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# 9

SHELLY EVERSLEY

## Female iconography in *Invisible Man*

In 1953, one year after the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Hugh Hefner launched his men's magazine, *Playboy*. The magazine's centerfold featured a nude Marilyn Monroe posed against a striking red velvet curtain. The photograph was taken in 1949 as Ellison was working diligently on the novel, and it became a quintessential example of American femininity, an icon of American cultural history. As a photographer, art student, and collector of painting and portraiture, Ellison understood the power of visual images. He liked to look at pictures. In his novel, Ellison describes a nude woman that seems to invoke the *Playboy* image: "the red robe swept aside like a veil, and I went breathless at the petite and generously curved nude, framed delicate and firm in the glass."<sup>1</sup> This nameless woman, "acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility" (*Invisible* 409), has a sexual affair with the protagonist and she appears in the novel just as invisible man confronts "The Woman Question." Ellison's artful description of the woman's symbolic role, like Monroe's pose, suggests complicity in a well-known and longstanding iconography of female difference and sexual objectification that critics have argued amounts to nothing more than a literary pinup. Ellison also describes the woman as framed by "a life-sized painting, a nude, a pink Renoir," and the narrator sees her nakedness haunted by a shadow. The painting emphasizes the very constructedness of gender difference. As a double, it offers a visual and life-sized reference to the history of female objectification so that Ellison's readers can look at the woman and see the "mirrors of hard, distorting glass" (3) that distort her humanity. The scene provokes in invisible man the sense of "a poignancy," something that forces him to question his reality – "[i]t was like a dream interval" – and most importantly, to question his assumption that invisibility is exclusive to black men (416–17). Here, both the narrator and the woman appear as nameless types. Their mutual and their individual challenge is to achieve an identity, one independent of the stereotypical images that conceal the truth.

At the start of the novel, Ellison's protagonist defines his predicament as one in which "people refuse to see me." His words call attention to the practice of looking as it informs and deforms humanity. The deliberate blindness that reduces humanity to stereotype amounts to an intellectual myopia, what Ellison calls a "construction of the *inner eyes*, those eyes with which they look through the physical eyes upon reality" (3). This metaphor also illustrates the status of women in the novel. Descriptions of Mary Rambo, Sybil, the "magnificent blond" at the Battle Royal, Norton and Trueblood's daughters, as well as the nameless nude framed by a Renoir, reveal concretely the deficiencies within the "*inner eyes*" that the protagonist must also rehabilitate. While they are the most consistent and crucial symbols in *Invisible Man*, women are also "more than symbols."<sup>2</sup> Indeed they become sites of *revelation* that transcend the simple opposition between black and white to offer new complexity to the novel's organizing themes. For this author who maintained a longstanding interest and engagement with the visual arts, telling by words is not enough to recover the humanity of women. As literal description, women cannot expose the social and psychological blockages that explain the gendered particulars that inform their invisibility. And, rather than read the debased iconography of women in the novel as proof of Ellison's "system of essentially androcentric seeing,"<sup>3</sup> a more suggestive approach will regard them as vivid renderings of the logic of invisibility. Fully aware of the universal implications of invisibility's attack on individual humanity, Ellison inserts visual depictions of women into the novel because he seeks a "way of revealing the unseen."<sup>4</sup> In his own introduction to the novel, Ellison describes his objective "to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal" (xxii), and he argues that "high visibility" actually render[s] one *un-visible*" (xv). Consequently, "*un-visible*" women are everywhere in the novel; their stereotypes dramatize, with particular vividness, the most critical moments in the protagonist's now universal quest for revelation and freedom.

Vision is perhaps the most underexplored aspect of *Invisible Man*. More than a literal question of seeing, the protagonist's life depends on his ability to "learn to look beneath the surface" and discern reality despite "mirrors of hard, distorting glass" (153, 3). Such discernment requires he learn to distinguish salient meaning from stereotype. While critics have discussed the phenomenological implications of *Invisible Man*'s desire to be seen, his desire for social equality, few engage the contradictory significance of what he sees, and more importantly, how he processes the visual image. As John Berger explains, "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled," since the meaning of what a person sees is mediated by time and space.<sup>5</sup> *Invisible man* makes this point when he recalls the details of his

life experience from his subterranean hole. The reader becomes especially aware of his subjective vision precisely because of his convoluted narration in which the past, his recollection, becomes crucial to the organization of the present time that begins and ends the novel – “the end is in the beginning and the beginning lies far ahead” (6). In this way, Ellison’s narrative choices reveal a gap between language and perception – what invisible man sees precedes his words. In an interview, Ellison explains that *Invisible Man* is “about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality” (*Collected Essays* 219).

Consequently, if the novel’s struggle to recognize humanity requires a movement from “illusion to reality,” visual depictions of women correspond to a world of illusion that reflect false realities. Ellison writes that “the true artist” must escape anachronism, “a distorted perception of social reality . . . that divides social groups along lines that are no longer tenable, while fostering hostility, anxiety and fear” (*Collected Essays* 685–6).<sup>6</sup> The artist’s position presents a challenge to the salience of stereotype so that when invisible man looks at women in the novel he confronts the false divisions that breed anxiety and fear. As a result, upon leaving the woman framed by the Renoir, he says: “Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically. Why, god-damit, why did they insist on confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both of us and them – all human motives?” (418). His question positions women – especially white women – as markers of privilege (“class struggle”) and sexual property (“ass struggle”), so that, as symbolic capital, women become the currency in the false hierarchy of human exchange. The narrator’s language indicates a palpable anxiety that can easily be misread as his and Ellison’s anachronistic antipathy towards women, but then he notes “the confusion” debases everyone. As the lesson of ambivalence becomes more vivid, the protagonist begins to understand that such divisions are untenable constructions that distort his access to reality. His intellectual “confusion” requires a revolution in his ways of seeing.

The priority Ellison gives to the visual in the novel, especially as it elucidates the process of looking, corresponds to the conditions of his writing. As he composed *Invisible Man*, Ellison worked as a freelance photographer (ix–x). At the same time, he collected photos from *Life* magazine, especially clips from a section called “What’s in a Picture.” One notable clip, dated April 2, 1951, stands out. It reads: “An event is often seen better in pictures than in actuality. In a picture we can study the facts and details with calm detachment and see things we would have missed had we been there.”<sup>7</sup> “What’s in a Picture” suggests an important claim about the author’s

aesthetic priorities. Believing that “[a]n event is often seen better in pictures than in actuality,” Ellison presents visual revelation as crucial to deciphering the meaning beyond the literal and beyond “our trained incapacity to perceive the truth.” The clip also suggests that the intellectual distance manifest in photography creates a kind of detachment that encourages the potential to see more than surface. In 1946, the same year Ellison began writing *Invisible Man*, he photographed portraits of his friend Albert Murray, and book jacket covers. By 1948 he regularly went out with his friend, the well-known photographer Gordon Parks, taking photographs and developing prints.<sup>8</sup> Parks made such an impression on Ellison, that the novelist modeled his protean character Rinehart after him. In the novel Rinehart’s chameleon-like presence inspires the protagonist to ask himself, “What on earth was hiding behind the face of things?” (493). As much as this question applies to Rinehart, it equally applies to the images of women that riddle the novel. And, as invisible man gets closer to self-understanding despite the challenge of mistaking surface for reality, he thinks again of Rinehart: “Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway?” (498). Reality, as Ellison pictures it, is both the “rind,” the immediate surface of things, and the “heart,” the more difficult to decipher truths that lie beneath, beyond what the eye can see.

In photography, as in painting, an image becomes intelligible via the manipulation of light.<sup>9</sup> Ellison, a writer, a photographer, and an art student<sup>10</sup> understood the relation between light and intelligibility. Finally conscious of his invisibility, the protagonist understands this insight:

I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. Perhaps you’ll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I *am* invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form . . . without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death . . . that is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. . . In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights . . . Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and the light is the truth.

(6-7)

Like any visual artist, invisible man knows that light gives an object its form, as radiation acts on the retina, the optic nerve, literally to make sight possible. Metaphorically, light represents knowledge, or mental illumination. When invisible man declares his mortal dependence on light, he calls attention to the notion of vision as insight, the epistemological depth humanity requires. The protagonist’s invisibility stems from the absence of light,

the dark benighted thinking that can only see a black man as rind without heart, form without content, a body without the ability to think or to feel. Such stunted thinking undermines the complexity of individual personhood; and, rather than illumination, it projects invisibility, what the protagonist calls “figments of . . . imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me” (3). This epistemological blindness to full humanity stems from a logic that positions black people and women as subhuman, as out of sight. In the novel, “Monopolated Light & Power” thus stands for a metaphorical myopia that pretends to possess exclusive control of the defining features of human actuality, of the truth (“The truth is the light and the light is the truth”). The narrator’s underground appropriation of a “Monopolated Light & Power” enacts his dissent from their totalizing control. By avoiding having to pay for the 1,369 lightbulbs that illuminate his hole, the invisible man seeks an independent source of insight.

At the Battle Royal and in his “blind terror” (21), a metaphor of proliferating invisibility, invisible man sees only the image of a “magnificent blonde,” her image constructed in the social imaginary. While he has not yet developed insight, he begins to learn its lessons. In this scene that frames the entire novel, the woman – also nameless and “stark naked” – stands before the protagonist, the fearful black boys, and the town’s most respected white men. The novel’s description frames her visually, and her subjectivity first appears through the male eyes that look at her body. Her humanity seems to disappear as her body submits to the voyeuristic gaze that renders her a pornographic sex object. She is invisible. Her manipulated image presents stereotypes of truth and social authority that rationalize domination over women and black people. For the narrator, however, this woman prompts him to see and feel ambivalence: “I wanted at one and the same time to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed on her belly her thighs formed a capital V” (19). Even as the woman’s presence provokes a visceral response, the protagonist’s engagement calls attention to her visual and revelatory significance. For instance, the V of the woman’s thighs juxtaposed with the American flag signals democratic victory. As Ellison began writing *Invisible Man* at the end of World War II, the United States had defeated totalitarian threats against global humanity. This victory not only positioned the nation as the world’s leading democracy, it also promised integration, an honest racial equality that would finally realize the most sacred principles of American freedom. Yet, at the same time, the V between the woman’s thighs also represents her gender difference and it reminds the protagonist of women’s unequal status. Looking past the symbolic surface of the “magnificent blonde,” *Invisible Man* begins to realize that

no victory has been won. Neither the woman nor the man can rely on the national symbols that should, in actuality, indicate their freedoms.

In the segregated United States, a black man's gaze upon a white woman could, in the South, warrant death by lynching. By accepting the risk associated with the deathly potential of looking at a white woman ("[h]ad the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked," he says), invisible man refuses the tyranny of monopolated vision. He rebels against the social order that objectifies him and the woman in order to rethink the unreality that shrouds her appearance. The protagonist looks: "she began to dance . . . the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils." The veils and the smoke imagistically emphasize the blinders that make her invisibility possible, and then they invoke another myth, Salome, whose seemingly promiscuous sexuality conceals her gender oppression. Salome's sensual dance allegedly cost John the Baptist his life. But, like the multiple meanings of the V between the blond woman's thighs, Salome's reluctant dance suggests more. In the myth, Salome refuses the persistent and inappropriate sexual advances of the King, her stepfather. Like "the most important men of [invisible man's] town," the king demands that Salome dance. In an act meant to demonstrate his masculine authority, his offer to compensate her for her services is calculated to reduce an independent woman to a possession, as one to be purchased as one would a whore.<sup>11</sup> The parallel between Salome's "Dance of the Seven Veils" and the blond woman's dance calls attention to the links between the myth of a dangerous, forbidden female sexuality and a blind-sighted objectification of women. Salome, like "the magnificent blonde," only *appears* to possess a dangerously seductive power over men.

A chauvinistic power that subjugates women and people of color distorts the protagonist's vision, for in his blindness he mistakes the blonde as a threat to his progress. As invisible man looks at "the magnificent blonde," he sees yet another myth: "She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea" (19). This Homeric and Joycean image invokes a siren, a nymph, part bird and part woman, who lures sailors to their death with her seductive singing. When he finally sees the woman distinct from her mythic sexuality – "I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in the others boys" – he begins to understand their shared subjugation (20). The novel offers no pause, no distinction, between the woman's dance as pornographic entertainment and the boys' fight, the Battle Royal, that immediately follows. This seamlessness depicts their common position in relation to a social authority that falsely constructs their positions as opposites. As the protagonist describes the chaos and the terror of his own fight, like "a juggled camera

sweeps in a reeling scene,” he reminds the reader of its visual and symbolic resonance. He narrates chromatically – “The room went red as I fell” – and invisible man invites the reader to see, with “inner eyes,” the importance of his struggle in relation to women who, shrouded in myth, also struggle with the burden of invisibility (20). Invisible man’s red room predicts retribution and earth shattering revelation, as does the ominous red moon that is present in the Salome myth.<sup>12</sup>

The narrator’s blindness and his insight in relation to the blonde woman initiates his education in invisibility. As he becomes aware of the distinction between formal education and the kind of knowledge that affords insight, invisible man recalls the images that inspire his illumination. He wonders whether the statue of the College Founder presents a “witnessing of revelation or a more efficient blinding,” and in his resistance to blindness he becomes an intellectual. His “mind’s eye” demands that he seek answers to his questions, “Why? And how? How and why?” (36). In another instance of the visual serving as a catalyst for revelation, the protagonist describes cinematically his encounter with Mr. Norton, a white benefactor of the Negro college. “As I drove,” he recalls, “faded and yellow pictures of the school’s early days displayed in the library flashed across the screen of my mind . . . photographs . . . of people who seemed almost without individuality . . . the figures in the photographs had never seemed actually to have been alive, but were more like signs or symbols one found on the last pages of the dictionary” (39). Pictures flash across the “screen” of the protagonist’s mind like projections in a slide-show. His description of the photographs suggests the opacity of blank-faced people who, in representing “signs or symbols,” provide the key to deciphering a “sphinxlike” code. The mystery includes the enigma of Mr. Norton, “a symbol of The Great Traditions” (37), specifically the white paternalism that honors “time, custom and our trained incapacity to perceive the truth” and forecloses the pre-invisible man’s ability to actually see. Most important, Mr. Norton declares his role as benefactor by way of his obligation to “construct a living memorial” to his daughter (45). The man’s dead daughter becomes the myth that organizes his philanthropic intentions. “She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer and more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of the poet . . . a perfect creation, a work of purest art . . . a personality like that of some biblical maiden,” he tells the protagonist (42). No longer a person but “a work of purest art,” the nameless daughter becomes an abstraction, “a *being*” without humanity, a fantasy that defines Mr. Norton’s false sense of reality. In his loss and longing, Mr. Norton projects an hallucinatory immediacy onto the photograph of his daughter that he carries in his wallet, speaking of her as if still alive: “[h]er beauty was a

well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again" (42). Upon looking at her picture, invisible man "almost dropped it," not because of its "perfection," but because of its similarity to "the magnificent blond" (42). "I seemed to remember her, or someone like her, in the past," he says, reminding the reader of the female images that recur throughout the novel (43).

For invisible man, the virginal picture of the girl presents a reversed image, a negative, of the Battle Royal's "whore." Mr. Norton's possession, "framed in engraved platinum," brings to mind King Herod's desire for his stepdaughter, a parallel that echoes the scene from the protagonist's past as well as the mythical history that clouds his vision in the present (42). He "almost dropped" the photograph because the image of the girl haunts him, directing invisible man toward what Roland Barthes calls a "blind field" since it prompts other memories (such as the "magnificent blond") and it creates sensory and intellectual discomfort.<sup>13</sup> In looking at the now dead, virginal girl, invisible man remembers a certain violence – a pornographic objectification – that in its invisibility, he shares with the real and mythical women he meets on his journey toward self-discovery. Norton's erotic and urgent desire for an unreal woman resonates beyond this father–daughter relation since Mr. Norton implicates invisible man, the school, and the social progress of black people in the girl's image: "You are bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument" (43). The mystery of this transgressive desire remains unfocused until Mr. Norton and invisible man meet Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper, whose incestuous impregnation of his daughter brings to the surface the chaos beneath Norton's desire. Trueblood's admission, "sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore," invokes the picture of the virginal girl that resonates in the narrator's memory of the "magnificent blonde" (59). As images, women can represent whatever a metaphorically blind man sees. And, while Trueblood's ability to "see" a whore in a girl – his daughter – resonates for Mr. Norton, Trueblood acts on his short-sighted desire masked as a dream.

"You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!," Norton exclaims upon hearing confirmation of Trueblood's transgression (51). Notably, his surprise stems not from Trueblood's action, but from his escape from punishment. Incest has not destroyed the man who has not only "looked upon chaos" but partaken of it. In his discussion of this incident in the novel, Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues the "status of the farmer's story as a commodity cannot be ignored," that Trueblood's situation "can be viewed as a capitalist's dream. And if such results can be achieved without fear of holy sanction, then procreation becomes a secular feat of human engineering." Baker's cogent reading of the commodity exchange crucial to this pivotal scene

recognizes the profit a patriarchal, capitalist culture understands in the legacy of heirs. He contends that if Mr. Norton had had the courage to believe that he could also escape retribution for such actions with his own daughter, the millionaire might have enacted his own “incestuous domination [of his family] as a productive unit, eternally giving birth to new profits.”<sup>14</sup> Although Baker exposes the critical parallels between Trueblood and Norton’s incestuous and capitalist ambition, he misses the point about their ambition’s object. It is not merely the story as commodity that cannot be ignored; it is the images of women, one black the other white, that become the glaring commodities from which both men enjoy profit. Ignoring the female images that instigate the episode as well as the poignant communion between Norton and Trueblood, Baker focuses on the incident as an artful exploration of black male sexuality even as he notices Trueblood’s “firm possession of all his ‘womenfolks’” (Baker 180), and Norton’s eyes “blazing . . . with something like envy and indignation” (51). Ellison’s narrator watches Norton give Trueblood a hundred dollar bill, and his comment on this exchange of female imagery is telling: “I saw him removing a red Moroccan-leather wallet from his coat pocket. The platinum framed miniature came with it, but he did not look at it this time” (69).

The failure to risk looking at women occludes their humanity. Ellison purposely crafts female presences in the novel in relation to manipulations of light so that, on first glance, readers only see a form without substance, highly visible objects without meaningful significance. But, with closer scrutiny, they become a cogent lesson in illumination: now visual and at the same time “*un-visible*,” women in the novel demand the kind of engagement that inspires discomfort, a discomfort now understood as the revelation of truth invisible man associates with light. In his journey toward insight and self-discovery, the protagonist must confront and engage their symbolic illumination. His describes the nude woman framed by a Renoir as “the kind of woman who glows” (409), and the light heightens the visual effect of her symbolic character as it delineates the contours of her particularly gendered invisibility. As their sexual tension increases, invisible man notices a slight anomaly of color in the woman “with raven hair in which a thin streak of white had begun almost imperceptibly to show.” This black and white detail suggests the binary logic of race and gender difference that also mirrors the thinking that cannot imagine insight. At the same time, it reverses the color imagery of Liberty Paints – the streak of white subtly contaminates the “pure” blackness of her “raven hair.” And, like the moment of terror at the Battle Royal, the protagonist admits, “she was so striking I had to avert my somewhat startled eyes,” and his gaze returns to the painting (411). In his discussion of the female nude in the visual arts, Berger explains that their

recurring presence has become the criteria in which “women have been seen and judged as sights” (Berger 47). Gender difference, based on a notion of masculinity as power and agency, defines women as objects, most “particularly an object of vision,” a “sight” that ultimately divides her subjectivity into two parts in which she simultaneously watches herself even as she is accompanied by an image of herself. She is always aware of being looked at by a spectator. By looking, invisible man risks confrontation with the “chaos” that comes with insight.

At the center of the novel, the protagonist encounters a black woman, Mary Rambo. He meets her just after he leaves the Liberty Paints factory hospital. Some critics have argued that the narrator looks at Mary only as a stereotypical mammy, “with echoes of Sambo,” whom the protagonist sees “not as a person” but only as “a link between past and future” (Sylvander 79). Because Mary nurtures the narrator back to health, many critics read her as a striking example of Ellison’s limited view of women. Anne Folwell Stanford, for instance, contends that Mary’s nurturing presence in the novel refuses to acknowledge diversity among black women by presenting her on the moral high ground of a “madonna/whore duality” (Stanford 118). But, as Claudia Tate notes, Mary “is not bound by this stereotype,” but rather she “sets the tone as well as determines the idiomatic language for the novel.” As the protagonist’s surrogate mother – not his mammy – she nurtures not the master’s white child, but a black one.<sup>15</sup> To reduce Mary to stereotype ignores the force of Ellison’s aesthetic commitment as well as what I am arguing is the revelatory potential of the “*un-visible*.” Mary escapes stereotypical objectification not only because of the crucial wisdom she imparts to the narrator (“Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don’t git corrupted”), but also because she exercises her insightful ability to *see* the humanity in an invisible man (255). The narrator first encounters her as an abstraction, a disembodied voice, “And the big dark woman saying, *Boy, is you all right, what’s wrong?* in a husky contralto” (251). He falls asleep “in the echo of her words,” and when he awakens, he “saw her across the room” (253). His vision seems to render her like the nameless woman shadowed by the Renoir, as “a sight,” objectified as the reflection of stereotype. But, in a challenge to the authority of a masculinist view, in what bell hooks calls an “oppositional gaze,” Mary returns his look and sheds passive objectification:<sup>16</sup> “Then I realized that through [her] glasses still slanted down, the eyes were no longer focused on the page, but on my face and lighting with a slow smile” (253). The “lighting” of her eyes focused on his face suggests Mary’s independent illumination, one not determined by a monopolated light. In Ellison’s short story, “Out of Hospital and Under the Bar,” readers see an even better picture of Mary’s

complexity and her insight. In this earlier draft, not included in the final edition of *Invisible Man*, Mary sees the protagonist confined in the hospital. Upon looking at him, he explains “she tried seriously to communicate with me.”<sup>17</sup>

Mary and invisible man’s potential “seriously to communicate” seems to emphasize the possibility of meaningful and sympathetic exchange between individuals. This potential also appears within his encounter with the woman framed by the Renoir: “the sensed possibility of a heightened communication.” Concerning their encounter, he says it was “as though the discordantly invisible and the conspicuously enigmatic were reaching a delicately balanced harmony” (411). Here, the woman, “enigmatic,” and the man, “invisible,” share a self-awareness of the paradoxical conditions of their objectifications. Their “harmony” reveals what Hortense J. Spillers calls “the damaged humanity of an acquisitive culture”<sup>18</sup> in which this white woman and this black man see their stereotypes as their only assets in a short-sighted human exchange. This acknowledgment becomes a crucial detail of their interaction and it forces the reader – who also becomes a viewer – to seek the truths concealed by images. For Ellison, the possibility of “heightened communication” between two “*un-seen*” individuals foregrounds the visual and discursive power that reduces women to one-dimensional surfaces. And by framing the woman in the visual, the narrator illustrates the disturbance of his insight, “[m]y vision seemed to pulse alternately clear and vague.” His inability to focus calls attention to the woman’s invisibility and also reveals the narrator’s metaphorical blindness. The woman’s debasement as sexualized commodity barely comes into focus for the protagonist as the “dim light from the hallway filters into the darkness of the room.” This filter of light illuminates, however briefly, the protagonist’s consciousness (“my mind revolved,” he says) by presenting him with a new way of seeing (417). A sliver of light penetrates his darkness and it creates an epistemological uncertainty that must come as he learns to see. “I didn’t know whether I was awake or dreaming,” he says in a surreal sequence that mirrors the dream that prompts Trueblood’s transgression. The narrator recounts the image of a white man acknowledging – with indifference – their post-coital, interracial moment. “It was strange,” he recalls, noting the uncertainty that forces him to question his reality. “I wanted to linger there, experiencing the sensation of something precious perilously attained too late and now to be lost forever – a poignancy” (417).

More than sex, the narrator’s feeling of an inscrutable sensation of “a poignancy,” defines invisible man’s encounter with the enigmatic woman. Barthes writes, “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). Framed by the visual, invisible

man's poignancy is the unspeakable, unfocused accident of "a heightened communication." The poignancy he feels recalls the narrator's response to Mr. Norton's photograph of his daughter – "I almost dropped it" – and it becomes especially disconcerting. Since his intimacy with an enigma represents something he cannot grasp, he cannot confirm its reality. For Barthes, this poignancy offers "a power of expansion. The power is metonymic" so that invisible man's experience of looking requires a "thinking eye" which forces him to "add something" (Barthes 45) and discover a way to articulate his experience. Like Ellison's narrator's "inner eyes," Barthes's Spectator's eyes and mind focus on the "something" in the image he can neither name nor identify. In order to articulate the meaning of what they see and feel, Barthes and Ellison's spectator must think and act. Poignancy thus depends on imagination as the ability to integrate form ("the rind") and substance ("the heart").

"The Woman Question" foreshadows the poignancy of the encounter between "the discordantly invisible [man] and the conspicuously enigmatic [woman]" framed by a Renoir painting. The woman's spectacular, sexualized persona brings into focus the very specularly of the black man's impotent position in relation to the monopolated light that can never render his person three dimensional. The white woman, like the black man, functions for the Brotherhood as an icon of their exclusive power. Even as the Brotherhood pretends inclusiveness, they rely on hierarchy of race and gender which hobbles their ability to discern a full picture of humanity. Wondering if he has been made "the butt of an outrageous joke" in the eyes of the Brotherhood, invisible man understands his assignment as spokesman for women's rights as a punishment (407). In yet another echo of the Battle Royal scene, he tries to convince himself that the white male power brokers acknowledge his ability so much that his assignment reflects their endorsement. He tells himself, "by selecting me to speak with its authority on a subject which elsewhere in our society I'd have found taboo, weren't they reaffirming their belief both in me and in the principles of Brotherhood, proving that they drew no lines even when it came to women?" (408). But of course lines have been drawn; the boundaries created breed what Ellison calls "social anachronism . . . that imbalance in American society which leads to a distorted perception of social reality" (*Collected Essays* 685). Brother Jack's reductive pamphlet on "The Woman Question" illuminates this anachronistic simplicity with which the Brotherhood perceives any kind of difference. Their decision to couple their surface commitment to political questions of gender (women) with race (invisible man) reinforces – via sexual taboo – those "anachronisms" and the false social divisions they produce. Women and people of color thus figure as the light and shadows that lend

the Brotherhood its form. Invisible man must, therefore, change his perspective and utilize all of his senses in order to discern what these prevailing images might reveal.

When asked about her husband's plan for social change in the Brotherhood, Sybil, the next white woman who inadvertently instructs invisible man on the contours of false images, responds with a spectacular insight: "Georgie's blind 'sa mole in a hole 'n doesn't know a thing about it" (524). George, Sybil's husband, cannot see social equality. According to the man's wife, his blindness is his representative problem: "Men have repressed us too much," she says. "We're expected to pass up on too many human things" (519). Her use of the term "repression" does not only describe a masculinist refusal to acknowledge women as an equal part of the conscious world. It also echoes the Vet's declaration of "that great false wisdom taught to slaves and pragmatists alike" (95), that, for him, emerges ultimately from a blindness he calls "repression": "He registers with his senses but short-circuits with his brain," he says. Invisible man has "learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity" (94). Like the Veteran-doctor, Sybil perceives "repression" as a social sickness that replaces reality with false images. The problem allows for men like her husband, Mr. Norton, "the most respected men of the town," and even invisible man to mistake myopia for clear vision. Relegated to the social unconscious, women, according to Sybil, are pushed beneath the surface and locked in distortion and unreality. It is no wonder that invisible man meets Sybil at a party in a building called "the Chthonian," a word relating to the underworld, as in infernal. Unlike invisible man's self-determined subterranean hole, the Chthonian underworld literally exists in the world above ground, in the social world where actual women appear as unreal images.

Invisible man's encounter with Sybil signals the penultimate moment of revelation that not only drives the protagonist underground, but also prompts his desire to articulate the double-consciousness that emerges from epistemological blindness. The two participate in a flirtation that depends on their symbolic statuses – "just the type of misunderstood married woman" and "Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are possible" (515, 517). Plotting revenge on the Brotherhood, the narrator intends to seduce the lonely woman in order to secure restricted information to which her husband, George, has access. At the same time, Sybil encourages the encounter so that she can confirm her fantasy of a black rapist. In their interaction invisible man finally sees a symbolic and "a very revolting ritual" and he asks whether Sybil's face displays "horror" or "innocence," an ambivalence that emerges from the "obscene scheme of the evening" (517). His question reveals his desire for answers, not sex. Now, near the end of his journey, he

sees a woman with whom he communicates; or, at least, she communicates something to him. Her articulation of the contours and the logic of negation prompts the protagonist to think; his next step requires action.

Unlike earlier instances of chaos that begin with unreal depictions of women, this time invisible man lands in Harlem during a riot that “sounded like a distant celebration of the Fourth of July.” The narrative describes a new level of perception: “there was a sudden and brilliant suspension of time” and “then time burst” at the very moment in which a black community takes action against the inequality that has repressed their humanity (535). This moment signals – both visually and literally – a declaration of independence marked by illumination. And, seeking a reason for the cause of the people’s action, the protagonist hears an explanation that implicates his “revolting ritual” with Sybil: “they said a white woman set it off by trying to take a black gal’s man . . . She was drunk” (541). Whether the unacknowledged Sybil inspires the chaos remains unclear but prophetic; the anachronistic notion that a drunk white woman could instigate a riot in a black community exposes the damaging effects of false perceptions. It confuses “the class struggle with the ass struggle” even as it anticipates parallels between race and gender inequities. As invisible man moves through the scene of chaos, he learns to see the surreal contradictions of everyday life. On top of a milk wagon, for example, he sees “a huge woman in a gingham pinafore . . . drinking beer from a barrel which stood before her . . . she bowed graciously from side to side like a tipsy fat lady in a circus parade, the dipper like a gravy spoon in her enormous hand” (544–5). The black woman, under the guise of symbolic mammy, does not offer a picture that would reconcile her stereotype with her behavior. Rather than nurture, she destroys, “she laughed and drank deeply while reaching over nonchalantly with her free hand to send quart after quart of milk crashing into the street.” Here, this enigmatic woman’s actions repudiate her “mammy” image so as the narrator looks, he asks “Why was I torn?” (545). Now “torn,” the man feels the poignancy of ambivalence and contradiction – a revelation mediated by false images of women – that send him running underground toward hibernation, “a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). He thinks, “the mind that conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived” and he pursues a plan of confronting the chaos he now associates with revelation. His experience among invisibles has awakened his “sense of perception,” and he finally declares, “I’m invisible, not blind” (576).

## Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 416. References hereafter in text.
2. Carolyn W. Sylvander, "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Female Stereotypes," *Negro American Literature Forum* 9:3 (Autumn 1975), p. 79.
3. Anne Folwell Stanford, "He Speaks for Whom? Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*," *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, Robert J. Butler, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 124.
4. Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p. 690. References hereafter in text.
5. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 7.
6. This statement appears in his essay "The Art of Romare Bearden." in *Collected Essays*.
7. "Photography," 1937-55, 1984, n.d. Ralph Ellison Papers. Box 27. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
8. Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2002), p. 376.
9. In photography, the artist must subtract light in order for an image to appear on film; in painting, the artist must add light to a canvas so that the viewer can discern the image. Thanks to photographer Matthew Rodgers and painter Robert Sciasci for pointing out this detail.
10. In addition to his well-known study of music, Ellison maintained a longstanding interest in the visual arts. Ellison studied art in college, and upon his arrival in New York, he began to study sculpture under Augusta Savage at her well-known Harlem Community Art Center. He maintained a lifelong friendship with painter and collage artist, Romare Bearden, whom he met at Charles Seifert's Ethiopian Art School; and he later became the first student of Richmond Barthe, a man many argue is the United States' greatest African-American sculptor. See *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, pp. 164-7.
11. In the New Testament, Salome is the daughter of Queen Herodias and stepdaughter to King Herod Antipas. John the Baptist condemns Salome's mother's marriage to Herod, her first husband's brother. Herod holds John the Baptist prisoner, but he is afraid to kill him since many think John a man of God. Herod also lusts for his young stepdaughter, so on his birthday he asks her to dance for him. She declines; but, when Herod offers her anything in his kingdom in exchange for the dance, she accepts. Upon concluding her seductive dance, "The Dance of the Seven Veils," she asks for John the Baptist's head delivered to her. Fearfully and reluctantly, Herod honors her wish, and Salome delivers the head to her mother. See Mark 6: 14-29. For centuries many have represented Salome as the original femme fatale, a symbol of the erotic and dangerous woman. See paintings such as "The Dance of Salome" by Benozzo Gozzoli (c. 1461-81), and "Salome with the Head of John the Baptist" by Carlo Dola (c. 1600). Oscar Wilde's controversial one act tragedy (first published in 1893), suggests that Herod's lascivious looks and his sexual desire for his stepdaughter, coupled with Iokanaan's (John the Baptist's) scorn for Salome and her mother ("By women came evil into this world" [22]), position Salome as

- the subject and object of a more general masculine contempt for women. See Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967). German composer Richard Strauss was so moved by Wilde's account of Salome (who is unnamed in the biblical story), that he composed the opera, *Salome*, first performed in Dresden in 1905.
12. In Wilde's account of Salome's story, Iokanaan's death also marks the appearance of a blood red moon. In the Bible, a red moon represents the realization of the prophecy of Revelation: "the moon turned red as blood all over, and the stars of the sky fell onto the earth . . . For the Great Day of his retribution has come . . ." See Revelation 6: 12-17.
  13. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard (New York, Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 57-8.
  14. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 192.
  15. Claudia Tate, "Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Kimberly W. Benston (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990), p. 168.
  16. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 115.
  17. Ralph Ellison, "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar," *Soon, One Morning: New Writing By American Negroes 1940-1962*, ed. Herbert Hill. (New York: Knopf, 1963), p. 244.
  18. Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 79.