

# White society v. black society in ralph ellison's "battle royal"

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



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Ralph Ellison's " Battle Royal," a narrative extracted from the novel Invisible Man, portrays the story of a young African American man who has been chosen to receive a scholarship and give a speech at a gathering of the town's white male citizens. The gathering turns out to be a cruel battle between the blacks who are invited, all for the white men's entertainment. The story itself, however, is an allegory that represents white society versus black society, and how they both support racism.

Throughout, the power that white men held over black men is extremely prominent. In the beginning, the powerful white males stand outside of the boxing ring, representing the powerful white society. The black men inside of the ring represent black society. The men who represent white society hold power over those who represent black society. The men in the ring are taunted and teased. At one point, the white males call out for a nude white woman to approach the blacks. They are forced to watch her, and to want her, but they can never have her. The woman is described to have a " small American flag tattooed upon her belly", which supports the idea that she represents the American dream (1213). The American dream could not be achieved by blacks, and the whites were guiding that idea. Also, the white woman represents the notion that everyone should be attracted to the white race, even those of color. Black men were supposed to idealize white women, instead of black women.

Another way the white men secured power over the black men is through money. The whole reason for the fighting is a promise that the winner will be rewarded with money. At the end of the fighting, when the winner is

announced, the black men are called to an area of the floor where coins had been scattered. The black men jump on the chance of getting money, but the floor is electrocuted. As the black men jump around trying to collect money, the white men are laughing, entertained by the pain they are putting the blacks through. The narrator describes the ordeal; "'Get the money,' the M. C. called. 'That's good hard American cash!' And we snatched and grabbed, snatched and grabbed" (1218). The white men make themselves feel superior by making the black men fight for money. White society, as symbolized in the white men, treat people of color as if they are inferior, supporting racism against blacks.

Along with the white men taking power over the black men, in the story, the blacks try to take power over each other. The narrator, who is deemed the invisible man, sees himself as better than all of the other blacks around him. He feels superior to them, and he even says it so; "But the other fellows didn't care too much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together into the servant's elevator" (1212). Because the narrator is well-educated, he thinks he is better than the other blacks. He thinks he is good enough to be like the white men. He, in his own way, is racist. Black society, represented through the other black men, seems to resent intellectual blacks. And intellectual blacks, represented through the narrator, seems to resent the rest of black society. During the fighting, the black men split off into groups to take down each other, but they always end up fighting on their own, because in the end there could only be one winner. The

narrator describes the grouping; " It seemed as though all nine of the boys had turned upon me at once" (1215). The resentment each different type of black has for the other supports racism within the black community. The narrator only cares for himself, not for the other people in the black community. He is interested in furthering himself to the point where he will not be looked at in the same light of those he is a part of. The narrator is searching for approval from the white people, ultimately pinning him against every black person around him. The narrator says that " only these men," referring to the whites, " could judge truly my ability" (1216). The narrator believes that only the white men can see his potential and that only the white men are the ones he should be trying to impress. This factor alone separates blacks from each other and tears the community apart. The story portrays not only a white versus black idea, but also an idea of black versus black.

In " Battle Royal," the story of blacks being forced to fight one another in front of white men represents a larger idea of the members of black society being ruled by white society and being pinned against each other. The white society supports racism by acting superior to those who are not white. They treat blacks like animals who are there to entertain. Within the black society, racism lives too. The blacks look down on one another, and the narrator seeks approval of only the whites. He sees the black community, the community he is a part of, as something he should be ashamed of, something he should be trying to climb out of. This story shows how racism is present in both white society and black society, and how black people

support racism by giving in to it and by giving into the white people that want to control them.