

# Internal and external violence in short fiction



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Specific time periods, such as World War II, and the Post-Civil War era bring to mind

images of hate, death, and violence. Not solely external violence or violence that is

carried out, such as murders, war, or blatant displays of violence such as those in Ellison's

Battle Royal, but internal violence as well. Internal violence is more about the mind, a

violence of emotion, though internal violence is closely linked to external violence. They

are linked not only because external violence causes internal violence, but also because of

the reverse. This is seen in the works of Ellison, Borowski, O'Connor, and DeLillo.

In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor shows the effects of internal

violence compared to external violence. On one hand you have the family members that

are brought off to be killed. The only thing the author lets the reader know about their

fate is a solitary scream when the mother, daughter, and baby are taken away. However,

for the entire time that the family is being held hostage, the grandmother is talking to The

Misfit. She shows how people react to the internal violence of a stressful, and fatal ordeal.

She pleads with The Misfit not to save her grandchildren's lives, not her son and

daughter-in-law's lives, but only her own. She has no fear for anyone but herself and is

consumed by the need to preserve her life. She tries everything she can to get The Misfit

to spare her. She tries to convince him that he is of good blood, and could never kill a

lady such as her self. She even tries to get him to turn to God for help. Of course none of

this works but it makes a point. It makes the point that when faced with the fear of

external violence, people will do anything to get out of it, and it puts a large strain on the

victims emotions. The mere threat itself is internal violence because of this.

Ralph Ellison's " Battle Royal" depicts external violence in a very forward manner.

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Ellison describes an evening in which ten black men are first forced to fight blindfolded,

and then made to crawl on an electrified carpet to get their cash prize. “

Everyone fought

hysterically.” Ellison writes, “ It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else.

No group fought together long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each

other, were themselves attacked (Charters 453).” Directly after the fight the combatants

are forced to crawl over an electrified carpet to collect money. The men are forced to

degrade themselves by crawling around trying to grab money, the whole time being

electrocuted, to the amusement of the audience, there for a night of entertainment. These

events were not only an example of external violence, but internal as well.

The external

violence was also in a sense internal because the whole point of it was to degrade and

embarrass the participants. The room full of white men where there simply to watch the

black men entertain them, fight for them, and suffer for them. The laughter of the crowd

was equally as violent as the fight. Instead of punches being thrown, words and emotions

were. The reader is given a good sense of how the narrator is being mentally beaten, as

well as physically, once he starts to give his speech, which was the reason he was at the

event in the first place. As soon as the speech began, the crowd yelled for the narrator to

speak up, so he was forced to practically yell the entire speech (even though most of the

crowd was not listening), directly after being in a grueling fight. “ I spoke even louder in

spite of the pain. But still they talked and still they laughed, as though deaf with cotton in

In “ This Way for the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen,” Tadeusz Borowski describes

internal violence with great ability. There is very little external, or physical violence

shown in the story, but there is a great display of mental violence shown, which is

characteristic of the topic. World War II had a lot to do with internal violence. Granted

there was plenty of external violence, even to a nightmarish extent, but the worst damage

was done to those who lived through the entire ordeal. The story shows how the

prisoners themselves were degraded to a point where they no longer felt sorry for

themselves. Instead they felt anger towards those in their same situation, and those in a

position much worse than their own, though it is not their fault. The external, and internal

violence they had to deal with ruined them internally and made them cynical and angry.

Borowski writes: “‘ Listen, Henri, are we good people?’ ‘ That’s stupid. Why do you

ask?’ ‘ You see, my friend, you see, I don’t know why, but I am furious, simply furious

with these people — furious because I must be here because of them. I feel no pity. I am

not sorry they’re going to the gas chamber. Damn them all! I could throw myself at them,

beat them with my fists...” Henri responds that the easiest way to relieve hate is to turn

that hate against someone weaker (Charters 186). This is part of how internal violence

works. Henri and Tadeusz have been in the camp for a while, and have been themselves

abused the whole time. Now they are on the loading ramps, being worked to exhaustion

and they have nowhere to vent their anger than at those being sent to their deaths. They

themselves are limited to internal violence. The external violence is left to the Nazis, who

use it not for its own power, but because the endless external violence acts as internal

violence, which is stronger in many ways the external violence. You can only whip a man

so long before he stops feeling the pain, but if you attack his emotions, if you wear him

down, he will be in your power, because there is nothing he can do. The prisoners can not

fight back, so all they can do is take out their aggression on the few people who are yet

Don DeLillo's " Videotape," deals with violence differently. The focus of the story

is not the violence it self, but the effect that it has on people. In recent times, people have

become desensitized to violence, because we see it all the time. In the news, movies and

in video games. The little girl who videotapes the murder in the story is different

however, because she hasn't been conditioned to the violence yet. When she sees the man

in the car get shot, she physically jumps at the sight, yet the man watching on the news is

excitedly calling in his wife to see the murder on television. The viewing of violence can

lead to a different type of internal violence. A violence inside the viewers head brought on

by the sight of something so terrible that it even phases a grown man, this day in age.

“ The horror freezes your soul but this doesn’t mean you want them to stop (Charters

432),” DeLillo writes. The repetitive viewing of violence today causes people to stop

caring about the violence in the world and it changes them, it makes them want to see it.

Its almost addicting to see someone get shot while driving along on the highway. This is

something that can happen to anyone, and that what makes is so emotionally violent. It

forces the reader to rethink how they live their lives, and it makes them think that

something like that could happen to them. They could be walking down the street and

they next thing they know, they are dead. Only real life, external violence can bring out

this feeling of helplessness, and this is what internal violence is about. Its about fear, and

helplessness because you realize that you too can die, and there is nothing you can do

Every day you can watch the news and see examples of violence. Its all over, and

everyone has seen it. It seems that at least every few months there is another high school

shooting where a teen rages against the society they live in the only way they know how,

through violence, both internal and external. Internal because of the way they change the

lives of those who live through the ordeal, and have the rest of their lives to think about

how they saw their best friend get shot in school one day. External violence is directly

related to internal violence because extreme violence, in person, scares people.

Charters, Ann, Comp. *The Story And It's Writer*. Bedford/St. Martins: Boston and New

Bibliography: