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Destruction as a Necessity for Creation in Ellison's Invisible Man

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Acting is a practice characterized by performing a role. The best actresses and actors are the ones who conform best to the roles that they are given, creating a visual mask over their true identity. The type of mask depends on the situation in which the acting takes place. Although most commonly associated with theatre and film, acting also occurs in everyday life when people adopt social masks shaped by certain codes of conduct, moral beliefs, ideologies, and stereotypes that society has constructed. Therefore, society often sees acting rather negatively for the function it performs in maintaining social norms and values. An exception to this attitude can be found in African and African American literature, art, and culture. To author John Glenn, "the resistant nature that has historically characterized both African and African American literature can be viewed in terms of performance" or "acting out" because it is a performance characterized by improvisation and therefore essentially based on freedom of choice (Glenn xiii). In this way, acting becomes a means of gaining power over oppression by taking an art form that is traditionally based in strict role playing and turning it into a form of individual expression necessary to creating an identity.

Ralph Ellison uses this technique in his novel *Invisible Man*, structuring the work around performance and acting out. All aspects generally associated with performance can be seen in the novel, from dialogue or oration to scenery and props to music. Usually, these are seen as the tools with which actors form their illusions. In the social theatre, these tools are used in much the same way. By changing the way they speak, where they live, and what they own, individuals can also change their positions in society, even though the transformation is nothing more than artifice. However, if these traditional facets of performance are stripped of their foundation in social construction, meaning they no longer are used to create a socially acceptable mask but rather are employed to create a new identity, an environment allowing for self-expression and

thus self-creation can be generated. With this model, Ralph Ellison, in his novel *Invisible Man*, is able to examine the universal human struggle of finding one's identity while living one's life in a world built upon restrictive ideologies and stereotypes. Through his nameless narrator, Ellison reveals that the only way to liberate oneself from a certain role is by becoming "invisible"; in other words, one must annihilate the socially constructed self to allow room for the true complex self to be created.

The first facet of performance which serves as a vehicle for this process is the Invisible Man's (IM's) monologue, or as I will refer to it, his role as orator. In a traditional performance or speech, the speaker has a set script, which he or she must follow to be successful. It is surprising then that Ellison's novel "measures the self-reliance of its nameless protagonist through his growing acumen as a public speaker" (Hanlon 75). Complicating the IM's move toward selfhood by way of public speech is the fact that his speeches seem to convey messages that are still socially constructed and controlled rather than created by the narrator. In his first speech, one given at his high school graduation, which leads to the degrading Battle Royal, the narrator proclaims "that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. (Not that I believe this – how could I, remembering my grandfather? – I only believed that it worked.) It was a great success" (Ellison 17). Here it is obvious that the narrator is not giving a speech about what he actually believes in but rather for "the extent of its public approbation" (Bell 29). Similarly, throughout his time with the Brotherhood as spokesperson for the Harlem district he studies the Brotherhood's ideology closely and it is this subversively oppressive ideology that he broadcasts to the public. During one such speech, he uses another common social construction: the IM explains that "I had to fall back upon tradition and since it was a political meeting, I selected one of the political techniques that I'd heard so often at home: The old down-to-earth,

I'm sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they've-been-treating-us approach" (Ellison 342). So how then

does Ellison use oration as a step towards freedom and self-identity despite the speech content's

being socially constructed? By a collaboration of sorts.

     Although the narrator's message essentially remains the same, always influenced by his

oppressors in his current situation, the way he presents it changes from event to event and crowd

to crowd. As scholar Christopher Hanlon asserts in his article "Eloquence and Invisible Man,"

"more than strictly 'political,' his [the IM's] chosen technique is also spiritual and musical,

drawing upon a tradition of call-and-response oration that also informs the improvisational styles

of jazz composition" (Hanlon 76). Instead of traditional western techniques of oration, the IM

does his best work when he uses techniques characterized as being part of the less prescribed

African American tradition and culture. At the start of his first speech while working for the

Brotherhood, the IM describes how "The microphone was strange and unnerving. I approached

it incorrectly, my voice sounding raspy and full of air, and after a few words I halted,

embarrassed. I was getting off to a bad start, something had to be done. I leaned toward the

vague audience closest to the platform and said, 'Sorry, folks'" (Ellison 341). From this passage,

it is apparent that he is floundering until he makes contact with a member of the audience, whom

he engages in a sort of call-and-response:

> "How's that?" I said, hearing my voice boom deep and vibrant over the arena. "Is
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> that better?" There was a ripple of applause. "You see, all I needed was a
>
> chance. You've granted it, now it's up to me!" The applause grew stronger and
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> from down front a man's far-carrying voice called out, "We with you, Brother.
>
> You pitch 'em we catch 'em!" That was all I needed, I'd made a contact. (Ellison
>
> 341-2)

Essentially, the IM has said nothing important, he has not even begun to give the Brotherhood's message, but the crowd's applause grows because of his individual style of oration. Only after he begins to use his own chosen method of oration does he give a moving speech showing that "the protagonist's re-humanization is facilitated through his re-birth as an eloquent speaker" (Hanlon 77). Although the message is still a social construction and the IM has not yet realized that he must embrace invisibility before he can create his own identity, his growing acumen at oration portrays the first step in his journey because he has taken a traditional vehicle for oppression, the confining and staid western style of oration, and used it as an outlet for self-expression.

Like oration, the location or setting the narrator is in at a particular time, another important aspect of performance, portrays what stage of his journey toward self-creation he is currently experiencing. Most settings seen throughout the novel are subject "to the unifying force of a mythifying narrative…Narrative that, in establishing itself as historical authority, wields the power to exclude from its self-legitimating boundaries any thing that exceeds linguistic province" (Bell 28), meaning that the environments are controlled, much like the messages of the IM's speeches, by society and its values, beliefs, and ideologies. When the IM is at the University with Dr. Bledsoe or Mr. Norton, or with the Brotherhood and Brother Jack, both social institutions, he becomes imprisoned in an environment that is negative toward his search for identity. This is because, instead of allowing for the creation of a self, these environments place a pre-constructed self on the narrator. At the University he is told that his role is to act as white society wishes while keeping hidden any power he can gain: "'I mean it, son,' he [Dr. Bledsoe] said…'Yes, I had to act the nigger!' he said" (Ellison 143). In Harlem, the narrator's identity is determined by the sinister motives of the Brotherhood. Brother Jack's

exclamation during his first meeting with the IM precipitates the change to come: "You're not

like them. Perhaps you were, but you're not any longer…Perhaps you were, but that's all past,

dead. You might not recognize it just now, but that part of you is dead!" (Ellison 291). Tod

Clifton, one of the narrator's Brotherhood comrades, is also entrapped in a socially constructed

environment until he, "in abandoning the haven of institutional designation, plunges into what

the Invisible Man can only conceive as the blackness of ontological abyss" (Bell 28). It is not

until the end of the novel that the narrator follows Tod's example, going underground in order to

become a part of this black nothingness and thus invisible, a step which must be undertaken

before identity can be created. This is because in the act of going underground, the IM is both

literally and figuratively subverting the society that lies above. As critic Aimable Twagilimana

describes it, "though it would appear these authorities eventually force this alienation upon him,

the Invisible Man's movement underground is a demonstration of his freedom. He consciously

acknowledges his invisibility and proclaims, 'i am nobody by myself' (15), telling us his

'hibernation'—his alienation from society—'is over' (580)" (Twagilimana 101). The narrator's

movement underground, "his movement vertically downward (not into a 'sewer'…but into a coal

cellar, a source of heat, light and power and, through association with the character's motivation,

self-perception) is a process of rising to an understanding of his human conditions" (Ellison,

Shadow and Act 57). By the end of the novel, then, the IM has removed himself from yet

another facet of life controlled by society and in doing so created his own environment, an act

that foreshadows his success in his most important performance yet, creating his own identity.

Although a smaller part of the IM's performance throughout the novel, the props that

Ellison uses are often symbolic of the level of self-creation a person has reached. After

disappearing from the Brotherhood, Clifton is seen near the end of the novel selling Sambo dolls

on the street. This drastic shift in roles suggests that although he began the journey to self-identification when he broke from the Brotherhood and its subversively restrictive ideologies, thereby ignoring racist social constructions, he was unable to then create his own identity. Part of the process of self-creation lies in acknowledging one's cultural background, even one steeped in oppression, and then growing beyond it but never forgetting it. When Clifton confronts the stereotypes placed upon his own culture, he allows the stereotypes to have power over him because he cannot move past the white people's reactions to the stereotypes. Therefore, although he acknowledges his cultural background, he is unable to continue forward. This inability results in his having to again take up the racial stereotype given to him by society, one that is even worse this time because he has seen the truth lying under social norms.   Indeed, he seems to be described as the doll he is now peddling: "It was Clifton, riding easily back and forth in his knees, flexing his legs without shifting his feet, his right shoulder raised at an angle and his arm pointing stiffly at the bouncing doll as he spieled from the corner of his mouth" (Ellison 433). Clifton has become the stereotype rather than just integrating it into a newly created identity.

Upon seeing this, the IM becomes extremely upset. This is because in many ways Clifton is an outward projection of the narrator's own desires for identity and in seeing his fate the IM realizes it might eventually be his own:

> I felt betrayed. I looked at the doll and felt my throat constrict. The rage welled behind the phlegm…there was a flash of whiteness and a splatter like heavy rain striking a newspaper and I saw the doll go over backwards, wilting into a dripping rag of frilled tissue, the hateful head upturned on its outstretched neck still grinning toward the sky. (Ellison 433)

According to his past behavior, the IM does have reason to fear. Throughout the novel, he has

despised and fled from any symbol others might connect with a racist stereotype, even when it is part of his culture. When eating yams, a traditional dish in Southern and African American cultures, the IM experiences a nostalgia and freedom he has not enjoyed for a long while. However, this freedom only goes so far, as he cannot eat the yam without thinking about others' reactions to the cultural symbol: "If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be!…What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked" (Ellison 264). Later, when the IM encounters Clifton with the Sambo doll, he is angered, embarrassed, and wants to leave immediately, "I couldn't face Clifton again. I didn't want to see him" (*Invisible Man* 434). This is because the Sambo doll not only represents the stereotype of the Sambo slave, a slave who is lazy but flattering and submissive to his master, but also, as a dancing puppet, the black entertainer who makes a living dancing, singing, and laughing for the whites who control him. Based on these encounters, it seems as if the IM will continue to run from the symbols associated with his culture, a path that would eventually lead him the same fate as Clifton. Fortunately, though, we find that the IM ultimately chooses another direction. Upon entering the dark hole underground, the narrator introduces his own important props, when he burns the papers he has collected, "identifications and emblems of his former life" (Lee 339), and surrounds himself with cultural symbols every time he removes an item from his briefcase. By burning the paper, "he is symbolically burning the illusory roles of his past so that he can be reborn with a new identity," the final and ultimate goal (Lee 339), and by accepting the symbols of his own cultural identity, he is able to use them as a framework, rather than the whole, of his identity.

Often performances in the novel are accompanied by jazz music, important because of its

improvisational and creative nature. In the process of casting off all socially constructed models

of being, the IM chooses this style of music "as his replacement model, using them to cope with

the world as faced by the modern artist and other sufferers" and to "fulfill his need for a model of

the universe that will allow him to contemplate the world and escape his pain" (Barker 41). His

choice of model is significant, especially when the concept and philosophy behind jazz is

studied. With free jazz, musical thinkers are "freeing themselves of premodern imperatives of

meaning, valuation, and de-notation. In so doing, they also tend to free themselves of all critical

and commercial visibility. They find their work, instead, within the textural materiality and

color of thought [and] performance" (Bell 23). Jazz musicians think not of how society will

view them, but instead become invisible, focusing on the music itself and the performance.

Further, although jazz does have basic rules and patterns that provide the framework for the

music, jazz is more literally created through a process of improvisation and collaboration. The

basic rules of jazz can be thought of as a person's cultural background; they are needed because

without them a person's identity is incomplete. However, they are not the entirety of the musical

creation, as one's background is not the entirety of one's self. The jazz is created only after these

rules are put to use by musicians who then improvise and collaborate with one another to create

music. Thus jazz is generally seen as being created without much previous thought and straight

from silence. The concept of blackness is much like the silence from which jazz is created, in

that blackness is usually connected to the idea of a void of light whereas silence is devoid of

sound. According to scholar Kevin Bell,

> blackness recognizes within itself the density of its own nothingness, feeding on the
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> contempt in which it is held for exactly this reason - its nonrecognizing, ineluctable
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> thwarting of social narcissism and the categories of classification erected toward this

end. Blackness visible…is the freedom that results from relinquishment of the very

imagining of subjectivity altogether, along with all of the mythifying narratives of

united "positionality" that keep it propped up, such as "race." (45)

Essentially, then, the process of creating jazz music from nothingness is much like the process of

creating an identity from blackness. One must embrace the blackness, the invisibility, and

relinquish social classifications such as race and other societal myths that have been created to

oppress, before then creating a visible identity. Once the IM "no longer seeks to craft a surface,

fixed representation of himself or consents to being objectified visually" he opens the way to

self-identification (Hill 796).

Overall then, it is jazz and blues in particular, but also the many other aspects of

performance, which both portray and show the narrator's path to self-discovery. First he

becomes invisible, decentering all the social constructions that crowd his life and meanwhile

realizing that life and identity is simply too complex and ever-changing to be characterized by a

single set of moral and behavioral codes, ideologies, or norms. This realization and embrace of

the invisible state of nothingness then becomes a clean slate on which the IM has full power and

control to create his identity, his own morality, his own ideologies, and his own norms. His

experience with invisibility "demonstrates that this experience has allowed him to see the

underpinnings of society and reevaluate them, rather than simply conforming to them…[and in

the end] he either has to be seen on his own, reconfigured terms, or he will remain invisible even

when he leaves the hole" (Jarenski 105).

Although the narrator in the novel is written as an African American in the chaotic

1950's, Ellison suggests that this model, "the process of spoken self-invention [which] entails a

moment of self-annihilation" (Hanlon 94), is universally necessary in self-creation. The

existential angst the IM feels "is not limited to those who are young or male or black" (Barker 43). With his question of "Who am I?" and his experience of throwing "off one mask only to find himself entrapped within another dehumanizing stereotype or disguise," the IM "became in many respects Everyman" because these are situations all people face in their lives despite race, age, or gender (Lane 64). Although the cultural stereotypes and symbols that a person will have to embrace and use as a framework will be different from person to person, the process of self-creation from a state of nothingness remains the same. In terms of performance, the various aspects that combine to create a person's new identity will vary, but the actual process of performing will yield the same results, the creation of one's own identity. With the final line of the novel, Ellison ends with this acknowledgement that invisibility is the way out of all kinds of oppression, not only racism, the answer "not only for Blacks but also for all modern men" (Stark 63): "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison 581)

Indeed, Ellison speaks out to all people and against all those who attempt to place restrictive ideologies and roles on others. One could even say Ellison's act of creating the novel is a model for the message of self-creation he himself is advocating. Using the many aspects of improvisational performance in his novel *Invisible Man*, he examines the universal human struggle of finding one's identity while living one's life in a world built upon socially constructed ideologies and stereotypes and, through his Invisible Man, reveals that the only way to liberate oneself from a certain role is by becoming "invisible," destroying the socially constructed self to allow for the nothingness needed for the creation of the true, complex and ever-changing self.

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