where she asks him what he plans to do with his future:

“Well, whatever it is, I hope it’s something that’s a credit to the race.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“Don’t hope, make it that way.”

...

“It’s you young folks what’s going to make the changes,” she said. “Y’all’s the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher.” (Ellison 194)

After fulfilling that purpose, Mary, described in Shanna Greene’s article “There’s Something about Mary: Female Wisdom and the Folk Presence in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” as “one of many *un-visible* women in *Invisible Man*’s journey” (122) disappears from the picture. Therefore, Ellison uses Mary as a tool to push the protagonist into a more active figure, more involved with the issues that his community is going through. She is merely a motherly figure that guides him and inspires him to pursue visibility and to fight for his rights as a black male, as the protagonist himself describes towards the end of the chapter:

Nor did I think about 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. (Ellison 196-197)

However, we learn nothing about her rights as a black woman. The novel makes no effort in depicting Mary's situation in society and whether her conditions as a black female should change or not, leaving Mary in the dark and pretty much invisible. Nevertheless, Greene states in her article that the original drafts of the novel included more chapters focused on the figure of Mary, so it seems that it was not the author's first intention to leave Mary out of the picture. However, the editing process omitted what could have been a more than advantageous and enriching side of the story.

In the interview (see Annex), Professor R. Lambert gives his opinion on this matter: "To me, Mary Rambo is a mother figure and a savior: Mary (the mother of God?) rescues the innocent lamb (the narrator) from the slaughter: after the narrator's experience at the paint factory, she nurtures him back to life." Professor Lambert supports therefore the view of Mary as a guiding, motherly figure in the novel, with the goal and purpose of helping the narrator rise from the ashes and move into action.

In chapter 13 we are presented with a dramatic scene focused on a black lady who is being evicted from her house. That brief apparition of a female figure is, again, used to force the protagonist into becoming a man of action. Just like Mary, the lady is shown as a weak and vulnerable figure in the black community with the mission of inspiring in the protagonist the rebellious spirit that will finally push him out of his sleep and into the fight. Because of his fears and his lack of confidence, it takes a long time for the protagonist to react. However, after witnessing the heartbreaking scene and listening to the angry complaints of the crowd, he finally bursts into a passionate speech calling for wisdom and non-violence. Although he has finally seen the need to take action, he believes that there are more effective ways to attain their goal, instead of going on being the barbaric and disorganised horde white society describes them as. After he fails and people physically attack the police officer who was carrying on the eviction, he cannot help but feeling certain excitement for the violent outburst. During the scene, a West Indian woman intervenes: "The brute struck that gentle woman, poor thing!' the West Indian woman chanted. 'Black men, did you ever see such a brute? . . . Give it back to him, black men. Repay the brute a thousandfold! . . . Strike him, our fine black men. Protect your black women! . . .'" (Ellison 213). Later, she goes on to express with enthusiasm how proud she is of the black men present. The message and the nature of this intervention seem fairly clear: the role of black men is to fight for the rights of

the community, and the role of black women, who must be protected by men, is to encourage them to do so.

## 5.2 Hubert's wife

Further into the novel, in chapter 19, we are introduced to Hubert's wife, a wealthy white woman. After conducting a lecture on women's rights -an issue that, ironically, is generally ignored in the novel-, the protagonist is approached by her, who wishes to discuss some aspects of the Brotherhood's ideology. She then invites him to her apartment, where they engage in a friendly conversation. The first appearance of a stereotype related to black man takes place in page 312, when Sybil expresses her admiration towards the protagonist and his communicative skills:

"It's really amazing. You give me such a feeling of security- although," she interrupted herself with a mysterious smile, "I must confess that you also make me afraid."

"Afraid? You can't mean that," I said.

"Really, . . . It's so powerful, so- so *primitive!*"

The fact that the author highlights the adjective shows how he is trying to emphasize the image that white society has of black men: wild, strong, scary (as she points out at the beginning of the quotation), *primitive*. After the protagonist expresses his confusion, she insists on the idea: "I don't mean really primitive. I suppose I mean *forceful*, powerful. It takes hold of one's emotions as well as one's intellect. Call it what you will, it has so much naked power that it goes straight through one. I tremble just to think of such vitality." (Ellison, 312). Although her way of talking is delicate, the use of the word "naked" and her explanation about how his vitality makes her tremble have a very clear sexual connotation. With these words, she is expressing the powerful and intimidating sexuality of black men, and how attractive that is for her. Her mentality and idea of black men is a portrayal of the common stereotype that showed black men as sexual beasts and rapists. Hubert's wife, as many other white women, dreams of being "raped" by a strong, black male, and wants the narrator to fulfil her fantasy.

When he states that his approach is rather pacifist and that his role is to organise the community, not to drive them into violence, she prises him again and carries on to say that "Women should be absolutely as free as men." (Ellison 312). That statement, although powerful, isn't furthered discussed later in their dialogue, nor examined in depth during the novel. It is like the author puts those words in the woman's lips with no further intention, just

for her to show that she is not some dull, unsatisfied white wife. However, her words and actions later on the chapter will prove she is. The narrator tries to resist the temptation but finally succumbs to his desire.

### 5.3 Sybil

In Chapter 24 the reader meets Sybil, another wealthy white woman. During a party held by the Brotherhood, the narrator is looking around searching for a woman to undermine the Brotherhood. He then approaches Sybil, who seems eager to throw herself into his arms. She feels neglected by her husband, who is always busy, so her loneliness makes her the perfect victim. The narrator invites her to his apartment and makes sure she drinks too much. However, he obtains no useful information, as Sybil has no interest in politics or the matters that the Brotherhood is involved in. Showing her sexual desire without concern, she asks the narrator to rape her. After the narrator's negative reaction, she proceeds to explain her friend's experience: "You can do it, it'll be easy for *you*, beautiful. Threaten to kill me if I don't give in. You know, talk rough to me, beautiful. A friend of mine said the fellow said, 'Drop your drawers'... and-" (Ellison, 391). When the narrator shows his incredulity and surprise and asks her to continue, she states: "Well... he called her a filthy name, . . . Oh, he was a brute, huge, with white teeth, what they call a 'buck'. And he said, 'Bitch, drop your drawers,' and then he did it." (Ellison, 392). She, as Hubert's wife, also throws in a comment about the social position of women that will not be further discussed by the author: "Men have repressed us too much. We're expected to pass up too many human things." (Ellison, 393). After that comment, she immediately goes back to her fantasy by confessing how she has always wished to experience the same as her friend. She continues insisting he must take her, and the alcohol is starting to weaken his good sense. He thinks to himself:

So why not entertain her, be a gentleman, or whatever it is she thinks you are- What does she think you are? A domesticated rapist, obviously, an expert on the woman question. Maybe that's what you are, house-broken and with a convenient verbal push-button arrangement for the ladies' pleasure. Well, so I had set this trap for myself. (Ellison, 393-394)

His line of thought shows that he now understands how white women like Sybil see him: as a sexual object. He gives more drinks to her and, instead of giving in to her request, he writes "SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS – SURPRISE" (Ellison 395) in her stomach, seeing the scene under a new humorous light. When she asks if he raped her,

he lies and plays along and they engage in a relaxed and almost comic recollection of his brutal, fictitious performance.

Sybil is not the first woman that the protagonist has encountered that wants him to fulfil her wildest fantasies. However, this time is different, as Shelly Jarenski explains in her article "Invisibility Embraced: The Abject as a Site of Agency in Ellison's *Invisible Man*": "Like the previous woman, Sybil wishes the narrator to conform to her fantasy of blackness, but because he has begun to attain a level of consciousness, he is unable to perform in the way he had for the other woman . . ." (100). In this occasion, the protagonist finds himself incapable of performing the role that is expected from him by white society, in this case white women. He finds himself struggling to decide what is right and wrong, and whether that situation has gone too far. His internal fight, as well as his awareness about the stereotype that he is being associated with, are shown in the following quotation: "I was confounded and amused and it became quite a contest, with me trying to keep the two of us in touch with reality and with her casting me in fantasies in which I was Brother Taboo-with-whom-all things-are-possible" (Ellison, 517). Although he is unable of getting valuable information from her, he surely passes the test, finally defeating the stereotype.

Expressing how she wants him to rape her it becomes obvious that Sybil shares the same view as Hubert's wife; both represent the stereotype of black men as sexual beasts and the influence of that idea on white women. By how Ellison uses this character in the novel, it is clear that her role is simply to personify that stereotype. She is only one of the many dull, unsatisfied white wives wishing to be sexually subjugated by the powerful, dangerous and *primitive* black men that have been subjugated by white society all along. The only difference is that, although the narrator fell under the spell of Hubert's wife, that experience made him wiser, and therefore he is reluctant not to commit the same mistake with Sybil.

## 6. STEREOTYPES ABOUT BLACK MEN IN THE NOVEL IN RELATION TO THE ROLE OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

### 6.1 The Battle Royale, Sybil and Hubert's wife: Black men as sexual beasts

In the very first chapter of the novel we are introduced to the Battle Royale, a cruel show where a group of young black boys are forced to fight each other. The most devastating aspect of that scene is the fact that the only purpose of that fight is to entertain the white aristocrats that are attending a luxurious party. Before forcing the boys –who are constantly humiliated and treated as pets by the audience- to start the fight, they make them look at a beautiful blonde white woman. Through the objectification of the woman, who is dancing naked in a rather sexual way, the white audience is obviously trying to both excite and embarrass the black boys. They are doing so in order to make a point: black men, even when they are very young, are sexual beasts unable to control themselves, and all of them would like to rape white women. They succeed, as shown in the novel through the protagonist's description of the scene and its effect on himself and the boys:

She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea. I was transported . . . Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not. On my right I saw one boy faint. Another boy began to plead to go home . . . wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him . . . He tried to hide himself with his boxing gloves. (Ellison 16)

In the first chapter Ellison already introduces this first stereotype, and also the one of black men as entertainers. After watching them fight, the audience takes pleasure in making the boys fight for some coins, which ends up being another trick to humiliate them. Seeing the boys get electrocuted when desperately trying to reach the coins the audience bursts out laughing. The crudity of this scene, which is fairly comical from the point of view of the audience, shows how black men are seen as a form of entertainment with the sole role of obeying and serving white society as shameful and painful its demands might be. Shelly Jarenski talks about this scene and other relevant chapters in her article:

This analysis allows us to reconsider *Invisible Man* as the narrative of one man's process of embracing that abject alternative. This process is prompted by and enacted through scenes that emphasize sexual experiences with white women as well as scenes that highlight the narrator's resistance to the commodification of black bodies, including the Battle Royal, the narrator's first speech for the Brotherhood, the murder

and funeral of Tod Clifton, and the botched sexual encounter with a woman who has called him not black enough (303). These scenes highlight key factors in the relationships among visual power and discourses of dominance-patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and whiteness—because each one features the juxtaposition of black men and white women as visual objects of America's racial and sexual fantasies. Through these highly visualized, highly sexualized moments, the narrator moves from a position of powerless visibility, ‘as part of the entertainment’ (17), as he describes his subjectivity at the Battle Royal, to a position of empowered abjection on the ‘lower frequencies’ (581) of the cultural imaginary. (86)<sup>2</sup>

With her explanation, Jarenski expresses how many of the most relevant scenes in the novel are used to reflect the distorted and overly sexualized image of black males and white females in the American society of that time, and their role of entertainers. However, she writes as if the stereotypes of female and male characters are equally portrayed in the novel, an idea that I strongly disagree with. Although the over-sexualisation of white females *is* portrayed in the novel—through scenes like the Battle Royale and the encounter with Hubert’s wife and Sybil—, all those appearances conveniently occur in relation to the protagonist and the author’s need to highlight or proof wrong a certain stereotype. In conclusion, the white blonde in the Battle Royale is over-sexualized in order to stimulate the boys, and Sybil and Hubert’s wife in order to stimulate the protagonist. In all those cases, the role of the female white characters is to personify the stereotype of black men as sexual beasts unable to control their sexual desire for white women. However, the novel makes no point at all about the women themselves in relation to their sexuality and whether their over sexualisation and stereotyping is right or wrong.

Professor R. Lambert gives his view on the connection between the blonde woman in the Battle Royale and Sybil (see Annex):

I think both characters are very different but not unrelated: the blonde is a tool for old, sexist, wealthy white men to corroborate their racist stereotype: black men are sexual beasts who cannot resist a white (blonde) woman. Sybil is different: the blonde woman was passive. Sybil is active: she wants to be raped by a “big black bruiser.” She wants to achieve a fantasy. But the narrator, as we know, also wants to use Sybil as a tool to undermine the Brotherhood. He is unsuccessful in doing so, but he is successful in destroying the stereotype. He will not take advantage of drunken Sybil.

Although he acknowledges the similarities of both characters regarding their role in the story, he also points out how their approach and attitude is different. While the woman in the Battle Royale is a passive character (she is probably there because of money) who does not engage in conversation whatsoever, Sybil shows a very different behaviour. She takes an active approach, conveying the stereotype in a more direct, aggressive way.

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<sup>2</sup> In her article, Jarenski is quoting *Invisible Man*, pages 303, 17 and 581.

## 6.2 Trueblood: harsh realities

For example, in chapter 2 the reader becomes familiar with the barbaric situation of the Trueblood family through the testimony of the father. Although the women –as it is general in the novel- do not participate actively in the interaction between characters, the reader learns their sad story. The brutal events seem to both disgust and amuse Mr. Norton, as it is described by the protagonist when seeing his reaction to the story. He insists on hearing Trueblood's narration, and as the protagonist describes, he listens intensively, like it is the most interesting story he has ever heard. He even seems annoyed and tells him to be quiet when the narrator suggests they should go back to campus. At the end, Mr Norton is shocked and does not know how to proceed. Although the story is obviously brutal, Mr Norton gives the man a hundred-dollar bill before leaving, as if that interaction had been part of a show and Trueblood was a comedian or a rarity performing in a circus. He then demands to be taken away fast, as he feels uneasy by the story and shocked that such thing is even possible. That is the first proof that Mr Norton's view of the black community is distorted. White men like him have an idealised and vague idea of what black people and their reality are like. In the bubble that they have created in the campus, they seem unaware of the disparities between black and whites and also inside the black community itself. Through the protagonist's words on page 45, the reader can appreciate the disparities between blacks: "How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things? I looked at the floor, a red mist of anguish before my eyes".

The contrast between Mr Norton's reaction –a mixture of terror and amazement- and the narrator's, mainly shame towards his own kind, is a perfect reflection of the different realities within the black community of the time, and how members of all sides dealt with those differences. This chapter, although women do not actively take part in the scene, also uses female characters in order to make a point about the view of black men in the eye of whites. As the narrator states in his mind, it is likely that white society will judge all black men according to brutal actions such as Trueblood's. In their eyes, subjects like him are a perfectly valid walking proof of what black males are capable of. And, in the eyes of higher educated black men like the narrator, men like Trueblood are a disgrace and degrade the decent members of their community. Through this scene Ellison is trying to represent the stereotype of black men as beasts, subhuman creatures, and once more female characters are involved in the process for the sole purpose of the portrayal.



### 6.3 Secondary Characters: Black men as entertainers

In Chapter 14 a woman makes a short intervention. After a rude, drunk white man is thrown out for repeatedly asking a black man to dance –reinforcing the stereotype of black men as entertainers-, a woman steps in to apologise to the narrator for the man’s behaviour. Her referring to the black members of the Brotherhood as “our colored brothers” makes clear that she is white. The woman, after apologising, states: “*I would never ask our colored brothers to sing, even though I love to hear them. Because I know it would be a very backward thing. You are here to fight along with us, not to entertain. I think you understand me, don’t you, Brother?*” (Ellison, 238). This intervention is, again, used by Ellison to represent the stereotype, and also to mark that racism comes in many different ways and levels of intensity. Comments like this one, even though they might come from good intentions, are nothing else than racism behind a pretty mask. Once she is done with the statement she disappears, like many of the other female characters once they fulfil their purpose.

Chapter 20 reinforces the portrayal of the stereotype of black men as entertainers. When the protagonist walks through a laughing crowd to see what is it that they find so funny, the author introduces Sambo, the dancing doll. The Sambo dolls, with black faces and big smiles and colourful clothes, were very popular at that time. The puppeteers made them dance in a comical way to amuse the public. The main purpose of the dolls was, of course, to ridicule black men by levelling them as mere entertainers, empty puppets for white society to play with.

Although the dancing doll is clearly a racist symbol, what offends the protagonist the most is discovering who is behind it: Clifton, a former member of the Brotherhood. The fact that it is a black hand that is moving the strings and a black mouth that is singing the offensive song enrages the protagonist: “For a second our eyes met and he gave me a contemptuous smile, then he spieled again. I felt betrayed. I looked at the doll and felt my throat constrict.” (Ellison 327-328). His use of the word “betrayed” clearly shows how, in the eyes of the protagonist –and the author’s-, Clifton’s actions are a betrayal to the black community and their ideals. The protagonist cannot believe how Clifton could go from being such an active figure in the Brotherhood to turning all he had fought for into a joke.

The Sambo doll is mentioned for the first time in the novel in the first chapter, after the Battle Royale. When the men promise gold to the black boys, a blond man winks at the protagonist and says “That’s right, Sambo,” (Ellison, 21). The fact that a white man is

referring to the protagonist as Sambo clearly shows how all black men are funny puppets in the eyes of white society. Female characters have no relevant connection to the Sambo doll in the novel, and in this case it is a black male that helps portraying and perpetuating the stereotype. However, it is important to make reference to this part of the novel, as it helps identify the type of resources that Ellison uses in order to convey his message and social denunciation.

## 7. FINDINGS

By exploring the role and purpose of female characters in the novel, it becomes obvious that in all their appearances they are involved in an interaction with male characters. It is clear that, when female characters participate in those interactions, all they do is either support the male's perspective, introduce new ideas to change the male's mind or to encourage him to take an active approach and proof the existence of stereotypes related to black men. Therefore, female characters in the novel are mostly used to portray and denounce the stereotypes about black men created and promoted by white society, but not to represent the stereotypes about women and whether those are right or wrong. When asked whether he thinks Ellison failed in portraying the stereotypes about females of the time, Professor Lambert states the following: "A lot of readers would argue that Ellison failed in that regards. Female characters, as a rule, seem much less rounded than male characters. Mary, for instance, is a Mammy figure, and although she has political opinions, she seems to have embraced her role as a Mammy figure."

The lack of depth in Ellison's female characters might have not been intentional, but it clearly affects the view that readers might have on the book and its message. While the author passionately works on the male characters' development throughout the story, he neglects women, who undergo no change in personality and behaviour whatsoever. Carolyn W. Sylvander supports this idea in her article "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Female Stereotypes":

The analysis of stereotyping of Black Americans which Ralph Ellison explores in various ways and places in *Shadow and Act* has applicability to any oppressed group. Unfortunately, however, his own creations do not always transcend the very fault he is opposing. Ironically, both Black and white female characters in *Invisible Man* reflect the distorted stereotypes established by the white American male. Though Ellison in *Shadow and Act* also suggests correctives to the oppression of a group by means of stereotyping, he does not apply those correctives to the women characters of *Invisible Man*. 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. Fitting his patterns of beast, clown, and angel, Ralph Ellison's women characters are not, in his own analysis of stereotyping, fully human. (77)

At the very beginning of her article, Sylvander already establishes how, although Ellison is fully compromised with denouncing the distorted image that white society has of black men, and therefore with giving black men their humanity back, he fails in doing the

same for women. Ellison does not portray the stereotypes that white society might have had about white and black females at the time. On the contrary, he himself shows a distorted and stereotyped image of women. By having his female characters play different roles in order to prove his point about black men, he is pouring his own stereotypes about women into the novel. Therefore, it is safe to say that Ellison's crusade is not as noble as it could have been if women would have been included in the fight.

In the article "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Women: - A Comparison of Invisibility Between the Invisible Man and Selected Female Characters in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952)" Ifrah Mohamed states:

The female characters are portrayed not as individuals but rather as symbols and as a collective representative of the female gender and women's situation at the time. There is, within the novel, a direct parallel between the ill-treatment of the female characters and the Invisible Man's journey towards enlightenment. The female characters are deprived of their visibility at the expense of the Invisible Man's journey. (3)

Through his words, he is expressing how, by helping the protagonist to attain visibility, the female characters are unable to achieve the same goal. They stay invisible in the eyes of white society and in Ellison's, as the protagonist's journey to visibility is based on a series of encounters where his invisibility is contraposed to that of female characters. Mohamed also explains how female characters seem to represent the situation of women at that time from a masculine point of view, and therefore they are a portrayal of their gender, rather than of race.

However, we do find some examples of race playing an important role regarding female characters in the novel, like the case of the Trueblood women. Their reality, tragic in both their financial and personal affairs, is a result of their race; poor black women did not have much of a choice in life, and were victims of brutal events even inside their community. Race is also a relevant factor in chapter 3, when the narrator takes Mr Norton to the Golden Day to calm him down with some whiskey. There, we are introduced to the prostitutes working in the bar, which is also a brothel. The girls are black, and so are the costumers, mainly students from the university. One of the girls, Edna, expresses her interest in Mr Norton. When another girl states how she would rather kill a white man like him, Edna answers: "Kill him nothing . . . Girl, don't you know that all these rich ole white men got money glands and billy goat balls? These ole bastards don't never git enough. They want to have the whole world." (Ellison 67-68). Her interest in Norton is entirely based on his race, as old white men like him tend to be wealthy. Black poor girls like her find themselves trapped in white society, and have to depend on the sexual desire that men might have for

them. White men seem the perfect target, as they are in control of society and, as Edna says, they want to have the whole world.

Lastly, Brotherhood's Emma is the only ambiguous character in that aspect. The narrator or the rest of the characters make no comments or indications about her race. Therefore, the reader cannot be sure whether she is white or black. The purpose of that ambiguity is hard to determine. Perhaps it was Ellison's intention to leave her racial identity in the dark; maybe her race, unlike most of the female characters, is not connected to her role in the story. However, with Emma we see once more the same pattern: she is part of the Brotherhood, the association that will bring the narrator into action. However, her role seems to be to bring drinks to the men and to, only now and then, throw some comment always related to the men and to the narrator in particular. As happens with other female characters in the novel, Emma is also over-sexualized, as her appearance seems to be the only trait that makes an impact on the narrator. To summarise, she takes part in the process of bringing the narrator to visibility, and as the rest of female characters, that seems to be everything that she has to offer to the story.

Regarding the mentioning of women's rights in the novel, there is one more example provided by a secondary female character: the woman in chapter 14 who, after a new identity is given to the narrator by the Brotherhood, addresses him with the following question: "What is your opinion of the state of women's rights, Brother?" (Ellison, 236). Although no comment is made about the woman's race, that question seems to introduce a new topic in the novel, an opportunity for the narrator (and the author) to discuss the situation of women in that time. However, the author slams that door shut immediately by having Brother Jack take the narrator away from her and into the crowd. This one, together with Hubert's wife's and Sybil's statements, are the only times in the novel when women directly address the topic, but no answer is given to them. What is the point, then, of their intervention? Maybe Ellison felt forced to represent women and their concerns, and so he did it superficially. That way, the novel included female characters who participated in the social movements of that time and who were slightly worried about their social rights, and Ellison did not have to dig deeper. My point is that, if women were not useful to prove certain stereotypes about men, Ellison could probably have filled *Invisible Man* with male characters exclusively, leaving women out, and the story would not be affected.

To summarize, black female characters such as Mary, the eviction lady, and Emma are a tool in Ellison's hand in order to push the narrator into a more active figure to fight for his community's rights. Therefore, they help him become visible as a black male. White

women such as Hubert's wife, Sybil and the blonde dancer in the Battle Royale all share the same purpose: represent the image that white society has of black men as powerful sexual predators, or beasts. The Trueblood women help portray that same stereotype as well. However, in their case black men are shown as beasts not only towards white women, but also their own. That is depicted by Ellison with the intention of showing the subhuman nature that black men have in the eyes of white society, and how they are usually categorized as the same based on individual, isolated facts. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that in *Invisible Man*, the few female figures are only used to make a point regarding the protagonist's attitude towards life or to represent the stereotypes concerning black men in that social and historical context.

## ANNEX

Full interview with Professor R. Lambert, conducted by e-mail:

**Q1. What is, in your opinion, the role of Mary in the story? How does she influence the protagonist?**

To me, Mary Rambo is a mother figure and a savior: Mary (the mother of God?) rescues the innocent lamb (the narrator) from the slaughter: after the narrator's experience at the paint factory, she nurtures him back to life.

**Q2. Regarding their role in the novel, do you see any similitude between the blonde white dancer in the Battle Royale and Sybil? What could be Ellison's purpose when introducing those characters?**

I think both characters are very different but not unrelated: the blonde is a tool for old, sexist, wealthy white men to corroborate their racist stereotype: black men are sexual beasts who cannot resist a white (blonde) woman. Sybil is different: the blonde woman was passive. Sybil is active: she wants to be raped by a "big black bruiser." She wants to achieve a fantasy. But the narrator, as we know, also wants to use Sybil as a tool to undermine the Brotherhood. He is unsuccessful in doing so, but he is successful in destroying the stereotype. He will not take advantage of drunken Sybil.

**Q3. Male characters in the novel seem to be judged and categorized entirely depending on their race. However, how does the author categorize women? Does he put emphasis on whether they are white or black, or does he focus exclusively on their gender?**

As female characters are often the sites of racial and sexual politics (at least as far as the blonde dancer, Sybil and Hubert's wife are concerned), their racial identity matters.

The Trueblood mother and daughter are trapped in their racial identity: they are poor black sharecroppers. So are the prostitutes at the Golden day: they are black prostitutes for black customers (most likely).

Mary Rambo is a Mammy figure from the South (a female Uncle Tom, I guess).

Not sure about Emma: I can't remember whether she is white or black, perhaps because Ellison wanted it so. She would be the one ambiguous character in that perspective.

**Q4. It is clear that in *Invisible Man* Ellison is criticizing the stereotypes and poor reality of black men in that time. Do you think Ellison takes into account the stereotypes and even poorer reality of women, as well?**

A lot of readers would argue that Ellison failed in that regards. Female characters, as a rule, seem much less rounded than male characters. Mary, for instance, is a Mammy figure, and although she has political opinions, she seems to have embraced her role as a Mammy figure (the veteran would be a good example of a sharp contrast to such equanimity: he mocks and refuses stereotypes).

**Q5. Finally, what do you think was Ellison's view on gender while he was writing *Invisible Man*? Do you think his personal opinion influenced the novel?**

Not sure I can answer this. Has Ellison's alleged sexist tendencies been verified. It would be good to look into his personal life. Sorry, can't be of much help with that one.



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