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Reaching Reality: Realistic Portrayals of Racism

Fiction, supposedly, mirrors reality. Realism, as a genre, has many calling cards: dialect writing, everyday subjects, everyman protagonists. However, Realism falls far short of reality. The genre, in very basic terms, is dedicated to depicting a singular and objective truth. However, human experience is filled with subjectivity that literature cannot ignore—to do so lends possibility to misinterpretations, such as the history of Richard Wright's *Native Son* reveals. As a way to move away from the confines of Realism, Ralph Ellison and Percival Everett use other, more modern styles of writing to create more accurate portrayals of real life. Whereas Realism constantly falls into a trap of trying to make cohesive and static characters, the surrealist and poststructural approaches in *Invisible Man* and *Erasure*, respectively, more realistically describe the nuanced and fractured identities experienced by individuals in a postmodern world.

While there is very much a glass ceiling, it is not that case that all African-Americans live in poverty. But Bigger Thomas does. It is also true that not all African-Americans are violent. But Bigger Thomas is. Richard Wright's 1940 Realist novel, *Native Son* centers on the story of Bigger, a poor African-American that commits two murders due to the systematic abuse and oppression of society. As the book rises to a moment of tension—the court case that will determine Bigger's fate—his lawyer, Mr. Max, pleads with the judge to consider Bigger's life. For, if he “can encompass the life of this man,” if he and society can understand what drove Bigger's actions, then “every man and every woman in this nation” can realize that he is “a symbol” of the ills of society (Wright 382-383). Bigger's entire legal defense rests upon him

being a representative of 'black life.' He becomes a singular story that people can freely apply to a whole group of people, erasing the variability of identity.

Wright legitimizes this interpretation in the way he crafted *Native Son*. The first two parts are simple, descriptions of Bigger's crimes in the guise of everyday life. The third section, however, is a retelling of the entire story in a court room. The justice system here acts as a symbol for Realism. The genre aims for "an objective presentation of details and events," much like the supposed goals of the American courts (Murfin and Ray 430). This reinforces the idea that *Native Son* is uncovering the 'true' story of a boy—any boy—that lives in the African-American slums. This led to contemporary critics seeing Bigger's story not as an "isolated" incident but in fact as being "about all [African-Americans] and racial minorities in America" (Weitz 344). Once Mr. Max turns Bigger into a symbol, critics believe they have to look no further. *Native Son* was branded and Bigger Thomas became the spokesperson for the life of African-Americans not only in the novel, but also in reality. Wright is very explicit about the fact that society has let Bigger down, has failed him. And they continue to do so not only through the economic oppression that Wright so clearly abhors, but also by denying the authenticity of any other African-American narrative.

Ralph Ellison noticed this glaring flaw. He tried his hand at Realism—under the direct tutelage of Wright himself—but found it insufficient, leaving him "unable to bring his fiction to life" (Skerrett 150). In light of this, he turned to a new genre for his most renowned work; *Invisible Man* is a complex and experimental study of Surrealism. By engaging with a stylistic movement that seeks "to liberate the mind" from the structures of society, Ellison gave himself space to move beyond a descriptive symbol of African-American life and into a realm of individual complexity (Murfin and Ray 501). He is not confined to a story that meets all of the

requirements of Realism and is, instead, free to move his narrator through an array of events with direct insight into their interpretations. This narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the novel, is not “one defective cog” in the great machine of society—as Bigger Thomas is—but moves beyond that to becoming an individual with a self-defined identity (Ellison 45). He denies the society that would try to turn him into Bigger 2.0 in favor of becoming himself.

The creation of this self is the underlying plot of the novel. *Invisible Man* is filled with binaries: north and south, man and woman, capitalism and communism, black and white. Realism would often indulge in such binaries, using the evil of one to argue the goodness of the other—such as Wright does between capitalism and communism, respectively. By venturing into Surrealism, Ellison was able to amplify the extremes of both sides and reveal the falseness of such a system. For example, many promise that the northern United States is an escape from the blatant racism of the south. Ellison’s protagonist, however, finds that his geographical location does not change the fact that he is black in a society that prefers white. The purpose of these binaries, it becomes apparent, is to paint “the white world as images of the real” (Schaub 146). Within these dichotomies is the idea of true versus false, a binary that often favors the group in power as Schaub points out. By undermining the definitional opposition of true and false, and thus undermining the goal of Realism, *Invisible Man* allows for more complicated and multifaceted ideas of identity.

Yet, Ellison’s protagonist must first recognize the system in order to subvert it. The narrator spends his whole life listening to “someone [who] tried to tell [him] what” he was looking for—identity and purpose (Ellison 15). However, all those people consistently forced him into specific roles without any regard for what he wanted or felt, they instead defined him by a single aspect of himself: his race. Just as Bigger Thomas became an actual figurehead for the

'black experience,' so does the narrator of *Invisible Man*. He quite literally becomes a mouthpiece for whatever the communist Brotherhood wants him to support. He is used to fill a diversity quota, to be the 'token' black figure in their party in a way that leaves him feeling more like "a natural resource" than a human being (Ellison 303). At first, he allows it. But, as he goes through his life, he comes to understand the ways in which society has pigeonholed him. He realizes that the only way to avoid "tyrant states" is to "let man keep his many parts" (Ellison 577). To deny any aspect of him is to deny all of him; he is more than one thing. This multiplicity of identity is allowed because *Invisible Man* was not written to expose some singular and horrible truth, as novels of Realism are. It is one man telling the story of who he is, instead of letting his lawyer do it for him.

Surrealism, though, proved to have its limits. At the end of the novel, the narrator admits that he is only "a disembodied voice" (Ellison 581). Ellison, here, faces the short-comings of fiction. A fictional autobiography with no body, no human being behind it, cannot capture the entirety of the real world. It is akin to a brain in a vat, an experiment in physical versus cognitive reality. Realism focuses on the physical reality: the way people talk, the small details, the descriptions. *Invisible Man*, though, uses Surrealist methods to realistically portray the thought processes and emotional reactions of a human being. Despite his fictional status, the narrator feels real. But to be so singular in focus, to appeal to either physical or cognitive reality, denies the fact that both not only exist but interact. Percival Everett crafted *Erasure* as a way to meld the sides together and portray the effects of this. His method of choice: Poststructuralism. Just as Surrealism aims to free the subconscious from the basic structures of society, Poststructuralism is bent around the idea that the perceived connection between people and their language is "overly simplistic" (Murfin and Ray 400). Literature, an embodiment of language, is the battleground for

these connections. All literature is created on the basis of the society it came out of.

Poststructuralism is a way of challenging not only society, as Realism and Surrealism have been shown to do, but also literature. By defying both the subject and form of the novel, Poststructuralism can more effectively critique the system as a whole and discuss more fully the total of reality.

In order to do this, *Erasure* twists cognitive and physical realities together, creating and exploring the tension between the two. Thelonious ‘Monk’ Ellison, the protagonist, spends the majority of the novel trying to integrate the stereotyped identities of the middle class and African-Americans. The first is expressed in his interests and professions: he is “a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker,” a professor, and a writer (Everett 1). This kind of quick and factual list of identity markers are examples of the physical realities within the novel. Meanwhile, Monk originally sees his race as something the “society in which [he] lives” assigns to him (Everett 1). This abstract idea that Monk considers but does not surround himself with, does not present as fact, becomes the basis of his cognitive reality. However, after he creates a fake persona (Stagg R. Leigh) to stand-in as the author of a best-seller he hates, Thelonious is forced not only to be told his race, but to perform it as well. This makes him confront his cognitive ideas about racism with the physical and descriptive reality of it. Both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* in some way dealt with the need of white audiences to feel like they are receiving an ‘authentic’ and ‘true to life’ portrayal of the ‘black experience.’ *Native Son* met that need while *Invisible Man* purposefully denied it. *Erasure*, though, is a full confrontation of it. Monk must face that fact that the idea of ‘authenticity’ leads to “the contemporary tendency to treat writers and their work as artifacts to be valued in relation to their origins” (Sánchez-Arce 117). The audience wants to believe that fictional texts reflect something about the author. Such as

Stagg Leigh mirroring parts of Van Go. By mimicking this experience within his fiction, Everett creates a full reality that faces the multiplicity of truth.

This factor, the underlying idea that truth is a subjective experience, is a culmination of Realism and Surrealism in the Poststructural form. By breaking down the expectation that the language and experience of a novel are directly related to the author within the novel itself, Everett has created a plot based around the idea of challenging expectations. Generally novels written with realistic styles can be lifted as examples of true experience, but Everett disputes that from the beginning. By the time the novel closes, in a chilling and Surrealist dream sequence, Monk becomes Stagg Leigh and tells himself that “now [he is] free of illusion” (Everett 264). He is forced to accept that he cannot separate himself from the image of ‘blackness’ he portrayed. His identity is multifaceted. Whether he meets the expectations of ‘blackness’ or not, those expectations are there. Those are the expectations that Bigger Thomas and the Invisible Man had to live under. Both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, as American literature, have been structured and are used to reinforce the ideas of American society. The best way to draw attention to this is by deconstructing the assigned meanings of those ideas—this is the advantage of Poststructuralism. Everett does not simply describe society, he does not simply deny it. He openly addresses it and challenges all of the things that it is built upon.

Reality is not a static thing. Nor is it singular. Yet it is a constant goal of fiction to seem realistic in some way or another. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* uses Realism effectively to that end. However, just because something is realistic does not mean it broaches any truth of reality. Wright puts all the blame of racism on the structure of society without looking to those people that function and benefit within it. Ralph Ellison amends this mistake in *Invisible Man* by creating someone outside (and, in some ways, even above) the system. There is a full critique of

the racism that occurs between individuals and systematically. But these realistic responses to and images of racism, while more complete, do not define its reality either. It is not until Percival Everett created *Erasure* that the issue is discussed beyond a singular surface or perspective. Thelonious 'Monk' is integrated in society. He is not convicted or isolated, he must face the world he lives in. He is both a victim and perpetrator of racist ideas. It is only by acknowledging that both can exist and interact within one person that all the nuances of racism can be described in full.

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