

A Different Kind of Rambo

Norman Bates

In all the publicity and controversy over the film “Rambo: First Blood, Part II,” an interesting comparison of fictional characters named Rambo might add to our understanding of how and why such characters are created and received. While Johnny Rambo is quickly becoming enshrined in popular and political discourse as a symbol of a vengeful “Captain America” here, a much lesser known Rambo is hidden away.

In providing a critically symbolic role in the nurturing of the nameless protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s classic novel, *Invisible Man*, Mary Rambo embodies all the opposite characteristics of Johnny Rambo: against J.R.’s violent and destructive actions, M.R. presents those gentle and life-affirming qualities that sustain rather than suppress. Although the contrast between M.R., a black female, and J.R., a white male, is not prima facie evidence of specific inherent virtues and vices, the historical and social roles of matriarchal and black survival skills versus those patriarchal and white retributive attributes help to illuminate the glaring differences between the respective character types.

Sylvester Stallone’s conjuring up of the demons of sadistic aggression through the havoc wreaked by Johnny Rambo is further testament to the long-standing symbol of the American frontiersman whose path in history and popular culture is strewn with the corpses of the dreaded “other”—from the Indian to the oriental. It is against this record of racist slaughter that the Ellison character of Mary Rambo appears as a maternal redeemer of the outcasts of color in America.

Without her efforts in the novel and throughout history, those oppositional forces in America that seek freedom and dignity would die. Ellison creates May R. as the savior of a physically debilitated and psychically lost black man.

For Stallone’s Johnny R., his erstwhile role as a savior of American POW’s is built upon the bodies of wasted enemies, specifically those vile and evil Vietnamese and Ruskies. M.R.’s-affirmative role as a symbol of sustenance and non-violent redemption is in stark contrast to the remorseless redemption of the murdering J.R. As fictional and social types, the different Ramboes suggest the contradictory symbols of America the Redeemer Nation.

On another level, the contrasts between the two Ramboes may also reveal how symbolic figures gain credibility and popularity as icons. Stallone’s manipulation of chauvinistic fantasies works through the emotionally evocative and graphically crude images which film can readily deliver.

In contrast, the reflective medium of literature requires a committed writer to develop complex but compelling characters. This doesn’t mean that film per se can’t produce complex stories and characters, or literature never relies on stock figures and situations; rather, the narrative form in both film and literature must be constructed in a way that both conforms to reality and challenges that reality.

Discounting the obvious differences in talent between Stallone and Ellison, and in the form of the different media, one can still find that integrity of creation surrounding Mary Rambo as opposed to the cynical production of Johnny Rambo. While the difference in the reception of the Rambo figures further underlines the fact that Hollywood heroes and heroines conform more often to fantasy than reality, the elevation of Johnny Rambo to a superstar cult hero points once more to the visual image of film and television as the significant vehicle for the manufacturing of a spectacle culture and politics. Public life thus becomes consumed with the images it privileges. And Johnny Rambo is obviously a more consuming passion for the American public than Mary Rambo.

The contrast between these two becomes an obvious blast at the attitudes pervasive in this land where a pathology of gender, national, and racial chauvinism can achieve such fortune and fame through the violent “heroism” of a Johnny Rambo.

Perhaps it’s time to hail the quiet heroism of survivors and sustainers like Mary Rambo before too-many others go down in a hail of bullets, only to be resurrected in the blood of “Johnny Rambo: Part III A Central American Adventure.”

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