

Title: Sophisticated Jokes: The Use of American Authors in *Invisible Man*

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Publication Details: *Renascence* 30.1 (Autumn 1977): p69-77.

Source: *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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For his novel of the American scene, Ralph Ellison uses American authors to support major ideas, ideas controlled by the dominant image of vision inherent in the title of *Invisible Man* and fully exploited in the fiction. References to American authors are sophisticated jokes, often very funny. As aware as Mark Twain that humor is a weapon, and as aware as T. S. Eliot that juxtaposition of allusions contributes to a total effect, Ellison plays with names of American authors and teases with allusions to American literary works. Flashing briefly here and developed there, the references reveal illuminating and humorous support of themes concerned with identity, with black leadership, and with the state of American society, a contemporary Ellisonian waste land.

Booker T. Washington, Emerson, Whitman, and T. S. Eliot figure prominently in comic handling of names and/or allusions, the tone set in the opening lines of the Prologue. To declare the quality of his invisibility, the naive narrator informs readers that he is “not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe.”

Names used in serious jests are Booker T. Washington and Emerson, and each allusive shot is like b-b spray hitting in different directions. Washington was an educator and a leader—and a writer because of his leadership—and references to his name, in Ellison's unique handling, serve several purposes.

The first naming of Washington in the novel is in the much-quoted passage spelling out the narrator's adolescent dependence on others for identity: “In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington”. One critic notes that when Brother Jack tells the narrator that he will be the new Booker T. Washington, he is telling him that he will be used “to control other Negroes to the Brotherhood's advantage.” This is not the only possible interpretation of this passage, however. The narrator has undergone many experiences since his first aspiration, and his vision of self and possible identity has changed. Instead of the confidence in Washington shown earlier, the narrator hedges in his response. “Why, naturally, I think he was an important figure. At least most people say so.” And his bravado in the new situation has naive humor. He tells Jack that “The Founder came before him and did practically everything Booker T. Washington did and a lot more. And more people believed in him. You hear a lot of arguments about Booker T. Washington, but few would argue about the Founder”. How much the narrator has changed in his vision about himself is made plain a few pages later when he writes, “But to hell with this Booker T. Washington business. I would do the work but I would pattern my life on that of the Founder. They might think I was acting like Booker T. Washington; let them. But what I thought of myself I would keep to myself”.

That the Founder and Booker T. Washington are not so distinct as these comments indicate is readily apparent when the theme of black leadership is examined through allusion and character.

Besides naming Booker T. Washington, the novel also alludes to his famous Atlanta Exposition Address of 1895. In Chapter 1, the narrator recalls the past of his race: “about eighty-five years ago they were told that they were free, united with others of our country and in everything social separate like the fingers of the hand”. This image from Washington's speech indicates a leader, and later, when the narrator cribbs for his graduation speech in Greenwood the “Cast down your buckets where you are” anecdote of the Atlanta Address, the allusion is a two-pronged pointer. By using the anecdote the narrator borrows his identity from Washington and also repeats what a great leader of the nineteenth century had told a white and black audience on a momentous and auspicious occasion. For readers there are a few laughs as the scene develops

and simultaneous incongruous images are evoked: the stately Washington who had respectful attention from hundreds, and the sweating, bleeding, gangling narrator who has at best the drunken inattention of the citizens of Greenwood.

The motif of black leadership is introduced. As a type of leader, the black educator, Washington and the Founder are not presented so differently as the narrator implied, and Dr. Bledsoe seems an obvious caricature of the historic Washington. Each of them presents a slight variation of the black American educator who is more concerned with self and power than he is for black Americans. And for each of them the statue of the Founder at the black college is symbolic, not only for the Founder.

THE bronze statue of the Founder is described by the narrator as a “cold Father symbol” of outstretched hands grasping a veil over the head of a kneeling slave; the problem for the narrator at that moment is interpretive. Is the Founder removing or replacing the veil? More than one reader has called attention to the similarity of this description to the actual statue of Booker T. Washington on the Tuskegee campus, and Russell G. Fischer cites the text of the inscription: “Booker T. Washington. 1856–1915. He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry.” Fischer also indicates that the narrator's puzzle is partially resolved when he describes the statue's “empty eyes.” He concludes that this description suggests that the Founder was figuratively blind or lacked perception. More confirmation is given by the narrator himself, although he does not seem to be aware of it at the time. So emotionally moved by the sermon in the college chapel that he must leave, he recalls that “A mockingbird trilled a note from where it perched upon the hand of the moonlit Founder, flipping its moon-mad tail above the eternally kneeling slave”. The mockingbird and the eternally kneeling slave seem to dispel any doubts about the Founder.

It is in the recounting of Dr. Homer Barbee's sermon immediately preceding the moonlit view of the statue that another playful dig is taken at the black educator as leader. This time, allusions to a work by Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy, stimulate alert response. In his tribute to the Founder, Barbee also praises Dr. Bledsoe for carrying on after the death of the Founder, suggesting that though there might be a difference in time, there is little difference in the type of educator—translated leader for the purpose of Ellison's theme. Marvin Mengeling ably discusses Chapter 5 for its echoes of Whitman's elegy. Recalling the familiar lilac, thrush, and star symbols of “When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloom'd,” Mengeling notes the “scent of lilacs”, the *a capella* singer as Ellison's modern thrush, and the star which streaked “down the cheek of that coal-black sky like a reluctant and solitary tear”. The train journey and the mourners at the stations are also parallels to Whitman's poem. Mengeling's conclusions, however, do not take into account Ellison's ironic reversals. The symbols are used, according to Mengeling, “to measure the great irony and bitter disillusion of racial betrayal brought about after the death of another great fighter for emancipation, the beloved Founder—Ellison's picture of a black and mythical Lincoln” and, he claims, “the Founder's dream had been betrayed by his successor, Dr. Bledsoe.” Although Mengeling does note that Barbee is blind when he “appropriately” stumbles over the legs of Bledsoe, he is too selective in applying the blindness only to Barbee's estimate of Bledsoe.

Both the portrait of the “black and mythical Lincoln” and the tribute to Bledsoe are presented by Barbee, an invited guest of Bledsoe. Since Barbee is blind, anything he says should be suspect; again, vision or seeing is the image in control. He cannot see the truth. This passage, therefore, seems to reinforce the theme of black leaders not being leaders of black people. The Whitman symbols are reversed by the blindness of the black Homer; the Founder was not Lincolnesque, and his successor, Dr. Bledsoe, is not the man so elevated by preacher rhetoric, a fact soon to be discovered in the narrative by the invisible man. With a created character type, with an actual name, and with allusions, the black educator-leader in American society is put down.

Another sly allusion treats identity comically, for *Invisible Man* is wide-ranging; the narrator is not the only

black American with an identity problem. There are the veterans of the episode at the Golden Day. The vets, mostly professional men who have lost touch with reality, show great interest in the who-ness of themselves and others. Mr. Norton is a new face, and though a few vets had let him pass after the narrator told them he was General Pershing, scrutiny and speculation continue:

“Look, Sylvester, it's Thomas Jefferson!”

“I was just about to say, I've long wanted to discourse with him.” The men carrying Norton toward the Golden Day are stopped again.

“Gentlemen, this man is my grandfather!”

“But he's *white*, his name's Norton.”

“I should know my own grandfather! He's Thomas Jefferson and I'm his grandson—on the ‘field-nigger’ side,” the tall man said.

“Sylvester, I do believe that you're right. I certainly do,” he said, staring at Mr. Norton. “Look at those features. Exactly like yours—from the identical mold. Are you sure he didn't spit you upon the earth, fully clothed?”

“No, no, that was my father, ...”

For readers familiar with William Wells Brown's *Clotel* or *The President's Daughter* (1853) Thomas Jefferson is not just a former president. He is the father of the daughter whose name gives the title to Brown's novel, her mother being Jefferson's slave-mistress. Sylvester may be comic, but there is pathos and a point in his enhancing his genealogy with a president—and a god.

If the name of Washington suggests at least two different motifs, the name of Emerson, as Ellison toys with it in *Invisible Man*, is certainly no less multileveled. Sometimes it means a private joke referring to the actual nineteenth century writer, sometimes it refers to a created character of that name who has several functions, and sometimes it is used as a kind of type—merged with other characters in the novel.

The name is introduced in the novel by Norton when he asks the narrator if he had studied Emerson. Readers knowing the full Ralph Waldo of Ellison's name, are able to smile as the narrator is embarrassed because he hadn't, and Norton tells him, “You must learn about him, for he was important to your people. He had a hand in your destiny”. Later, in his final campus interview with Norton, the narrator announces his intention of reading Emerson. Norton approves. “Very good. Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue”. The private joke slips in again when the narrator is at the paint factory, worrying about using “Emerson's name without his permission”.

Links between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ralph Waldo Ellison are noted by Earl H. Rovit in “Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition.” Recognizing Ellison's reference to his middle name, Rovit claims there is affinity in the men as writers. They are both “outsiders” who are inside the American experience, and, as writers, they must create forms with which to give order out of chaos. Ellison has done this in *Invisible Man*.

But Ellison has also created a character with the name, and the episode with Emerson's son reveals other allusions and another angle of attempts to manipulate the narrator. Functionally, the episode serves to let the narrator and readers know what Bledsoe had written in his letters of “recommendation,” but there is a great deal more suggested. The narrator has saved Emerson's letter to the last, and in response to a letter, he goes to Emerson's office. The man who receives him, the narrator notes, has “a strange interest in his eyes” and a

“long hip-swinging stride that caused me to frown”. The interviewer refers to his father as a success, but he claims that ambition can blind one to realities, that “No one speaks *to* him. *He* does the speaking”. It is the son of Emerson who is interviewing the narrator, and that he has been affected by being spoken *to* is apparent. A psychological wreck, with an analyst and shaking hands, the not-so-simple son suggests homosexuality. He speaks with the narrator who reports his “touching my knee lightly and quickly removing his hand as I shifted my position”. More direct comment is given in his dialogue alluding to a critical eyebrow raiser of the late forties: “With us it's still Jim and Huck Finn.... I'm afraid my father considers *me* one of the unspeakables.... I'm Huckleberry, you see... !”. Alert to allusion, readers can recall Fiedler's “Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck, Honey.” For those who missed the subtle suggestions of description and of the allusion, there is another literary clue, another allusion to Whitman. Emerson's son extends an invitation to the narrator several times to a party at his club, the Calamus Club. In *Leaves of Grass*, the section dealing with Whitman's concept of “adhesiveness,” manly love, is, of course, titled *Calamus*. Readers need not wonder, as the naive narrator does, “What was young Emerson's plan—and why should it have included me?”. Readers know.

The final use to which Ellison puts the name of Emerson is to have the narrator recognize him as a manipulator like others. “And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—”. In his confrontation with Ras during the riot in Harlem, the narrator takes another step forward: “... I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine”. The list of those who had run him gets longer, and in the castration dream, there are “Jack and old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras and the school superintendent, and a number of others”. Is the Emerson referred to in these passages the character created in the novel or the actual writer? Or both? Ellison riddles a riddle.

Because Ellison has referred to T. S. Eliot as a literary ancestor and has acknowledged several times the impact upon him of “The Waste Land,” readers should not be surprised that *Invisible Man* is also a comic waste land in prose. There is no naming of Eliot in the novel, but Ellison quotes Harry's speech from Eliot's *Family Reunion* in his frontispiece with an excerpt from Melville's *Benito Cereno*; Harry's remarks anticipate the general theme of seeing. But an early allusion sets the stage for the Ellisonian waste land, and other imagery and characters develop it. Readers familiar with Eliot's work are brought up sharply as the narrator describes his college campus: “If real, why is it that I can recall in all that inland of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? And why does no rain fall through my recollections, sound through my memories, soak through the hard dry crust of the still so recent past? Why do I recall, instead of the odor of seed bursting in springtime, only the yellow contents of the cistern spread over the lawn's dead grass?”. For readers smiling but uncertain in smug half-recognition, Ellison adds the fillup. “I'm convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight; the school of flower-studded wasteland, the rocks sunken, the dry winds hidden, the lost crickets chirping to yellow butterflies”. For the Shakesperian rag of Eliot, Ellison substitutes “and, oh, oh, oh, those multimillionaires!”.

The waste land, it becomes clear, is not only the college campus. Eliot 's work draws heavily on the fertility myths, in which society is represented by the land, its sterility or barrenness symbolizing lust, its fertility, love. In addition, Eliot's “The Waste Land” is his parallel to Dante's *Inferno* as his “Ash Wednesday” is his parallel to the *Purgatorio*; in “Ash Wednesday” love and women are redemptive. *Invisible Man* suggests all of these elements. After the narrator leaves the college, many of the scenes are set in an underworld, literal or figurative. There are the scenes in the paint factory three basements down, where the narrator has his battle with the suggestively named *Lucius Brockway* [italics mine] and is hurt in an explosion from the fire; there are the scenes in the subway; there is the apartment where the Brotherhood meets—the Chthonian; and

there is the devious underworld of Rinehart.

In this hell of a contemporary world, sex is lustful with the sexual episodes in the novel having a farcical, ironic or comic turn. The scene with Emerson's son has already been referred to as suggesting homosexuality in American society, but other vignettes are shown much earlier in the novel. Before the battle royal which preceded the narrator's Washingtonian speech, there was the impersonal "innocent" blond at the stag party who bumped and ground to arouse slobbering response from the leading citizens of Greenwood—devastating revelation which is funny yet horrifying.

With the story of Trueblood, of obviously ironic name, Ellison plies ironies, revels in the tall-tale, and goads readers into laughing response. There is ironic foreshadowing when Norton twice remarks to the narrator that the land had been barren before the Founder came and now it is fertile. He soon discovers confirmation; incest gives concurrent paternities. Norton rewards Trueblood with a hundred dollars, matching the response of white society as they lapped up his story. The grim humor has a sharp point. Toward the end of the visit, Trueblood mentions his other children. "Lissen to the younguns,' he said in embarrassment, 'Playin' 'London Bridge's Falling Down'". In Part V of "The Waste Land" Eliot had written: "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down." And, for Ellison, American society is falling down as it envies known incest, as with Norton, and rewards, as with the white citizens near the campus.

When the narrator himself becomes involved with women there are comic coups. His being trapped by the nameless wife interested in the Woman Question has the absurd climax of husband Hubert's return:

"... he stood in the dim light of the hall, looking in with neither interest nor surprise. His face expressionless, his eyes staring. There was the sound of even breathing. Then I heard her stir beside me.

'Oh, hello, dear,' she said, her voice sounding far away. 'Back so soon?'

'Yes,' hello, he said, 'Wake me early. I have a lot to do'".

Later, when the narrator has become disenchanted with the Brotherhood, he plans action on his own for gaining information about the organization. His plans for the "seduction" of Sybil backfire in one of the funniest of the farcical episodes in the book. Charles W. Scruggs, in "Ralph Ellison's use of *The Aeneid* in *Invisible Man*," claims that it is a classical analogue to Aeneas and his descent to the Underworld, a parody of a "crucial encounter between the Cumaean Sybil and Aeneas in Book 6 of *The Aeneid*." The parallels noted by Scruggs offer deeper insight into the fun and are of value in the interpretive reading of a complex work.

However, the Cumaean Sybil is also part of Eliot's "The Waste Land," and a passage about her follows the title. In this excerpt, the prophetess of Apollo is seen hanging in a cage. When boys cried to her, "Sybil, what do you want?" she replied that she wanted to die. Instead of prophesying and helping, Ellison's middle-aged Sybil gets drunk and blurry, but there is no question about her wanting to die—in the Renaissance-Jacobean sense of the word. Her fantasy-wish is for a brutal attack by a black man. The narrator cannot do it, wonders if he should pour a drink on her, then decides "as I saw her lipstick lying on the table and grabbed it, saying 'Yes, yes,' as I bent to write furiously across her belly in drunken inspiration:

SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS SURPRISE".

Slapstick comedy takes over as the narrator tries to rub out the inscription, gets her out of the apartment house when he receives a telephone call to come to Harlem, and finally puts her in a taxi after she had run

girdleless and barefoot along the park.

Other references to sex extend the range of association, but none of them represent love. The prostitutes at the Golden Day speculate hilariously about Mr. Norton, and Emma, although she is Jack's mistress, has an eye for the narrator. Sex is a joke, and society is sick. Women are used and use others.

Exceptions in the novel in the presentation of women are Miss Susie Gresham of the black college to whom the narrator pays tribute in retrospect and Mary Rambo, a mother-figure who takes in the narrator when he needs help after the explosion at the paint factory and to whom he is trying to return during the Harlem riot. Although her suggestive name is not so simply interpreted because of Rambo, Mary is an obvious allusion to Christ's mother, a redemptive figure. Eliot uses Mary in "Ash Wednesday," his *Purgatorio*, as representative of a different role for women, helping to redeem the time. Ellison seems to do the same.

There are other clues in Eliot's work and in Ellison's that all is not completely lost. In the fertility myths, the burial of a princely figure, or a king, can help the land to become fertile again, can help society to become healthy. Tod Clifton (whose first name means death) is the most princely character in *Invisible Man*, his qualities so marked that even Ras, the Harlem enemy of the Brotherhood, cannot destroy him: "Youth! Intelligence! The mahn's a natural prince". Clifton's bolting from the Brotherhood, his being shot on the streets of New York, and his moving funeral planned and executed by the narrator alone are key episodes which prompt the action of the narrator. After Clifton's funeral, there come the rupture with the Brotherhood, the Harlem Riot—and the bursting of the water main which ultimately sends the narrator to the coal cellar to think. Salvation by water is suggested in Eliot's work; water helps to "save" the narrator in Ellison's work. Near the end of "The Waste Land" the protagonist asks, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" Shall he assume some personal responsibility? At the end of *Invisible Man*, in the Epilogue, the narrator ponders leaving his hibernation "since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play".

Source Citation

Gottschalk, Jane. "Sophisticated Jokes: The Use of American Authors in Invisible Man." *Renascence* 30.1 (Autumn 1977): 69-77. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Literature Resources from Gale*. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|H1100002917
