

Oppression in the perceived form of success english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Identity Crisis
Oppression in the perceived form of success can be a deadly weapon. Martin Luther King Jr. said, " Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity (brainyquote.com)." His statement mirrors the lesson a young boy acquires as he tries to fight racial suppression in Ralph Ellison's " Battle Royal." Racism and white supremacy have been like a widespread rampant disease that has plagued all of America since its beginning. Eventually, out of the enduring injustice of racial intolerance in this country came the rise of civil rights leaders with the common goal of freedom from the oppressor. How they enacted their plans to achieve this freedom differed. Leaders such as Martin Luther King jr. and Booker T. Washington took the non-violent and submissive approach while leaders like Malcolm X chose otherwise. In " Battle Royal", the protagonist struggles to choose which side of the fight to support. One could infer that the boy is more than just a narrator, he also acts as Ralph Ellison himself. He is unexpectedly asked to participate in a violent fight before giving his well-received valedictory speech to the town's prestigious white members. This fight against his own kind is a means to break him and the other boys. They are humiliated in front of the leaders community in hope of receiving rewards in the end. Following giving his speech in a severely distressed and battered condition due to his beating, the boy receives a scholarship to a state all Negro college. This " gift" granted to him by these prestigious white men seemed to be the best news the boy had ever received. His excitement soon faded as the dying words of his grandfather haunted him in a dream. All of his young life, this boy had followed the submissive policy of Booker T. Washington with the ghost of his antagonistic grandfather haunting his mind.

He tried to abide by the law, never quite grasping these words. Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open (Ellison 185). This dying revelation tried to convey the message that his people must strive for knowledge because that knowledge will lead them out of ignorance into the territory of success.

Powerful white men for African Americans to achieve because knowledge in the hands of an oppressed people can be a dangerous asset did not desire this success. Despite his confusion about his grandfather's message, the boy aspires to be like Booker T. Washington. His aspiration stems from reverence but from his belief that Washington is an exception to white society's code of absolute black inferiority. Even though the young boy is amazingly for his age, he is trapped in a time where society suppresses his innate ability to self-expression. The impact on him is so great that he resorts to embodying his idol Washington will liberate him and them from complete suppression.

Early in the story, Ellison reveals that his main characteristics are his unstable mental and emotional states. The young boy declares himself an invisible man. In the moments where the protagonist's subconscious and his true desire for social equality and retaliation take over, he is punished. His punishments suggests to him that social equality is not possible for him.

Because of this, he will be forced to find an alternative way to escape the constant mental, spiritual, and emotional constraints of white society. The

Booker T. Washington status supposedly represented approval from white people, and freedom from suppression. The protagonist's intelligence leads him to distance himself from his black brothers because he believes he is like Washington a small scale and therefore should be treated better than his black classmates. This sort of self-hatred is disgusting in many ways. He is referred to as the "ginger-colored (189)," which indicates his skin is lighter than his black classmates. Historically, light skin African Americans held a higher status than their dark skin counterparts did. With that racial distinction artificially implemented and encouraged by white supremacy, it is understandable that this young man believes he is better than his black classmates are. The theme of this story is racism as an obstacle to individual identity. As described before, the protagonist struggles to arrive at a conception of his own identity; he finds his efforts complicated by the fact that he is a black man living in a racist American society. He struggles to find himself in the midst of conflicting values and standards. Even with the assistance of his grandfather's dying wishes, the young boy is unable to see the problem at hand. His age and inexperience cripple his ability to realize the he is seen as nothing more than a manipulated pawn in the grand scheme. One could argue that a major idea of "Battle Royal" is the limitations of ideology. The idea that he must live up to the standards of Booker T. Washington is the dominant driving force in the way this young man conducts himself. He naively lives by a white-approved doctrine in order to escape oppression and to elevate himself as an individual." Battle Royal" gives the readers a small insight on the way in which many black individuals were oppressed. This young man was viewed as a threat to the white way of

life. He is intelligent and has all the potential to become an inspirational leader for his country. However, this potential is frightening to the white leaders because they do not want him to think for himself. They do not want him to realize that his way of life is not a dignified lifestyle for anyone to live. They do not want knowledge to open his eyes and see the broader picture that his adolescent mind cannot allow him to see now. These white leaders are smart enough to understand that a bright boy like him has the potential of figuring them out and becoming a revolutionary. In order to keep him concealed they give him the gift of the scholarship. That scholarship itself was another form of oppression because it is intended to subdue the young boy's curiosity that would lead him to the horrible truth. What these men fail to realize is that the boy's grandfather had previously exposed the truth of their intentions on his deathbed and his words continually play in the boy's mind. They are unaware of the great advantage this young boy has over them because the constant reel of his grandfather's words affect all of his decisions. Ellison, Ralph " Battle Royale" Literature and Its Writers: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Ed. Ann Charters, and Samuel Barclay Charters. Boston: Bedford, 1997. 185-196. Print.