

Buddhist Recognition in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Since its 1952 publication, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has been renowned as a twentieth-century American fiction masterpiece. The novel reflects the lives of African Americans during this time, and most scholars talk about race. During its publication, Ellison's former college Tuskegee Institute reported no lynching in the United States for the first time in 71 years of tabulation. Just a year before in 1951, on May 24, a mob of 3,500 Caucasians attempted to prevent an African American family from moving into a Cicero, Illinois apartment. Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson called out the Illinois National Guard to protect the family and restore order. In the same year of 1951, on May 24, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in District of Columbia restaurants as unconstitutional.

During a 1966 interview, Ellison begins to stroke the top of a sandstone Indian head of Buddha from the Jain period sitting in his study. He explains that after he saw the sculpture, dreamed about it a few times, he finally purchased it (on a monthly payment plan) from the gallery of William Wolfe on Madison avenue and 69th street in Harlem, New York. Ellison reveals that the artwork contributed to his creative process as a writer. He became interested in the philosophical and religious rituals that influence artists. He also believed the power of the writer lies in their ability to show a bit more about the complexity of humanity. Ralph Ellison thought the slightest thing overlooked which tells of the unity of the American experience beyond class, race, and religion is a disservice by a writer to the nation, especially a country that is still in the process of unifying itself. In addition to issues of race in his contemporary moment, Ellison also draws inspiration from Greek philosophy and Buddhist philosophy. The importance of Buddhist philosophy is especially significant in reading *Invisible Man* as a work of African American Buddhist Literature.

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This essay thus expands the argument of African American works is a form of prose separate from the necessary conditions that made it into a democratized style of writing. It is a style in response to an imposed social order, yet its transcendence must also lie in the “paradox” that the oppressed condition one fought “gave the writer’s life meaning” (Warren 18). German philosopher Immanuel Kant argued “proof that even our inner experience...is possible only on the assumption of outer experience” (B 275). In Kant’s *Refutation of Idealism*, he states that we must “show that we have experience, and not merely imagination of outer things” (B 275). So, what matters most is not only the uncovering of the woes of black lives through Ellison’s novel but the expansion of what steps of Buddhist practice are analogous to and emerge from the historical progression novel. *Invisible Man* may serve as a guide in showing a character’s progression through the Buddhist practice process. Discussing the eastern influence of Ellison’s novel is an additional step in expanding on progressive narrative works of Buddhist recognition.

Ralph Ellison offers vital insight into the meaning of conscientious social responsibility in American consensus. By undertaking the duty of mindful social responsibility, he follows his nineteenth-century Transcendentalist lineages—Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson. They have become significant figures in modern efforts to discourse significant democratic appeal. “Awakening” is the Emersonian name for authentic and audacious confrontation with reality. According to Jack Turner, Ellison extends the Emersonian ethic by asserting that one cannot be well awake in America without conceptualizing the ways historical white supremacy shapes one’s identity and probabilities in life. Ellison demonstrates that one cannot attain democratic individuality without awakening to race. There is an interconnected relationship between eastern and western influence in the case of marginalized groups’ expressions of want for unity, peace, art, and culture. In a 1954 *Saturday Review* essay, Ellison describes the connections he finds between Spanish folklore, music, and American vernacular in “*Cante Flamenco*” while visiting Madrid and Paris. He describes the ancient folk music of the Andalusian gypsies of southern Spain to be “mysterious” and laced with sounds of “Byzantine, Arabic, Hebraic, and Moorish”; all of which contribute to blends of “Eastern and Western modes” (*Critical Essays* 23). Fittingly, he connects these sounds to that of early jazz, blues, and slave songs. Both forms allow for thoroughgoing individual expression. Cante Flamenco embodies an “unilluminated affirmation of humanity,” and (like the slaves) gypsies were an outcast group with cultural expressions that democratically rivaled a Western cultural experience (*Critical Essays* 24). Because of the gypsies marginalized status, they have not lost “awareness of the physical source of man’s most spiritual moments” and mock despair. They express the human condition regarding “though we be dismembered daily we shall always rise up again” (*Critical Essays* 24). This idea of always evolving to be better despite disadvantages also permeates *Invisible Man* as a leitmotif.

Along with influences from Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and other transcendentalists, Ellison also draws inspiration from essays found in the 1967 André Malraux novel *Museum Without Walls*. Malraux incorporated Nietzsche’s philosophy of the “overman” (*Übermensch*), the grand, illustrious guy who would make prodigious works of art and whose resolve would allow him to achieve anything. An overman is someone

who can, with gratitude, live a life that may involve suffering and irrationality, knowing that the underlying circumstances of a lifetime will not change when an individual is in the idyllic state of an overman¹. Guy Welbon explores the influence of Buddhism on Nietzsche's philosophy. He argues that Nietzsche possibly learned Sanskrit while at "Leipzig from 1865 to 1868," where he studied under "Max Miiller's (1823-1900) first teacher, Hermann Brockhaus (1806- 1877)" (Elman 681). According to Welbon, Nietzsche was probably one of the most soundly rooted in Buddhist philosophy "as a result of his training" for his time amid Europeans (Elman 681). The collection was exhibiting diverse critical responses to cultural representation in various geographical areas. Though, Ellison read the essays in a magazine no longer printed in English before they became a part of the novel. By understanding these articles, he felt a sense of freedom from the narrow-mindedness of how he once thought culture was indeed defined. Philosophy took on a new meaning to Ellison as depicted in *Invisible Man*.

In the novel, Ellison explores the journey to self-awareness through the lens of an unreliable narrator. The unnamed narrator is speaking candidly to the reader from a dimly lit basement underneath an apartment building. He is supplying his warm lair with electricity stolen from the light company Monopolated Light and Power. Readers meet him during his meta-reflective state of explaining his self-identified invisibility. He is "neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation [but is] in a state of hibernation" (6). The narrator's psyche is disarticulated throughout the novel because he is in a state of mental conflict in response to his strange encounters. Quickly, the idea of invisibility can be applied to anyone and not only to the African American male experience. Often, other ethnic groups, women, disabled bodies, and other marginalized peoples are sometimes rendered invisible. Although Ellison's narrator resolves his cognitive dissonance in the introduction, the journey to his self-discovery is most compelling.

The narrator's organized sense of self-expressed throughout the novel causes a split in his consciousness. He often refers to his grandparents, who were freed slaves after the Civil War. They believed that they were separate but equal and that they had accomplished equality with white citizens despite segregation. The narrator's grandfather lived a humble and quiet life after slavery ended for him. On his deathbed, he spoke to the narrator's father heavy with burdens, comparing the lives of African Americans to war and combat. Although he felt like a traitor, he advised the narrator's father to destabilize white people with "yeses" and "grins" and "agree 'em to death and destruction." The bildungsroman of the story is his journey from gullibility to understanding. He is "trained in the habits of deference and humility through which blacks in America had traditionally gotten by" (Dickstein 54).

Due to his failure to recognize the nature of his mental processes, he exteriorizes whatever person or organization comes at him and captures an object outside of himself with which to identify. For instance, he claims, "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). He grasps that object, interiorizes, apprehends as a subject, all while the method and physical sensations conceive as external objects. Then a mass of concepts of want, aversion, or indifference rises toward beautiful, or neutral objectives

and matters. Throughout the episodes, his revelations are not entirely reliable, because his judgment continues to be clouded by other characters. In the end, he declares himself invisible, because some will choose not to see him for whom he believes he is on the inside. He is forced to reconcile with his life as it is, and to not allow external influences to decide who he should be.

Another critical aspect of Invisible Man's namelessness is its further indication of his lack of self-identity. An analogous example of this is that of the character Django in Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*. Dr. King Schultz began to introduce Django to townspeople with the surname "Freeman" once they began traveling together to collect bounties. According to the social-psychological theory of self-fulfilling prophecy, hearing our name (identity) validates our existence. This state which makes people much more inclined to feel positive about the person who validates them and causes them to act more like what the validating person expects. So, as a result, Django began to behave more like a free man. He started to make his own choices about the clothes he would wear. He also behaved less like a subordinate as his character's mental state evolved throughout the film. The term "freeman" also caused others to treat Django as such. The people they encountered were unconsciously affected by hearing the identity (or self-fulfilling prophecy) of his name. Since the narrator has no name, he then has no way for anyone to recognize what his prophecy will be. It becomes clear that the narrator must speak and act to be seen clearly by others. It is not who one is inside, but what they do and say that defines their character. So, the narrator "gradually assumes a mask of invisibility in order to rebel against this limitation" (13). He must shed the illusion of social order and conventional restraints to become more aware of himself. He believes he is invisible because of a physical condition; namely, his blackness. However, his skin color is an issue for those that respond to it with negativity; but, his race only contributes to his deeper sociological understanding of his navigation in the social order. The race itself does not define him, and the narrator comes to find his existence at a disadvantage only in a prejudiced culture. He is also unaware of how to be at peace within himself throughout the novel until he discovers (and accepts) a developed purpose of existence. Accepting himself would require him to stop operating under the illusion of progress. So, he comes to take his invisibility as a source of power and light rather than to view it as a debilitating factor. The narrator continues his life as a victim of his hamartia until the end of the novel.

Aristotle introduced the term hamartia in the *Poetics* in describing the tragic hero as a person of high status whose bad experiences are brought about by an error in the decision. This ethical flaw, such as Faustus's decision to sell his soul to Mephistopheles to gain more knowledge about the universe, and dark magic, is an example of the error of insight due to unawareness, and to the lack of a vital piece of information. What Faustus lacks in knowledge; he tries to make up for by turning to the dark magic found in his books. The play subverts the social order in that Faustus refers to a "sound magician" as a sort of God which overturns the common law of Christianity (1.1.64). This declaration shows the beginning of his fall from grace. The two spirits who try to influence Faustus want him to repent or go to damnation. These spirits' representation is common in medieval morality drama, in which the conflict within a main character's soul may be played out in monologues

made by personifications of good and evil. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus misses the mark of humility, and he falls short of the objective of the human state. Marlowe suggests, through his depiction of Faustus, that the path to human experience encompasses fleeting pleasure. The benefit of human knowledge is understanding that there are natural and self-imposed limits on the duration of those skills. Faustus is fooled by himself into disillusioned thinking about what master he is indeed serving. He thought he was helping himself, but he failed to see the vital piece of information to prove otherwise until the end.

Likewise, Ellison's narrator is psychologically bound to a separate subject and object and; therefore, restricted in mental captivity. For illustration, the narrator says that "I was sitting in a cold white reject chair, a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye" (231). After an injury, he has lost his memory, and he finds himself in a chair with a doctor asking him questions about his identity such as his name, his mother's name and Buckeye the Rabbit. Unfortunately, he is unable to say anything about himself; he has forgotten everything about his identity. The narrator's experience in the hospital reveals a banal awareness of lack of specific ancestral knowledge towards African Americans in public spaces. The narrator initially trusts that joy and grief depend on external objects. He searches for objects, ideas, reasons about philosophical values, but he does not investigate from where contentment and distress come. Rahula Walpola and Paul Demieville in *What the Buddha Taught* reveal that "To the seeker after Truth it is immaterial from where an idea comes" (6). The "source" and expansion of an idea is a "matter for the academic" (Walpola 6). By asking about his beginning, the doctor intended to remind him of his African origin and oppression. Because the narrator fails to examine the source of fulfillment and blues and to search for them instead in the scientific field, he is ignoring the origin and focusing on the division. The Buddha reasons with one of his pupils:

"What are the things that I have not explained? Whether the universe is eternal or not...I have not explained. Why, Malunkyaputta, have I not explained them? Because it is not useful, it is not fundamentally connected with the spiritual holy life, is not conducive to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquility, deep penetration, full realization, Nirvana...Then, what, Malunkyaputta, have I explained? I have explained *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*. Why, Malunkyaputta, have I explained them? Because it is useful, is fundamentally connected with the spiritual holy life, is conducive to aversion, detachment, cessation, tranquility, deep penetration, full realization, Nirvana." (Walpola 14)

Invisible Man does not relinquish *dukkha* (clinging-aggregates) until the end of the novel. The First Noble Truth (*Dukkha-ariyasacca*) is generally translated by most scholars as "The Noble Truth of Suffering" (Walpola 16). One may consider the narrators' *dukkha* as chains of the dualistic discernment of delusive experiences—his hamartia. However, this may be a mistake because there is no oppression or freedom in the moment of delusion. The Pali or Sanskrit word *dukkha* denotes 'suffering', 'pain', 'sorrow' or 'misery', as opposed to the word *sukha* meaning 'happiness', 'comfort' or 'ease' (Walpola 17). Though, the word *dukkha* "has a deeper philosophical meaning" (Walpola 17). It also includes "deeper ideas such as 'imperfection', 'impermanence', 'emptiness', 'insubstantiality'" (Walpola 17). The emotional conditions and the suffering

that appear like attachments occur inside of the mind. The source of this appearance of attachment is that it is the thought of the individualist nature that styles the illusion.

Nevertheless, the narrator comes to discover himself as shaped by his broad emotional influences and not by the personal identity and expectations of others. For example, at the Golden Day brothel/bar, a veteran teases Norton's attention to the narrator and the state college for African Americans. He says that Norton (a white man) understands the narrator as a mark on his record of achievement rather than as a human. He also claims that the narrator thinks of Norton not as a human but as a sort of god. He refers to the narrator as a robot disturbed with an impaired vision that makes him do Norton's will, but that this blindness is the narrator's main advantage. It becomes increasingly more difficult for the narrator to maintain a level of fulsome identification when reminders in the form of chauvinistic micro- and macro- expressions pollute his otherwise ordinary life experiences.

During the Battle Royale scene, the narrator is forced into a man dingo fight before giving his speech. Once it comes time for the narrator to speak, the white men giggle and overlook him as he quotes sections of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address of 1895. He says, "social equality," and the men insist that he explain why he said that. He claims that he made a mistake and finished his speech. The men reward him with a calfskin briefcase and advise him to value it, telling him that one day its contents will benefit his community. Inside, the narrator finds a scholarship to the state university for African Americans. In response to many of his critics about his exposition, Washington asserts that the wisest among African Americans understand that the anxiety of questions of social equality is the extremist madness and that severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing will result in progress and privileges of the law. The battle royal episode embodies the novel's theme of sightlessness (not knowing). The boys' blindfolding matches the white men's representational blindness as they watch the fight. They see the boys as inferior, as creatures. The eye coverings also represent the boys' metaphorical blindness and their inability to see through faux kindness that hides the men's racism. They force the boys to follow a racial stereotype of an African American man as a savage. Ellison's narrator has not yet learned to see behind the façades of white social order. Ellison does not limit himself to representational language and metaphorical references. In his demonstration of the narrator's mimicry speech, Ellison directly enters the ritual of African American communal examination. By placing this speech in the setting of actions of this episode, he analyzes, and questions present and past beliefs. Kantian theory suggests that people are aware of their existence as resolute in time based on the experiences that define that reality.

Time is something permanent in human awareness. Since time is continuous, then it cannot exist inside of people because it is needed to determine our very existence. Therefore, the perception of this perpetual cycle of experience and response in time is conceivable through something or someone external to us. So, the determination of existence in time is imaginable, for Ellison's narrator, through the presence of natural things he perceives separate of himself. This perception of the natural world demands the accurate representation of it to require a permanent distinction between the physical and the imagination. Hence, as time and other occurrences of nature remain stable, the existence of language may only be determined to change or stay the same based on the separation of

life between humanity and nature. Since humankind unifies with this permanent thing, the words (experiences) remain a constant representation of the time in which we exist. The idea of invisibility in this novel serve as a symbol for the state of not being seen beyond physical markers of identity. The actual narrator and the invisible man are not operating as one who is unaware of how to interpret symbolic representation. The narrator gives readers a fair warning in the prologue: "I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness" (5). His truth is the actualization of himself, and "the truth is the light" (Ellison 7). In this reflective state, the narrator finds himself to only be invisible without light, but without light, he is formless as well. For, the elements of light on form consist of (1) a figure lit by a direct source of light and (2) the dark (shadow) which is the area of the form that light cannot reach. The values of that illuminating source involve the form that receives its most direct light, but without light, the form will not show. The narrator declares, "Light confirms any reality, gives birth to my form" (8). According to Ellison, this vague and dim existence is "to be unaware of one's form" and to "live a death" (7). Light, in this instance, is analogous to the term "enlightenment," which is parallel to the term "nirvana." Ellison's narrator is a personification of the subject term "nirvana", and his narration is the process of embracing his distinctiveness and discovering self-enlightenment. Per the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology of nirvana is Sanskrit: *nis* (out) and *va-* (to blow), or literally "to blow out" the craving, unawareness, and illusion of satisfaction from the mind. This path is a part of the process involved in practicing the four noble truths often associated with the Eightfold Path ("Nirvana"). Cessation of the first noble truth, *dukkha*, is the first step towards actualizing nirvana.

Sankara Saranam, the author of *God Without Religion*, claims that eastern philosophy is concerned with universal knowledge while western philosophy aims at definite knowledge. This concept refers to the general understanding that eastern philosophy addresses the entire human existence while western philosophy (beginning with the Greeks) only focuses on specific aspects of the human condition. Scholars would argue that an example of this concept is the way Confucius' *Analects* deal with both the internal and external life of a person (holistic) while Aristotle's works emphasize how one should conduct one's self to live well among others (disconnected). Buddhism embodies a notion of gaining a holistic understanding of one's self while a western philosopher like Plato might emphasize goals one should strive for in discovering what is true and meaningful in life. An example of this occurrence is in Plato's *Ring of Gyges*.

Throughout the novel, there are several instances in which the narrator experiences moments comparable to the steps of reaching nirvana in Buddhist teachings. The narrator's psyche is dismembered throughout the novel because he is in a state of cognitive dissonance; "I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the mind, the mind. It wouldn't let me rest" (560). This sort of dissonance is known as dualism in Buddhist theory. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when a person's actions contradict their attitudes, they will experience psychological tension. Meaning that if someone acts in a way they do not find pleasing to their perception of their true nature, they will have an internal battle between whom they believe themselves to be and who showed up. Also, a person may alter their behaviors to line them up with their attitudes. The word "Mind"

(*manas*)” in Buddhist philosophy “is not spirit as opposed to matter” (Walpola 21). Mind is “a faculty or organ (*indriya*)” (Walpola 21). The mind would not let him rest because they were two separate entities battling one another for space to exist. Buddhism teaches of an absolute mind (awareness) wherein if one wishes to find enlightenment, they must have no thoughts either for or against physical and mental unity. According to Walpola, in the “*Anguttara-nikaya*, one of the five original Collections in Pali” comprising the Buddha’s addresses, there is a list of pleasures “(*sukhdni*),” such as the happiness of domestic life and the contentment of “renunciation,” the pleasure of “attachment” and the satisfaction of “detachment” (Walpola 17). Likewise, the disease of the mind is dualism, and the way to avoid dualism is to: avoid the “Aggregate of Perceptions (*Sannakkhandha*)...the perceptions that recognize objects whether physical or mental,” want for nothing nonessential such as secular values, avoid the “Aggregate of Mental Formations (*Samkharakkhandha*),” these constructions are “volitional actions”— such as “will (*chanda*), determination (*adhimokkha*), confidence (*saddha*), concentration (*samadhi*), wisdom (*pabha*), energy (*viriya*), desire (*raga*), repugnance or hate (*patigha*),” not indulge in excessive, self-destructive behaviors and thoughts, not pursue power over other people, and not dwell in inner emptiness (Walpola 22). This list aligns with the Four Noble Truths (*cattvri*).

Contrariwise to this point, self-perception theory sums up to conclude that a person will examine their behavior to decide what attitudes fit accordingly. This theory suggests that a person will not experience psychological tension from their contradicting behaviors because they hold no previous beliefs about it. When one attempts to gain peace by stopping motion (or perhaps more extremely by living as a recluse), serenity may be obtained and is ever-present within the host; Herein lies the process of attaining nirvana. However, Ellison’s narrator does none of these things throughout the novel until he accepts his self-identified invisibility. He loses his dualism of wanting to be recognized by external subjects, yet he is in psychological dissonance about his most authentic desires. The identity or self (ego) of Ellison’s narrator is a dimension of subjectivity constituted by his unconscious want to be seen by others (illuminated, understood) and his conscious desire to please external figures (perhaps the shadow of another’s influences).

So, his consciousness of self is not always aligned with his unconscious person, because he is turned continuously against his hidden self by external forces to feel accepted by society. It seems complicated for the narrator to look within and trust his intuition. Intended for illustration, in chapter sixteen, the narrator reveals:

“I dreamed I was at a circus with [my grandfather] and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. [...] I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. ‘Read it,’ my grandfather said. ‘Out loud! ‘To Whom It May Concern,’ I intoned. ‘Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.’” (105)

This occurrence reveals in the narrator’s dream as a reference to his grandfather’s views and beliefs. The dream indicates the narrator’s grandfather believed the clowns represent the apparatus of white authority. Thus, the narrator’s grandfather decides not to laugh at the attempt at beguilement of him. The letter from Bledsoe (which was supposed to be a recommendation) tells the employers to keep the narrator running in circles from the vision of progress. Ironically, because the narrator does indeed laugh, he still shows his hamartia by failing to follow his grandfather’s guidance.

The comparison of Buddhist philosophy and the process of transitions the Invisible Man undergoes may help readers to understand the process of active self-identification. Active self-identification is not in realizing the self; but, it is about recognizing the self as interconnected with everything else by practicing being mindful of the self in relation to everything and everyone else. Buddhist philosophy is a “combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates (*pancakkkhandha*)” (Walpola 20). Self-actualization is not a new concept; neither is its association with Buddhism; in fact, Buddhism heavily relies on the person’s ability to identify her/himself as a unique, interconnected and flawed individual within the philosophical construct of the theories. At this moment, readers find the point of the narrators’ dissonance within himself as he is continually attempting to feel “more loved and appreciated” by trying to “justify and affirm someone’s mistaken beliefs” instead of listening to his mind and being true to his self (ego) (Ellison 573). Dr. Charles Johnson claims in the *Shambhala Sun* magazine that:

A Buddhist is compelled to look within, and through meditation recognizes the truth of the ephemerality, the arising and falling, of all labile phenomena, whether that be our thoughts and feelings, nations, or situations. There is nothing to which we can be attached. Instead, what is required [is] an egoless listening...for attentive listening is an act of love.

It is in this act of listening to his desires that the narrator comes to love and accept himself in a world that does not readily love and accept him. Ellison’s narrator is forsaking his identity by “limiting his possibilities to others’ versions of reality” (Clifton 15). He has no experience drawn from his well of consciousness to refer to for affirmation. Instead, he seeks affirmation from The Brotherhood and sells his identity (soul) for power and wealth. Much like his acceptance of a name from Jack drawn from an envelope buried in a white woman’s bosom. Though, there are potentially damaging limitations to conclude that as an “inappropriate pun,” his “ethnic identity is his soul” (Clifton 15). The premise in this pun is set to have readers assume that relinquishing awareness for influence and money was inherently apart of his soul since he was inherently African American. The invisible man settles for an alternate reality because his ethnic identity is not his soul; otherwise, he would not have had to experience specific paths to discover that soul, because it would have been known to him already.

Ellison’s narrator does precisely the opposite of this rule and experiences dualism because of it. One phase of attaining nirvana is to not pursue outer predicaments such as the self-righteous pursuits for the power of other people. He becomes a leader and speaker for the Brotherhood, a standard set of men with their communist, organizational plans of domination. In doing so, he comes to feel:

Aware that there were two of me: the old self that slept a few hours a night and dreamed sometimes of my grandfather and Bledsoe and Brockway and Mary, the self that flew without wings and plunged from great heights; and the new public self that spoke for the Brotherhood and is becoming so much more important than the other that I seemed to run a foot race against myself. (Ellison 380)

It is difficult to recognize something said or done as familiar to something someone else may say. Identifying an adverse thought process inside as inherited from an external source makes one change the thinking about the way one associates to the world. Ellison’s

narrator is battling against his organized sense of self-expressed in his speeches. He dreams of himself as influenced by his grandfather and recognizes Bledsoe's marred influence over his identity and choices. This split in his loyalty to himself and the Brotherhood's expectations disrupts his growth by displacing his conscious experience and knowledge to a smaller level of importance. The narrator is growing to understand "the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations" (Ellison 381). His transformation is a slow process as he feels "more human" while communicating with community members from his soul, and not as a puppet for the promotion of communist views of the Brotherhood. Self-perception theory applies to this section in that moment of stepping outside of a natural shell does occur in ways that seem impossible. Examining those instances to determine what the actual feelings are motivating the situation is crucial. The Brotherhood still symbolizes an external influence teaming in his mind. The group influences his thoughts and grants him the opportunity to tap into his real public speaking potential. Unfortunately, they stifle and manipulate his skill development to their advantage. The latter example is a fundamental lesson in Buddhist teachings. The experience is: to reach inner light the traveler cannot dim the progress with the darkness of others; for, their dark intents may poison the expansion of ones' light, and the seeker will not find peace. Dissonance theory suggests that these behaviors can be altered to fit perception. There are confusion and dissonance involved in living a life for the pleasure of another because the mind mistakenly believes it is primarily undertaking its pursuits. When, in fact, the mind is in cognitive disillusion because the person is not living an authentic existence. This dual sense of self from a Buddhist perspective is a hindrance to healthy self development, but that hindrance is a catalyst to accept the natural process of re-building the self at the core of the mind.

The four noble truths of Buddhism must be experienced and not merely forced upon the narrator. These ideas discussed here can be broadly summed up to mean an absence of *dukkha* (clinging-aggregates). Such aggregates are birth, death, aging, sorrow, pain, separation from loved ones (attachment), and not receiving what is wanted. Each is all longings for living life, but the dwelling on these conditions of the mind are unsatisfactory. All forms of life change and can, therefore, never honestly remain. The expectation is still a set up for defeat and lack of fulfillment. The cessation of these cravings is the goal of nirvana. These feelings compared to the narrator's desires consist of: longing for "sense-pleasures (*kama-tanha*)" (Walpola 29), (carrying the briefcase; sexual encounters with women whose physical features were not closely associated with blackness, an archetypal PTSS symptom), craving to be or to unite with an experience and to dominate others (acceptance of the Brotherhood, and power), yearning to be separated from the world, to be nothing, or to be separated from the pain the world can cause (living as a recluse).

Another step in the process of reaching nirvana is to want nothing that does not last. However, the narrator holds on to a briefcase throughout much of the novel. In Buddhist philosophy, "consciousness does not recognize an object" (Walpola 23). The suitcase was given to him by the very group who undervalued his mimicry speech and degraded him before they allowed him to give it. He values the disposable reminder of his gullibility, humiliation, and societal burdens. This briefcase symbolizes the mark of pain youth can experience when they feel debased. There is no recognition at this stage for the narrator. It

is “percepdon” (the third Aggregate discussed above) that recognizes that the suitcase is merely an object (Walpola 23). It is despair some may carry with them for the rest of their lives, much like the narrator takes the bag around for the rest of the novel. The want for experiences of the past and material representations of the self may misguide one into making choices to ease the hurt of the past instead of moving forward into a healthier level of self-preservation. One of the narrator’s marks of lacking self-awareness is his insistence on carrying this bag (material and emotional burden) around everywhere. Although, he is not consciously aware of the symbolism the briefcase holds.

Before his first speech for the Brotherhood (327), the narrator’s mind reverts to his grandfather’s words of advice before he died. This section is essential to consider the third step in attaining nirvana, which is to not dwell in inner emptiness. Inner emptiness may be thinking deeply about self-pity, self-annihilation, or focusing in on one’s suffering. The result is a mood of unanimity with all creations once one realizes everyone else is also feeling alone in their internal struggles. The redundancy in the narrator’s actions in this example is that he unconsciously continues to form his identity through introjection (incorporating into one’s being) and not by self-actualization. He introjects the attributes of other people or organizations and transforms them into an aspect of his identity. During those days of “certainty,” the narrator thought of his grandfather who shared wise words indeed: “When you’re a young ‘un, you Saul, but let life whup [you] a bit and you [...] try to be Paul—though you still Saul’s around on the [in]side” (Ellison 380, 381). This quote refers to Saul being given the new name of Paul once he became an apostle of God. Paul had to grapple with shedding the illusion of righteousness and damnation continuously. Both Paul and Invisible Man express a lot of dissonances.

Dissonance theory can explain why behavior changes attitudes. The process of starting to do something differently causes the mind to alter itself to suit the patterns of behavior displayed. For example, if one is a procrastinator and wants to be more punctual, then they will merely perform tasks ahead of time. As a result, the attitude will evolve to appreciate the rewards of due diligence. However, self-perception theory does not account for this concept, because one cannot know how to be more productive if they have never acknowledged their idleness. Self-perception theory suggests that the person would not have the psychological turmoil associated with cognitive theory to activate behaviors that change thought patterns. Much like the narrator has been beaten down and is not conscious of his dissonance. As a form of self-preservation, he is taking on the role of others to feel as if he is accomplishing something for a higher purpose outside of himself. Unfortunately, this incorporation causes the narrator to feel significant loss once he is hurt or confused by his objects of identification. This failure results in dwelling on the decline or dreaming of the objects (his grandfather, Bledsoe, Mary) and his ego incorporates those beings’ identities into itself to self-preserve. However, these objects are not light (Mary), but are darkness (Bledsoe), which dampens his journey to nirvana.

Finally, a finishing step of reaching nirvana is to be placid with cohesion. There are a few moments of realization the narrator has at the end of the novel to support the idea of him finally accepting this cohesiveness of life and “the end was [indeed] the beginning” (Ellison 571). Ellison’s narrator comes to believe that “a man’s feelings are more rational than his mind, and it is precisely in that area that his will is pulled in several directions” (Ellison 573).

He also tried to “go in everyone’s way but [his] own” and finally “rebelled” (Ellison 573). These moments may be considered states of the narrator’s cessation. His desire for things outside of himself is ceasing to control his actions and thoughts. He also acknowledges his dualism and therefore, his “sickness” of the mind and the fact that he carries it with him while simultaneously trying to place it outside of himself onto others (Ellison 575). He does not realize that they, too, are sick and unable to see his dilemma. In the end, the narrator painfully and rapidly comes to understand himself and reach nirvana truly. The four truths only broadly sum up the basic ideas of Buddhist enlightenment. However, Ralph Ellison depicts the stages of this transformation rather cleverly throughout the novel.

Nirvana and self-actualization support the same goals—realization and individual truths. The truth is undeniably the light, and the narrator realized that “life is to be lived, not controlled; [...] humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat” (577). It is in this state of cessation that the narrator comes to learn that structures of identity form about others and the social relationships people find themselves in affects the nature of the self. Walpola reminds us that:

...persons who realized Truth are: ‘The dustless and stainless Eye of Truth (*Dhammacakkhu*) has arisen.’ ‘He has seen Truth, has attained Truth, has known Truth, has penetrated into Truth, has crossed over doubt, is without wavering.’ ‘Thus [,] with right wisdom he sees it as it is (*yatha bhutam*)’ and with reference to his own Enlightenment the Buddha said: ‘The eye was born, knowledge was born, wisdom was born, science was born, light was born.’ It is always seeing through knowledge or wisdom (*nana-dassana*), and not believing through faith. (Walpola 9)

Therefore, from a Buddhist perspective, if the craving for other’s approval diminishes, then the focus on self-actualization and mastery do not deny the status of human dealings, but instead supports the notion that autonomy is an essential prerequisite for fulfilling personal relationships. Thus, even being “hurt to the point of invisibility” still causes the narrator to “defend because in spite of all I find that I love” and urges that lives “will be lost, its meaning lost” unless people “approach it as much through love as through hate” (580). This quote expresses another fundamental aspect of reaching nirvana, which is to approach life with balance. To be not for or against the natural state of the human spirit as a formless, but embodied being on this plane of existence; This is the human condition. There is no futility in allowing light (self-awareness) to show to others, because one may also “on the lower frequencies, speak for [others]” (581). Life is a joyous and painful journey to self-discovery, but without accepting the fact of this notion the discovery can never be made; one may run away from specific experiences to avoid the pain of seeing their true nature. Nirvana and active self-identification now become united; two terms joined in suggesting that inner acceptance and the vehicle as a conduit to stop suffering is far more beneficial to the agent and the outside world than a reality constructed by the masses. Readers would do well to take some time to look at the conditions and results of the matter; namely, writers have the power to transform readers’ state of mind from suffering to peace and contentment.

Notes

¹ Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche, Life as Literature*. Harvard University Press, 1994.

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