

Ralph ellison was an african american

[History](#), [African American](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Ralph Ellison was an African American writer and literary critic who was most recognized for the book "Invisible Man" in 1952, which is written in an adaptation of the Afro-American folk and cultural tradition. In her paper "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison" Susan Blake posited that "the predominant theme in this story is the quest for cultural identity[...] as unbeknownst to the main character, he seeks identity as a black man in a white society" (p. 121). This is evident as *Battle Royal* opens with a seemingly young and confused black boy on the cusp of manhood, who desperately wants to belong but is unsure of how to establish himself in a world where life is stacked against him. This is an issue which can be identified in today's society particularly among the black youth.

For the purpose of this essay we shall analyse the events in "Battle Royal" in an effort to identify parallels which exist between present day society and that of the protagonist's society in "Battle Royal". The chapter is an account of inequality and racial injustices in a small town down south in the post-colonial era, where segregation was alive. It begins with the protagonist narrating a childhood memory of his grandfather's death and his final words in passing. The grandfather had admonished the protagonist's parents to teach him and the other young ones to be a traitor as he, the grandfather had been, so he can get ahead in a white society. These were appalling words to the family and the children, including the narrator had been rushed from the room.

The boy grew, always thinking the grandfather had imparted a curse and spent his life trying to escape the clutches of the curse, for who would want to be known as a traitorous coward? The parallels which exist between our

society and that of the story are embedded in the symbolism that Ellison employed as a tool in his treatment of the issues of the black society in the 1950s. The story is rife with symbolism for issues which may easily be identified in modern day society. First we see the dying grandfather and his last words, symbolic of the hopes and dreams of ancestors passed on to the next generation. He has little else left to leave behind as a legacy, all he has is his wisdom.

We see a confused black boy, symbolic of much of the black society, wandering aimlessly as they haven't a true sense of who they were before slavery and they struggle to figure out how to begin to carve out a place in this world. The gathering at the Battle Royal, comprising of the most influential and affluent whites in the society represents the hierarchy that governs the system we live under. It also represents black perception of opportunities for a seat at the table or at the very least, crumbs from the table; a chance to win the approval of whites for social and economic advancement. Such opportunities are often used as a lure, they keep blacks hopeful, paint a picture of all we could accomplish but beneath the surface can be the trap that leads to destruction.

The white stripper represents the fantasies of blacks, something that is often not attainable; something that would often serve as a source of embarrassment to us if they were to be known, yet they make us vulnerable. The animosity the nine boys have towards the main character symbolizes the helplessness and frustration of the black community (Blake, p. 122). The protagonist represents to the boys, a constant reminder of the scourge of

their lowly estate as slaves, the physical and sexual exploitation that had to have occurred to make his existence possible, for he was a ginger coloured boy, indicative of lighter complexion which is testament to a black ancestor being raped by a white master. He was tainted by this for it made him appear to be a house nigger as opposed to darker hued boys who would have been regarded as field niggers.

This mentality is prolonged in present day society as colorism is an issue among blacks, who feel that the lighter skinned blacks have better odds as they may have lighter skin tones and finer hair textures that may afford them more opportunities than darkies. This frustration feeds into the symbol of the blindfolded fight serving as blacks being played against each other. We lash out, not knowing why we are fighting against each other, not recognizing that the differences in each other that we pick at make no difference to whites, who still see us all as blacks. We are conditioned to adopt the philosophy of every man for himself. In essence we forsake the principle of community and abandon team work. It sets us up for the money rug, which is symbolic of the whites dangling the proverbial carrot, a part of a sordid game that further divides us and allows them the upper hand. It relegates us to a position of grovelling, total degradation. It represents the economic struggles of blacks, who must bear unspeakable humiliation and undergo excruciating pain and sacrifice to make a dollar. Finally, the note in the main character's dream symbolizes the ever shifting goal post; the reality that the rules of the game will always keep changing.

Ellison uses the Battle Royal as a ritual rooted in slavery in which both sides accept their status and assumes their role (" Art" p. 175) Other writers used some variation of the Battle royal in their stories as it appears to have been a fixture of slavery in which slave owners pitted their strongest slaves against their neighbor's with the plantation as the ultimate stake. In order to understand the underbelly of the basis of the symbolism in the grandfather's statement on his death bed, one must know the differences between the Sambo and John characters in African American folklore. Sambo represents the docile, subservient slave who accepts degradation while John represents the unbroken defiant slave who continually defies master.

The parting words of the protagonist's grandfather serve as nuggets of wisdom for though youth and pride would have many aspiring to be a John, for longevity sake it would serve him better to be a Sambo or Samfie; for though this appears to be Sambo's nature, it is his greatest source of power. We see the protagonist rejecting the Sambo nature out of pride. This is still the attitude of many blacks today, for they cannot see how playing Sambo will benefit them and think it further extends the white man's narrative, that they can be no more than grovelling idiots who suck up and worship the ground that whites walk on. They refuse to accept the grandfather's philosophy that it can be harnessed and used as a tool that can pacify the whites to some degree and help blacks to eke out a living for themselves.

By virtue of the staunch opposition to the Sambo stereotype, some blacks are regarded as traitors because they choose the path of least resistance to survive a prejudicial society. Those who would try to walk the path of Sambo

are called coons, Massa's boy as a label that shows disdain for their decision to travel the path of least resistance; an indictment that they have somehow sold out the black race or relinquished their black card. This may result in alienation, as both whites and blacks reject such a one. By the end of the chapter the grandfather's words take on new meaning for he only wished to let the next generation know that to get ahead blacks must outsmart the white man by playing the white man's game of black subservience, but know at all times that you won't win on their terms. Take footsteps of Sambo, for Sambo can fly under the radar but John will draw heat from Massa and they will always seek to break John. The takeaway then, is that we should continue to go to the schools, take the scholarships, seek to accomplish by the white man's standards but know that for him this is entertainment and so the game of "send the fool a little further" will always be part of the black man's reality.