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# **LITERATUR**

**in Wissenschaft und Unterricht**

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# **LWU**

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Herausgegeben von

Paul G. Buchloh · Dietrich Jäger · Horst Kruse · Peter Nicolaisen

Redaktion: Walter T. Rix

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BAND XIII · 1980

## L I T E R A T U R

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The references to other works of Oscar Wilde take us on to the field of literary criticism. On p. 12 of the teacher's guide, the editor quite rightly characterizes Algernon's and Jack's conversation at the beginning of Act I as a "repartee . . . an image taken from fencing" – a remark that would have gained much in weight if the editor had referred to *A Woman of No Importance* (Act I) or *Dorian Gray* (ch. 18) where Wilde himself uses the fencing imagery for speech characterization: "You fence divinely. But your button has come off your foil." – "I have still the mask." – "It makes your eyes lovelier."

More important even, it was a habit of Wilde's to re-use his aphorisms – a characteristic to which the editor might easily have opened our students' eyes: Algernon's flippant remark that Lady Harbury's hair has turned "quite gold from grief" (15) is an echo from *Dorian Gray* (ch. 15); his witticism "All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his." (23) harks back to *A Woman of No Importance* (Act II); Gwendolen's epigram "In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (52) reflects the *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*; etc.

Most important of all, however, by not putting the comedy within the context of Wilde's complete work, the editor has made the play appear as just a light-weighted farce (cf. *Unterrichtsmodell*, 5, 33), whereas, by putting it in the perspective of Wilde's other writings – notably his literary criticism like *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist* –, he might have shown – just as Wilde had shown in Lord Goring "the philosopher that underlies the dandy" (*A Woman of No Importance*, IV) – the philosophy that underlies the farce.

Braunschweig

Horst Schroeder

Karl Wilhelm Dietz, **Ralph Ellisons Roman *Invisible Man*: Ein Beitrag zu seiner Rezeptionsgeschichte mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Figuren –, Raum- und Zeitgestaltung.** Frankfurt (Main), Bern, Las Vegas: Peter D. Lang, 1979, 328 pages, pb., SFr. 50,- (Mainzer Studien zur Amerikanistik, Vol. 12).

Since the late fifties, Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) has met with constant critical and scholarly interest. This activity reached a peak in the early seventies when special issues on Ralph Ellison were published by *Black World* and *CLA Journal* and John Reilly (*Twentieth Century Interpretations*, 1970), Joseph F. Trimmer (*Casebook*, 1973) and John Hersey (*Collection of Critical Essays*, 1974) compiled the most important articles on Ellison's controversial book.

Indeed, the novel has been controversial from the moment of its publication. On the one hand it has been hailed as an exquisite work of art. It won the National Book Award in 1953 and in 1965 was polled the most important novel since World War II. On the other hand, however, it has been under heavy attack from mostly Marxist-orientated critics and, later in the sixties and seventies, black nationalists, who branded Ralph Ellison an establishment writer, a docile Uncle Tom, renegade etc., or preferred to belittle his importance for ideological reasons.

Another point of dispute which is not yet settled is the question of whether or not Ellison's *Invisible Man* constitutes a genuine Negro novel, i.e. a "black" protest book, which can only be understood in relation to the history and painful experience of the exploited and oppressed American Negro, or whether Ellison transcends social protest and writes about "universal man", "existence as such", thereby asserting the basic unity of human experience and the existential quality of human suffering and alienation. Evidently, critics who hold the latter position tend to place the novel into specific Western (i.e. white/European) literary traditions, such as the *picaresque novel* or the *Bil-*

*dungsroman*, so that it sometimes seems expedient to remind the reader that *Invisible Man* is actually – and not accidentally – about a black man and his search for identity in a society which refuses to see him as he is. Sensitive critics argue that the book is essentially a Negro's novel, but not "merely" a Negro novel (in the restricted sense of the word), since the degraded American Negro – in reality and as a fictional character – epitomizes all that is wrong with modern man: e.g. the problem of "other-directed personalities" (Riesman) is not racial in origin, but it is evident that the position the Negro holds in American society makes it even harder for him to develop a sense of identity. In his interpretation of the "Battle Royal" scene in *Invisible Man*, Marcus Klein writes that "It is the function of this caste system to suppress a great deal more than the Negro, and it is the lesson of this episode that these Negroes incarnate for these whites everything that they suppress"<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, *Invisible Man* is neither a mere Negro novel, nor a "universal" novel, but a profoundly *American* novel. "The Negro", as Richard Wright said, "is America's metaphor".

Apart from these more general points of dispute, scholarly criticism has, up to now, primarily concentrated on the discussion and analysis of the theme and the imagery and symbolism of *Invisible Man*. As to its theme, critics focused mainly on the presentation of the problem of identity and related questions, such as whether or not the epilogue proves a final acceptance of the condition of invisibility. The interpretation of the novel as the symbolic history of the American Negro revealed new, interesting aspects. As to the imagery and symbolism, critics could not, of course, ignore Ellison's extensive use of metaphors of vision and blindness, darkness and light, and the recurring motif of running. Although this symbolism was often found to be obtrusive and contrived, the structure of the novel – with its supposedly static quality and no real progress – and Ellison's variations of style provoked even severer judgements, which, however, were not left uncontradicted. In re-

cent years, the evaluation of Ellison's use of Negro folk culture within the context of a "Western" tradition has given new impetus to the old discussion of the special qualities of the Negro novel and, more generally, of the characterization of a specific Afro-American culture.

Although not each and every publication of the immense and still growing body of Ellison scholarship is worth reading, since very often little more than simple paraphrase is offered, an Ellison scholar about to work out his own interpretation is still confronted with a bulk of valuable written work which he must survey in order to avoid repetition and to discover open questions. It is exactly this sort of extensive critical and systematic examination of the reception history of *Invisible Man* that Karl Wilhelm Dietz declares the first objective of his new study of the novel. On some 50 pages which constitute part I of his book Dietz first delineates the growth and character of Ellison studies and Ellison reviews in chronological order before he draws attention to various studies of literary affinities and of the socio-cultural context. At the end of part I, the author concentrates even more specifically on findings concerning "constituent elements of *Invisible Man* as a work of art" (13). Dietz comes to the conclusion that a lot of work remains to be done in this field because certain aspects of the novel – above all the "layers" of plot, characterization, setting and time structure – have found only superficial treatment (15). Dietz takes the probing formal analysis of these "layers" as his second objective and presents it in part II (63–214) of his voluminous study.

Dietz follows the plot meticulously and traces structural links and recurring motifs within the larger tri-part structure of the novel. He points out that its structural principle of "repetition plus variation" does not mean that the novel moves "in a series of circles" (Klein), but rather that it serves as the basis for the protagonist's development from unconscious rebellion to conscious resistance which is unfolded in the pattern of a journey. Consequently, the various artistic means by which the

protagonist is characterized are examined in the next part of Dietz' study (106–143), in which, for example, it is shown that the protagonist's handling of language, as demonstrated in his speeches, is a major clue to his changing personality: "... there is a progression in his speeches from an uncritical imitation to a skillful and even creative use of language. Language becomes a sign of his finding personal and group identity" (14 – refers to 115ff.). The other characters in the novel function as signposts in the "hero's" search for identity. After he has carefully drawn a schedule of their appearances and re-appearances, Dietz discovers "mirroring effects in the grouping of figures" (168ff.). He then proceeds to examine the functional significance of the settings in space and time and comes to the conclusion that "While the experiencing self . . . loses all sense of orientation, the narrating self regains a new sense of space in his underground existence" (14 – refers to 175ff.). Furthermore, he makes some interesting remarks on different aspects of time ("colored people's time", clock, "natural time") as they are presented in the novel and interrelated with its dominating metaphor of invisibility.

Dietz ends with a consideration of musical motifs (references to jazz, blues) in *Invisible Man* – a somewhat superfluous appendage, since this aspect has found extensive treatment elsewhere and its presentation here, at the very end of his study, seems rather arbitrary.

The merits of Dietz' book, however, are obvious: he knows his subject very well and organizes an immense amount of material in such a way that the reader can always (with the exception, perhaps, of part I) follow his line of argument. Never does he jump to conclusions and his analysis is always undertaken with great care and a sense for details. It should be noted, however, that his language often borders on scholarly jargon and that his findings sometimes appear to be unrelated to the overall interpretation of the novel and seem meagre when viewed in proportion to the energy expended in analysis.

It is not my task here to discuss the pros and cons of a more formal analysis of artistic and structural devices, of "layers" of a novel etc., and I am far from saying that an extrinsic approach is the only legitimate one. This would be absurd, even more so since Ellison himself has always emphasized the importance he attaches to form and artistic craftsmanship, in which, it is true, he excels all other Negro writers. But it remains to be asked whether a novel like *Invisible Man*, which abounds in subtle and elaborate references to the history of the American Negro and his social and psychological situation, can ever be appreciated in its full significance, if all these references are either neglected or only noted marginally.

Ellison once said that one of his aims in writing the novel was to explore the problems of black leadership. But his fictional rejection of both Bookerism and Black Nationalism does not come into focus when one tends to separate the novel from its actual historical and social background. Many key-scenes of the novel are a symbolic recapitulation of Negro history (e.g. the journey north, eviction scene) or only understandable if the socio-psychological dimension is taken into account (e.g. Trueblood, fabrication of "optic white"). Dietz knows this, but touches upon it only lightly (205).

His conception of *Invisible Man*'s "journey" has more of a literary convention than of "Negro history acted out" (Guttman). His "space" and "time" are mostly abstracted concepts – abstracted from concrete historical time and concrete geographical space. As Jacqueline Covo remarked in 1974, esthetic considerations may serve as a shield from reality. By concentrating on a book as a mere work of art and art as something autonomous, one tends to neglect its social context and in the particular case of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* much, if not the essence of the novel, is lost.

Within the frame of his approach, Dietz has done thorough and probing work, but it seems to me that the approach itself

imposes regrettable limitations on the scope and depth of the interpretation.

*Kiel*

*Christoph Bode*

- 1 Marcus Klein, "Ralph Ellisons *Invisible Man*", from *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century*, Cleveland/New York, repr. in Seymour Lee Gross/John Hardy (eds.), *Images of the Negro in American Literature*, University of Chicago Press, 1966, 249–264; here p. 257.