

Stereotypes and exploitation of women in invisible man

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In *Invisible Man*, the trope of invisibility functions as a criticism of racist American society, but it also encompasses the novel's subtext of gender erasure. Both black and white females throughout the novel are underdeveloped and virtually invisible, constructed along a spectrum that replicates the classic duality in stereotypes of women—mother/Madonna or whore/seductress. The most notable white women represent the tabooed white female and are portrayed as highly sexualized and obsessed with the sexual stereotypes of black men. Black women are also seen as extremely sexual creatures, but those who are not overtly sexual automatically fall into the category of the nurturing mother figure. In the novel, both black and white women are blatantly stereotyped and are exploited and used by men who seek to further their own interests and desires. The white women that appear in the novel represent the taboo of the white female for black men, symbolized especially by Mr. Norton's daughter, Hubert's wife, Emma, the sophisticated hostess at the Chthonian, and the Naked Blonde. The novel's most notable white women are highly sexualized and are used by the novel's men by means of that sexuality. These women, especially the Naked Blonde and Sybil, are thereby relegated to the role of the stereotypical white seductress who is attracted to the equally stereotypical notion of the primitive and animalistic sexual impulse of the black man. The Naked Blonde, with a "small American flag tattooed upon her belly," (Ellison 19) dances for the narrator and the other black boys before the Battle Royal and is recognized as an obvious taboo by them. This woman, who ostensibly seems to be the American dream for every man, white or black, is actually taboo for all the men who watch her dance. For the narrator and the other

black boys, the prospect of a naked white woman is horrifying and painfully shaming, knowing that she is completely forbidden to them and that the only purpose of her sensuous dance is to make the boys squirm in anguish. For the white men the Naked Blonde is off-limits because she is a stripper and is therefore of a decidedly lower class than they are, which makes her unmarriageable. Their only access to her, then, is through paying her to arouse them. Thus the white men dominate her and control her sexuality through money, their higher class, and through their perceived male superiority. The Naked Blonde is completely aware of her sexuality and “ faintly [smiles] at [the] fear” (20) of the black boys as she dances for them. Just as she serves as the stereotypical female seductress, she projects a similar stereotype onto the boys as she believes that they will not be able to control their primitive sexuality in the presence of her naked body. She smiles knowingly at their discomfort, aware that it is evidence of their attraction to her. The Naked Blonde is not only reduced to the role of seductress, but is used as a commodity by the white men to fulfill their own desires. As a stripper at a function put on by white males, the Naked Blonde’s purpose is to entertain, arouse, and follow the white men’s orders, much like the function of the black boys. She is relegated to subhuman status by the white men, evidenced by the “ terror and disgust in her eyes” as they chase her around the floor and toss “ her as college boys tossed at a hazing” (20). The narrator himself describes her hair as “ yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll,” (19) further augmenting the image of the Naked Blonde as a puppet of the rich whites, controlled by them to further their own wants. Similarly, Sybil, the white wife of a Brotherhood member, portrays a

forbidden white female and also functions as the overly sexual white seductress. Sybil, in Greco-Roman mythology, was a siren who lured sailors to their death, advancing the image of Sybil as a white seductress. She admits to having rape fantasies involving black men, furthering the stereotype that black men cannot control their sexual impulses. She begs the narrator to “ threaten to kill” her (518) and cries, “ Come on, beat me, daddy—you—you big black bruiser...Hurry up, knock me down! Don’t you want me?” (522). The narrator is put off by the way she sees him as “ Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible” (517) and becomes disinterested in her, just as he is disinterested in the Naked Blonde because he is terrified by the taboo she represents. Sybil wants to use the narrator to fulfill her interracial rape fantasy, but he is only using her to get information about the Brotherhood. He admits that she is the type of woman who he “ would have avoided like the plague” had “ her unhappiness and the fact that she was one of the big shots’ wives” not “ made her a perfect choice” (516). The narrator wants to use Emma in similar fashion, remembering that she was once attracted to him and thus deciding to use her to get information about the Brotherhood’s plans. He remembers Emma in terms of her sexuality, recalling her “ bound breasts pressing against” him and “ that teasing light in her eyes” (512). Thinking of her boldness and the voicing of her opinion, he notes the resentment he had once felt for her. He likes her when she is sexual, but when she starts to speak and act on her own thoughts like a man he resents her. Later, noticing that she is so sexually turned on that “ she might willingly surrender herself (in order to satisfy herself),” he decides not to pursue her any longer because “ she was far too

sophisticated and skilled in intrigue to...reveal anything important to” him (515). The narrator is only using Emma to get what he wants from her, and once she has outlived her usefulness he abandons her. She is also used by the Brotherhood, who marginalize her by making her pour drinks for them, using her as their messenger by making her deliver the narrator a message, and by using her sexuality to help lure the narrator into joining the Brotherhood. Brother Jack warns Emma that the Brotherhood wants to recruit the narrator and that she should “ make [him her] interest too,” after which she asks him to dance (303). Emma is therefore another example of a white woman being used by men to further their own interests. The black women in *Invisible Man* are equally stereotyped, most forming to the classic female duality of mother/Madonna or whore/seductress. For example, Edna, Hester, and Charlene, the whores at the Golden Day, fall into the whore/seductress side of the spectrum. Edna admits to fantasizing about white men and jokingly propositions Mr. Norton: “ I sho do. I just love ’em. Now this one, old as he is, he could put his shoes under my bed any night” (88). It can also be said that the prostitutes at the Golden Day portray maternal aspects as well, helping the narrator take care of the ill Mr. Norton. The “ exotic girl” with “ a pleasant voice with a slightly husky edge” who mistakes the narrator for Rinehart is also a seductress, as her speech makes it clear that she and Rinehart are sleeping together: “ No, daddy, don’t look back; my old man might be cold trailing me. Just walk along beside me while I tell you where to meet me. I swear I thought you’d never comee. Will you be able to see me tonight?” (494). Also fitting the stereotype are the girls from Harlem, “ the best-looking girls” who are commandeered as a “ squad of drum

majorettes...who pranced and twirled just plain girl in the enthusiastic interest of the Brotherhood" (380). Similar to the way that the novel's white women are primarily used by the men, the majority of the black characters are exploited as well. This is particularly evident in the stereotypical black whores/seductresses. The whores at the Golden Day are obviously used by men for their sexuality; Rinehart is not only using the "exotic girl" for sex, but as she mistakenly tries to slip the narrator Rinehart's money it becomes clear that he is using her as a cohort in his schemes as well; the girls in Harlem are procured simply to use their sexuality to arouse interest in the Brotherhood. Clearly, the stereotype of women as merely sexual creatures crosses color lines, encompassing both the novel's black and white women, who are then exploited by the men around them. On the other side of the spectrum is the motherly/Madonna stereotype of black women found in the novel. The women characters that fit this stereotype are portrayed as nurturing, caretaking, and helpful. While this is not necessarily an offensive characterization as whore/seductress is, the act of stereotyping women into this duality of Madonna/whore serves to deny the diversity of black women in America. An example of this mother/Madonna stereotype is Sister Provo, the elderly woman being evicted from her home. The narrator describes her as "a motherly-looking old woman" (267) and states that her tears move him "as when a child, seeing the tears of its parents, is moved by both fear and sympathy to cry" (270). It can be said that Sister Provo and her husband are being used by the white power structure, which is responsible for their eviction, to maintain its power and dominance over the black community. They are exercising their power over the poor minority culture and are using

the couple to display the reach and strength of the authority that they yield. By taking their possessions, the white power structure is reinforcing the notion that it is in control of the lives of the blacks in America; it can give and take as it sees fit. Mirroring this scene is the one with Lottie, the pregnant wife of Dupre, who begs him not to burn down the tenement and who represents a mother figure, as does the nameless mother with the children who also inhabit the tenement. In this scene, the angry mob is displacing its anger at the white power structure onto their own community, burning down their own tenements. These women become victims of this misdirected anger as a mob of drunk, chaotic men destroy their homes. Also fitting the mother/Madonna stereotype are the duped Sisters from Rinehart's church and Jim Trueblood's wife and daughter. While both of the Trueblood women are pregnant and are therefore mother figures, the daughter Mattie Lou functions as a seductress as well, evidenced when Jim Trueblood refers to her as a whore: "...maybe sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore" (59). The Sisters from Rinehart's church are used by Rinehart in one of his many schemes involving his shifting identities, and the Trueblood women are banished to the periphery as their voice is never heard outside the story of a man. Neither white nor male, these women are treated as invisible and their version of the story is never told. Kate's violent reaction to finding her husband on top of their daughter is the only time that the female perspective is interjected into Jim Trueblood's recounting of the events, and Jim primarily thinks in terms of his own survival instead of the suffering he has caused his family: " Except that my wife and daughter won't speak to me, I'm better off than I ever been before" (67). The act is judged

by an audience of men, including Mr. Norton and the narrator, the school administrators, and other powerful white men. Mr. Norton even pays Jim Trueblood for telling his story; clearly, it is the Trueblood women who have been used and victimized. The only memorable black woman who is positively portrayed and given any kind of depth and development is Mary Rambo, the kind woman who acts as mother/Madonna by taking in and healing the narrator after the explosion at the paint factory. Mary is a nonsexual “big dark woman” (251) who offers to “take care of [the narrator] like [she] done a heap of others” (252). A man nearby then praises Mary’s maternal instincts: “You in good hands, daddy, Miss Mary always helping somebody and you need some help” (253). As her name suggests, Mary represents the saintly mother of Jesus, doing everything she can to support the narrator and, in effect, adopting him as her surrogate son. Mary pushes the narrator to learn from and embrace his past, and he comes to think of her not as a friend, but as “something more—a force, a stable, a familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face” (258). Mary reminds him that he can and is expected to become something in life. Soon, though, the narrator meets Brother Jack and joins the Brotherhood, and he begins to see Mary differently. He becomes ashamed and embarrassed of her, and his vain attempt to dispose of the cast-iron bank is symbolic of the narrator’s attempt to shatter her image. The bank, like Mary, represents a part of his heritage that the narrator wants to forget. He begins to complain about her cooking and starts to notice the noise, poverty, and filth of her home, as indicated by the banging on the pipes, the smell of cabbage, and the invasion of roaches.

Mary's language turns from concern to the stereotypical nagging of a mother: " Boy, when you come home? [...] Then where you going so soon, ain't you going to eat supper? [...] What kind of business you got on a cold night like this?" (297-298). The narrator begins to feel uneasy and guilty under Mary's restrictive gaze, and she becomes another situation that the narrator must leave in order to find his identity. When the narrator at last leaves Mary's home, she appears no more in the novel except in the narrator's thoughts and memories. She becomes an abstraction that the narrator's consciousness invokes when he is in trouble and in need of motherly guidance. In fact, Mary regains her helpfulness and reaches the full power of her position as mother/Madonna after she is removed from the novel. The narrator leaves Mary's home without even saying goodbye, confident that she will be fine. Just like the other women in the novel, Mary has been used by men and discarded when she proves to be no longer useful. The narrator no longer needs Mary in the flesh, for he can conjure her up in his mind whenever he needs her. Women in *Invisible Man* are conspicuously underdeveloped and stereotyped along two extremes of the spectrum, denying the diversity and complexity of the female gender. The narrator's encounters with white women suggest that he primarily understands them as forbidden objects of desire, but a closer examination of the white female characters in the novel indicates that they are primarily used by men for their own ends. Black women are similarly used by men, existing only as highly sexualized seductresses or as self-effacing maternal figures. The novel makes the struggle for social equality visible through the narrative of an " invisible" black man, but the marginalization of blacks in

the novel is mirrored by that of the women as well. With the exception of Mary Rambo, the women characters in the novel are underdeveloped, undiversified, and, for all intents and purposes, invisible. Women are exploited by men and their own struggle for equality is ignored because the novel's dominant institutions—the white power structure, the Brotherhood, and society as a whole—tends to treat people not as individuals but as stereotyped groups. It is because of this tendency that the narrator has so much trouble forging an identity, and it is why the novel's women can never attain a fully developed or meaningful identity for themselves. Works Cited Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1995.