

Illuminating the darkness

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



“ Now this is the Law of the Jungle—as old and as true as the sky/And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die.”~Rudyard Kipling, “ The Law of the Jungle” [i]In his novel “ The Invisible Man” Ralph Ellison presents, from a 1950s perspective, the struggle of becoming a black man in the United States. Ultimately, Ellison is seeking to convey the effort of forging an identity in a society that scorns one because of how they identify him. While the resultant invisibility is a powerful message, equally as powerful is the journey by which the narrator matures into adulthood. In the first chapter of the novel, “ The Battle Royal,” Ellison shrewdly reverses the conventional view of the “ heart of darkness” as characteristic of Africa to symbolize the brutality of the American South. By selecting specific words, Ellison equates the African- American rite of passage into manhood with the vicious rape of innocence by animalistic white men in their self-created jungle arena. Ellison injects the theme of the rite of passage from the beginning of Chapter 1, “ The Battle Royal,” when the narrator discusses his graduation day. This is effective because high school graduation, particularly in the 1950s and particularly for men, is a symbolic rite of passage. It is also functional because it offers a public scene in which the men of town must act in a certain manner. The narrator delivers a speech proposing that humility is the secret to success. It is for this type of attitude, which is the persona this boy presents in public, that the “ most lily-white men of the town” (1526) praise him. Ellison cunningly juxtaposes this public rite of passage with a private one when the narrator is invited to give his speech again at a “ gathering of the town’s leading white citizens” (1526). This repetition is clever because it forces the reader to notice the

parallels of the events; for example, once again the boy delivers his speech and the white men gather. These similarities prime the scenes for comparison, which forces one to notice the sharp contrast of what is important and how people act in the private setting versus the public setting. The private scene is also important because unlike the public high school graduation where the diploma, an abstract and conventional proof of adulthood, proves the boy has become a man, it tests concrete and taboo tenets of manhood. Unlike the public sphere, where men act as they should and a paper verifies that one is a man, the private sphere is comprised of men without inhibitions that seek hard proof of masculinity. Of note are the three major tests to which the white men subject the black boys. The first is a naked woman. The narrator responds to her in a manner that shows he is naive to the sight of unclothed women but, also, that he is aroused by her: "I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear...Yet I was strongly attracted and looked in spite of myself"(1527). Like African Americans, the white woman has historically been oppressed by white, Southern men. Also like African Americans, by the 1950s white women had gained some abstract, public respect that was debatable in the private and practical sphere. The second test to which the boys are subjected is physical violence, during which they must all turn against one another to survive. Finally, they are forced to humiliate themselves in the interest of obtaining money from an electrified mat. Each of these experiences tests animal instincts that are supposed to be controlled on the public arena: the first test- sexuality, the second and third tests- survival of the fittest. While this story confronts the passage from childhood into manhood, Ellison is speaking of a strictly African- American

experience. He does not offer the reader any reason to think that any of these white men ever underwent these trials, nor does he offer any hope that these boys will be accepted among the white men as equals. In fact, it is apparent that these boys are undergoing a unique entrance into adulthood, in that they are truly learning their role as second class to the white men. Ellison uses the atmosphere of the tests as a furthering force to convey the absolute brutality of the situation. In his Epilogue the speaker makes reference to “ that ‘ heart of darkness’ across the Mason Dixon line”(1539), and it is precisely in this jungle-esq manner that Ellison paints this scene. He describes people as animals or attributes animal characteristics to them: the woman has eye make-up that reminds the main character of “ a baboon’s butt”(1527); a man is clumsy like an “ intoxicated panda”(1528); another man yells like a “ bass-voiced parrot”(1532); a boy is compared with a “ circus seal”(1532); the men “ gave chase”(1528) in a wild frenzy while attempting to ravage the blonde woman. The ballroom is depicted as “ a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths”(1528). This ominous environment is a lion-less jungle that dissolves into “ complete anarchy”(1529). These civilized, white men have created an environment in which the black boys become not only their prey, but also the prey of one another. They each “ fought hysterically”(1529) with “ hate...and feverish terror”(1530). In time with the frantic music the animal instincts intensify: “ the harder we fought the more threatening the men became”(1530). Finally, the heart of darkness/ jungle atmosphere is completed by continuous reference to lack of sight due to darkness and smoke. Upon entering the room the narrator notices immediately that it is “ foggy with cigar

smoke”(1527). The boys are then blindfolded and the narrator tells us he “experienced a fit of blind terror”(1528). Unlike the white men, he was “unused to darkness”(1528). The main character must continue to fight his way through the “smoky- blue atmosphere”(1529). This darkness serves to separate the pack of wolves that are the boys and forces them to employ the law of the jungle, which is an unrestrained and ruthless competition, with everyone out solely for his own advantage. This is an excellent way of portraying an African- American boy’s entry into adulthood because the image of him entering a jungle transmits the message that life will remain a brutal battle. By setting up a comparison between the private and public sectors of society, Ellison is able to show the danger of the nature of man; it is no accident that the boys are “blindfolded with broad bands of [white] cloth”(1528). While on the surface the white man may respect the black man, the real danger lies within society’s heart, which is quite possibly a dark place. If the South truly is a jungle, it is a jungle of the worst sorts; it has no lion to keep order and survival may depend on brotherhood. Kipling offers sound advice in the second stanza of his poem “The Law of the Jungle”: “As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk the Law runneth forward and back/ For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.” Perhaps, Ellison is offering the same advice: for these men to survive the jungle they can no longer allow themselves to be divided against each other- their strength lies in their pack.[i] This poem is available online at: <http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/K/KiplingRudyard/verse/p3/lawjungle.html> I thought it was

appropriate because it outlines the rules of the jungle, which is what I am arguing Ellison creates to better explain the black male's rite of passage.