
The Problem of Trafficking Women and Its Portrayal in Invisible Man

In his essay "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ralph Ellison argues that The nation could not survive being deprived of their [the Negro's] presence because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom. While Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* makes the struggle for social equality visible through the narrative of an invisible black man in order to demonstrate this point, what about the women in the text whose characters often seem invisible or underdeveloped? Although Ellison's own perspective on the so-called Woman Question is ambiguous given his virtual silence on gender equality in his essays and interviews, the novel's female characters particularly white female characters illuminate how the majority in American democracy marginalizes, uses, and sacrifices certain groups of people, particularly women and racial minorities. In fact, despite the lack of development of the female characters who appear to play relatively minor roles in *Invisible Man*, Ellison's problematization of American democracy like the protagonist, hereafter referred to as I am could not function without the female characters who simultaneously bind the fates of the novel's characters together and elucidate the gap between democratic ideals and reality.

The function that the female characters play in *Invisible Man* can be seen in the recurrence of the trope of the woman as a trafficked sexual object throughout the novel, as I am's remarks such as . . . and how did I guess there was a woman in it suggest. When I am makes such statements, he discloses his suspicion that some man usually a black man has identified himself in a particular way or has been convinced to do something in exchange for another man's woman most often, a white man's woman. In this regard, the trafficking of women provides us with a means to understand how I am relates to other men in the novel and attempts to identify with them through women and discourses about women. However, while I am's encounters with white women suggest that he primarily understands white women as both forbidden objects of his desire and a means to become more like white men, a closer examination of the predicaments of certain female characters in the novel indicates that statements such as the aforementioned one also reveal how women are used or sacrificed by a man for his own ends. Thus, rather than being negligible, women despite their invisibility can be understood as indispensable to the functioning of a white male-dominated democracy. Because women are assumed to be a common currency that all men are presumed to accept and desire, women are sacrificed, exchanged, and used throughout the novel by men who seek to maintain their privileged position in a purportedly democratic society.

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As men seek to assert their subjectivity by treating women and black men as exchangeable or sacrificial objects, the male and female characters in the novel become bound together. Consequently, as Ellison's novel discloses, this trafficking implicates the humanity of both the female and male characters in the novel and illuminates how they share a common desire to fully realize their humanity despite their racial and/or gender differences. Claudia Tate argues that the narrow margin of difference between I am and the female characters assist the Invisible Man in his course to freedom as his interactions with women elucidate their common plight since these women, like I am, are the means to another's end. While I do not make the bold claim that these characters help I am achieve freedom, I contend that I am's interactions with the nude woman at the Battle Royal, the Trueblood women, Emma, the discourse of the Woman Question, the nameless woman that I am goes home with after his speech on the Woman Question, and Sybil illuminate the complexities and shortcomings of American democracy in a way that ultimately enables I am to understand democracy as a process rather than a fixed state with a predictable endpoint.

In his essay "On Initiation Rites and Power," Ellison's quest to define democracy as a struggle becomes evident. Here Ellison argues that the function of literature . . . is to remind us of our common humanity and the cost of that humanity. This cost of humanity that Ellison speaks of assumes that although humans are vulnerable by nature, they must persist in the struggle for freedom and pressure others to embrace their humanity even in the face of potential defeat. While I am, like the female characters in the novel, is vulnerable and subject to sacrifice, he lacks perception of this reality initially, ignoring the way that he is used by the Brotherhood and others for someone else's ends. While I am does not initially realize how his own plight is tied to that of women when Ras asks him what the white men of the Brotherhood gave him to abandon the black race, Ras rants:

What they give you to betray their women? You fall for that? . . . Women? Godahm, mahn! Is that equality? Is that the black mahn's freedom? A pat on the back and a piece of cunt without no passion? . . . He take one them strumpets and tell the black mahn his freedom lie between her skinny legs " while that son of a gun, he take all the power and the capital and don't leave the black man not ing.

Because I am is conditioned by the Brotherhood to oppose Ras politics, he initially lacks the perception necessary to recognize that the white men's trafficking of white women does not serve to make the black man into a white one. Rather, this trafficking serves to both test the black man and keep him in his place. Set up to fall into the trap of the white woman or rather, the white man, black men are treated as a suspect class where one wrong move with a woman makes one a criminal. Once the black man violates the cultural taboo against miscegenation, he is reminded that he is not a real man or human since he is not white and since the women being trafficked are not his property and do not share his race or class position.

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Because certain women in *Invisible Man* are also vulnerable to being sacrificed and objectified based on their gender, the similar predicaments experienced by the female characters and I am becomes evident as both must struggle to find a place for themselves in a nation dominated by white men. While Carolyn Sylvander insists that both Black and white female characters in *Invisible Man* reflect the distorted stereotypes established by the white American male, I contend that the female characters in the novel do not necessarily passively embody these stereotypes. Rather, since the female characters allegedly inferior gender makes them candidates for trafficking by men who stereotypes women as passive and inferior to justify the inhumane treatment of women, they illuminate for I am that people must struggle both as individuals and members of a collective group to negotiate their invisibility in order to prove their humanity and pressure American democracy to embrace them.

What exactly is this notion of humanity that Ellison assumes all people potentially embody? Why does this paper understand Ellison's notion of humanity as universal rather than gendered? While Ellison never explicates his conception of female humanity, we can get a better grasp on his notion of humanity by first problematizing Sylvander's understanding of Ellisonian humanity as something that separates the genders rather than as something that is shared. Because Sylvander examines only one aspect of Ellison's definition of what it means to be human, her thesis that Ellison redeploys stereotypes of women in a way that oppresses women proves problematic. Quoting Ellison's essay *Richard Wright's Blues*, Sylvander discloses that Ellison indicates that human life possesses an innate dignity and the [human being] an innate sense of nobility; that all men possess the tendency to dream and the compulsion to dream and make their dreams reality. From this, Sylvander concludes that Ellison denies humanity to women in the novel because, as she argues, the female characters in *Invisible Man* lack the ability to dream. While it may be the case that the female characters in the novel understand themselves and are understood by others primarily in terms of their relationships to men, it is necessary to acknowledge another facet of Ellison's definition of humanity that he explicates in *The Little Man at Cheehaw Station*. Here Ellison explains that we are but human and thus given to the fears and temptations of the flesh. From this, it appears that because humans are marked by imperfection, confusion, and desire, Ellison's notion of humanity cannot be truly understood or experienced without exploring sexuality.

Significantly, sexuality is something that all of the characters in the novel theoretically have and must grapple with as they struggle to reconcile the relationship between the political and the personal/sexual. It is precisely this struggle that ensures that the plights of the heterosexual male and female characters are intertwined. Consequently, the role that women play in *Invisible Man* cannot truly be understood in isolation from analysis of I am's relationships to the female characters and the stereotypes of the animalistic black male that he must grapple with as a black man. While Houston Baker correctly argues that black male sexuality is a central theme in Ellison's novel, he understands this sexuality in rather stable, monolithic terms surrounding the

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phallus. Yet, as this paper indicates, even in I am's encounters with women, normative assumptions held by the white male about both black male sexuality and female particularly white female sexuality are problematized. While the black male may prove to be more dynamic than the one-dimensional sexual creature that he is stereotyped as, the white female characters are sexualized by others and often sexualize themselves despite the rigid gender roles of the late 1940s and 1950s that demanded that women contain their sexual impulses and remain in the private sphere with the children.

The first time that I am must grapple with his sexual desires for a trafficked white woman in the novel is at the Battle Royal. As I am recalls:

A sea of faces, some hostile, some amused, ringed around us, and in the center, facing us, stood a magnificent blonde stark naked . . . Some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear . . . Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked . . . I felt a desire to spit upon her as my eyes brushed slowly over her body . . . I wanted . . . to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. I had a notion that of all in the room she saw only me with her impersonal eyes.

The feelings that I am expresses here seem to be as contradictory as what the woman herself represents. On the outside, the blond nude/America may appear to represent the American dream for every man black or white and may seem to symbolize democracy given the tattoo of the American flag on her stomach. If the woman can simply be reduced to a symbol of democracy, why do the men in this scene find her so alluring? As Tate argues, this woman represents the forbidden white woman. Yet, this woman is not just any white middle-upper-class woman. Given that she is a stripper in this scene, this woman is taboo for both white men and black men. Because the woman is a stripper, she is likely to be of a different social class than the white men at the Battle Royal. Consequently, the wealthy white men could never marry such a woman; they can only access her by paying her for her services that arouse them and remind them of their manhood. However, because the white men pay the woman to arouse them, they can still dominate and exploit her female sexuality since she is of an allegedly lesser gender and class.

For I am and the other young black men at the Battle Royal, however, this woman's allure is compounded by her white female flesh. She is forbidden not only because she is a white woman but also because the young men are not white and have not paid for her services. These young men may try to glance at her, but as I am indicates, they are constantly haunted by the specter of Jim Crow laws, which seek to protect the integrity of white womanhood. Yet, if I am and the other boys do not look and acknowledge their desires for flesh, they risk the possibility of sacrificing their humanity and manhood. This double-bind causes I am to

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experience competing desires to touch and possess the woman and destroy her. Since attaining the woman might enable I am to become more like white men, he wants what she appears to represent the American ideal. However, he also wants her as a body since such desires are an indispensable component of humanity, particularly for heterosexual males in this instance. I am may even want to look at her to test the limits of democracy to see if he can violate the cultural taboo against penetrating a white female with his gaze and survive.

At the same time, I am wants to destroy the degraded humanity and the white man's domination over others sexuality that the female stripper represents. Citing the terror and disgust in the woman's eyes as she is thrown around by the other men, I am seems to identify with her predicament as he experiences guilt and fear about both violating Jim Crow laws by looking at her and seeing her dehumanized by the other men. I am's fear may reflect a anxiety about violating the gender politics of Jim Crow, but it may also indicate his apprehension about realizing that the democracy that he aspires to become a part of is not nearly as democratic as he imagined. Because both I am and the woman are minorities in this scene since neither would have been at the white male-only gathering if they were not part of the entertainment, I am seems to briefly realize that democracy as he knows it in the South does not embrace genuine humanity. In fact, the Battle Royal scene illuminates how the white privilege that governs democracy thrives on making a spectacle of difference be it gender or racial difference (or even a combination of the two, though there are no black women in this scene).

As Ellison elucidates through the white men's subhuman treatment of the woman and the black boys in the scene, certain people have more access to and control over definitions of democracy than others. Much like the woman has been asked to strip to entertain the white men at the gathering and make the black boys uncomfortable, I am and the other young black men have been asked to participate in the Battle Royal to entertain the white men who exploit her humanity. It thus becomes evident that this event represents a ritual which governs behavior. The rituals become social forms . . . the Battle Royal represents a vital part of behavior patten in the South, which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines . . . Because the white males assert their civility and superiority by degrading black males through these caste lines, the Battle Royal is akin to castration, excision, or lynching, as Houston Baker argues. Similarly, the white woman, although presumably paid for her services, is dehumanized and objectified by the white men who make a spectacle of her feminine sexuality and throw her around like the victim of a college hazing ritual. By making a spectacle of the black boys and the white woman, then, this gathering precludes women and black men from becoming the puppeteers of democracy.

While I am may not explicate how he and the woman are similarly situated and dehumanized, Ellison's inference that the woman is paid to be there and that the boys have to scramble for coins after partaking in the Battle Royal demonstrates how both have been denied their

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humanity by these white men who get pleasure out of treating them as a spectacle. In fact, when I am says of the woman, I had a notion that of all in the room she saw only me with her impersonal eyes, he implies that they share some sort of bond. While this woman does not know or speak to I am, her glance at him seems to imply her tacit acknowledgment that they face the same struggle to free themselves from their bondage to the white male and make democracy more accessible and accountable.

Part of this lack of accessibility can be traced to the gender politics of Jim Crow, which seek to prevent I am from realizing certain desires by prohibiting him from touching much less looking at white women. Given this, the Battle Royal scene can be read as elucidating that desires are an inevitable and uncontrollable part of the human experience regardless of what the laws and norms that govern a democracy permit and forbid. If democracy refused to make I am human at the Battle Royal, his struggle to acknowledge his sexual desires could make him feel human for a moment. Perhaps, then, these desires are a natural response to the gap between democratic ideals and reality that Ellison frequently cites.

While most of the women that are trafficked in the novel are white, two black women Kate and Matty Lou Trueblood are trafficked by both black and white men. Infamous in their locale for their incestuous family, these women epitomize what Ellison means by being outside of history. Because these women are neither white nor male, they are treated as if they are invisible. Moreover, while these women are the ones who bear the burden of Trueblood's incestuous endeavors, they do not get to tell their story. Rather, their story is told and circulated to other men by their incestuous father/husband. In fact, the Trueblood women and their story if it is even their account of their experience at all are trafficked both implicitly and explicitly by many different males, including, among others, Mr. Norton who asks and pays Trueblood to relay his story, Trueblood who tells the story, and I am who listens to Trueblood's narrative. As Michael Awkward points out, trueblood's incestuous act is judged almost exclusively by men. This male judgment is offered by a cast which includes the black school administrators who wish to remove the sharecropper from the community and Trueblood's white protectors who pressure the administrators to allow the sharecropper to remain in his home . . . They form . . . an exclusively male evaluative circle which views Trueblood's act as either shamefully repugnant . . . or meritoriously salacious . . . Except for the mother Kate's memorably violent reaction to seeing her husband atop their daughter, the female perspective on Trueblood's act is effectively silenced and relegated to the periphery in the sharecropper's recounting of the story. Thus, even though the Trueblood women's pregnant stomachs may be evidence of Trueblood's incestuous act, these women are trafficked to such an extent that Trueblood and Norton benefit from their hardship while the women carry babies that they are ashamed of.

As Trueblood proclaims, Except that my wife and daughter won't speak to me, I am better off than I ever been before. Though Trueblood discusses Matty Lou and Kate in his account of his

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impregnation of his daughter and his wife's response, this statement illuminates how he primarily emphasizes his own survival rather than the hardship that these women endure. While it is conceivable that the Trueblood women find power in their invisibility as they punish Trueblood by refusing to interact with him, the novel's failure to shed much light on the Trueblood women's version of their experience makes it difficult for the reader to gauge how productive this power is. Readers can assume, however, that any power that these women might exercise by distancing themselves from Trueblood does not enable them to rewrite their history for other men to hear since Trueblood circulates his own male-biased account of the family's incestuous history to many other men.

At the time that I am listens as Trueblood shares his story with Norton, he has yet to realize just how much he has in common with the Trueblood women, whose invisibility precludes them from accessing democracy to challenge the dominant male narrative about their history and tell their story in their own words. While I am shares a racial identity with the Truebloods and seeks to protect them from having to share their story with a white man who is likely to shun them, he distances himself from the Truebloods by emphasizing the tension between the Truebloods and the people at the school. As a result, I am fails to grasp how the humanity that the characters of Kate and Matty Lou Trueblood implicitly problematize is related to his own struggle to be recognized, listened to, and embraced by democracy. However, just as the Trueblood women become invisible when a male-biased version of their story is circulated to other men, I am becomes invisible when the Brotherhood deliberates I am's fate without genuinely considering his own testimony after he allegedly acts opportunistically in an interview. Just as Kate's and Matty Lou's voices get smothered as Trueblood circulates the incest story to assert his own subjectivity and entertain others, I am's voice is completely ignored based on what the Brotherhood asserts about him for their own political ends.

I am first contemplates whether others consider him human when he asks himself, What was I, a man or a natural resource? Because this question follows Emma asking? But don't you think he should be a little blacker, it appears that I am begins to question his humanity in the North when he encounters this woman who grasps her humanity through her agency to speak and ask questions as if she is part of the Brotherhood. While Emma's role in the novel can primarily be understood in terms of her relationship to men as I am's question Who is she anyway, Brother Jack's wife, his girl friend implies, she is the first woman in the novel who, though trafficked by men, negotiates her position for her own ends by manipulating the terms of the male/female binary that predominated during the 1940s.

Emma's agency can at least partially be traced to her somewhat masculine demeanor. Described as a smartly dressed woman with a hard, handsome face, Emma appears masculine on the outside. Yet, Emma is also a feminine temptress that I am believes would willingly surrender herself, though she would do so only in order to satisfy herself. Characterized as a

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woman who has sexualized herself, then, Emma resists the dominant assumptions about womanhood that predominated during the late 1940s, when women were urged to quell their sexual desires and avoid promiscuous behavior. By depicting Emma as someone who chooses to have sex for her own pleasure, Ellison draws into question the gap between the image and reality of American democracy, which sought to define womanhood and manhood in narrow terms by projecting rigid gender roles for both sexes throughout society during the late 1940s.

This gap is complicated because Emma as a woman acquiesces to the masculine ideals of the Brotherhood in order to lift herself from her subordinate position as a woman. As I am notes, Emma is far too sophisticated and skilled in intrigue to compromise her position as Jack's mistress by revealing anything important to me. As I am's realization suggests, Emma disciplines herself to not allow herself to become a victim or sacrificial lamb, used by I am or someone else for ends that she will not benefit from. Rather than understanding Emma as a female Other, I am portrays her as someone who is psychically essentially no different than the members of the Brotherhood. Keen and manipulative, Emma would not compromise herself in a way that might force her to sacrifice her privileged position. Instead, her own interest is inextricably bound to that of the Brotherhood as Brother Jack's statement We're . . . interested 2E . . in his voice. And I suggest, Emma, that you make it your interest too . . . suggests. To the extent that Emma sacrifices her ability to exercise a free will independent of the Brotherhood's puppeteers, she embodies the Brotherhood doctrine that Discipline is sacrifice. Thus, while Emma may try to resist being used by others for ends that will not benefit her, she cannot altogether abandon the masculine power structure in which she operates since she benefits from her position in that structure at times.

In fact, although Emma negotiates her subordinate position by acting more like a male than a female, that she is still considered a woman can be seen in her relationship to the Brotherhood. Since it seems that the Brotherhood cannot lure I am into their project without the presence of a woman, the Brotherhood traffics Emma to make I am a brother. In fact, because Emma gives I am the sheet of paper with his new identity, she is in some sense the means for I am's rebirth. Without her, I am would lack identity. Although Emma may be marginalized to the extent that the men in the novel ask her to pour them drinks and hand I am the sheet of paper with his new identity on it, she is the carrier of all of their fates since these men and the political movement that they represent cannot function without her. Minor acts like pouring drinks and passing slips of paper might seem to reflect Emma's invisibility, but the power of her invisibility can be seen in Emma's success at luring I am into the Brotherhood.

Here it becomes apparent again that the political represented here by the Brotherhood cannot operate smoothly or maintain participants attention without being eroticized and without the presence of women. Although men may not acknowledge their dependence on women, men and the political ideals that they represent cannot subsist absent women, who serve as objects

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of a man's desire and provide men with certain material necessities and emotional support. Thus, while women are also struggling to find their place in democracy as Ellison's text demonstrates, they are also the means through which men black and white struggle to find and advance their places in the political realm.

Because the Brotherhood uses I am to gain the support of the disenfranchised just as they rely on Emma's feminine allure to lure I am into the Brotherhood, both Emma and I am, as Tate argues, are instruments for the exercise of another's control and assertion of power. Specifically, both I am and Emma convey messages for the Brotherhood, though I am orates before audiences while Emma passes I am the sheet of paper with his new Brotherhood name. Although Emma does not resist her role as messenger and bartender since performing these tasks, among other things, elevates hers to a position that she would have otherwise been barred from at a time when women were traditionally excluded from the political sphere, I am recognizes Emma's humanity in the way that she negotiates a space for herself in the typically male political sphere of the Brotherhood with her intellect, manipulation skills, and sexual license.

That Emma has the wit to evaluate situations and determine how she should behave in order to maintain her privileged position suggests that she might be more human than I am who initially does not realize that he is not in control of his fate since he is not speaking for himself but is instead the mouthpiece for an entire movement. Yet, because Emma acquiesces to the Brotherhood's terms to maintain her privilege and find a space for her in the political realm, it seems that she too may lack the capacity to thoroughly interrogate the politics of the Brotherhood, which require her to sacrifice aspects of her womanhood and act like a man in order to avoid being completely excluded from the political realm.

The Brotherhood's failure to truly embrace womanhood can in fact be seen in the chapters concerning the Woman Question. Unable to think for himself, I am only knows what others particularly members of the Brotherhood have told him and conditioned him to believe. As a result, I am mocks the Woman Question and traffics women as a collective group without realizing that he too is being trafficked by the Brotherhood, which uses him to gain legitimacy and support from blacks, as Emma's statement? But don't you think he should be a little blacker suggests. Disclosing his abiding trust in the Brotherhood, I am's inability to look beneath the thin veneer of their rhetoric of equality becomes apparent as he temporarily sacrifices himself in order to work his way ahead in the movement and further the collective democratic struggle that the Brotherhood purportedly represents. As I am asks rhetorically, For 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 the Brotherhood, proving that they drew no lines even when it came to women? While I am perceives that the Brotherhood supports both gender and class equality, he lacks the perception to fully grasp that the

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Brotherhood is far less concerned with the plight of women than they are with gaining support for their movement and thus enhancing their own prestige.

Because the Brotherhood is intent upon maintaining its legitimacy and reputation, the Brotherhood elites define themselves against un-Brotherly behavior and thus rely on punishment for those who betray the movement. When I am is demoted from his assignment on the class issue and reassigned to speak on the Woman Question, women as a collective entity become the punishment or sacrificial lamb that the Brotherhood relies on to preserve its legitimacy and support base. By treating I am's assignment to the Woman Question as a demotion, the Brotherhood illuminates how its rhetoric of equality is nothing more than rhetoric that is unlikely to alter the predicaments of the disenfranchised. By trafficking the Woman Question and furthering the perception that the Brotherhood seeks to advance the cause of women, then, I am unwittingly legitimizes the gap between image and reality in American democracy.

While I am reifies this gap by accepting his fate and trafficking the Woman Question in order to ensure the smooth functioning of the Brotherhood, he denigrates the Woman Question, emphasizing, I had just been made the butt of an outrageous joke. Whereas Sylvander interprets this statement to connote that Ellison considers gender inequality a joke, I contend that the chapters on the Woman Question, which problematize the way that the gap between democratic ideals and reality implicates gender and racial minorities alike, actually highlight Ellison's consciousness of gender politics. In fact, Ellison reveals this consciousness to some extent when he indicates that the discussion of I am's relationships with women and the Woman Question serves a comedic function in the novel. Specifically, Ellison argues that the comedic discussion of the Woman Question serves to disclose how when I am is thrown into a situation which he thinks he wants he is sometimes thrown at a loss.

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