

Behind the 'battle royal'

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A visage of violence, uprising, gullibility, and realization – Ralph Ellison's short story "Battle Royal" depicts a different story that embroils the philosophical depths behind concepts of racism and suffering. It is about pleasing people that results to losing your own identity. It is a foreshadowing historical tragedy as the narrator attempts to transport his readers from idealism to realism and finally relating to the true meaning one's social identity.

In the beginning of the story, a nameless, first-person narrator instinctively intimates that for the first twenty years of his life, he has looked at others to answer questions of self-definition. Identity issues could instantly be implicated as he discovers that it is only him who can figure out who he really is. In order to do this, the narrator must first "discover that [he] is an invisible man!" As the story unfurls, it transfixes a scene in which he muses that it's not only him who's "blind" but also, those who abuse the narrator by belittling him as mere stereotype and erasing his individuality and human dimension.

The primary objective of the narrator in the story is just to deliver a good speech. Uneasy about it, he was really worried. While blindfolded and being beaten in the "Battle Royal", he is still going over his speech inside his head. Symbolically, he's blind to the attackers that he must fend off. This is a stark depiction of the narrator's utter blindness to racism happening around him and the all the dehumanizing acts that he is forced to participate in. Then, the narrator is softly remembering his grandfather's death. The narrator overhears him imparting some words to his father.

Those words haunted the narrator's psyche for years to come. On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather gives him a rather disturbing advice.

The old man said: Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, agree them to death and destruction, let them swallow you till they vomit or bust wide open. Learn it to the young ones.

Using personification, Ellison represents the lion as the white man, who will roar throughout the duration of the story. The men roared as the narrator will struggle for the coins on the electric rug. When he tries to pull a white man onto the rug, the man raise up roaring with laughter and kicks him in the chest. During the narrator's speech, the men yell for him to repeat the polysyllabic "socialresponsibility" and the room fills with the uproar of laughter. Clearly, the narrator's question of identity could be traced back to the weary lives of his grandparents who were born as African slaves and freed years before.

Rhetorically, this freedom bestowed unto them and made them part of a "United" States. But in the closer analysis, in the social circles during their time and as what the narrator experienced, African-Americans are still separated from whites; it is somewhat like the separate "fingers on the hand". Ellison descriptively used animals to symbolically represent people because in the course of history white men traditionally treated the black people as animals. In the first place, they were slaves. Also, when white men see naked white women as sexual objects, ironically the white men transform themselves to animals.

One instance in the story depicted a man who watches the woman dance and holds his arms up like an intoxicated "panda". Although the symbolism of the animal imagery is not very obvious, how Ellison showcased these symbols reinforced his themes. It adds up to the life and vitality of mental pictures demonstrating the vividness of Ellison's storytelling. Works Cited Ellison, R. W. Battle Royal. In Literature: Reading, Reaching, Writing. Compact Fifth Edition by Kirszner & Mandell, p. 174 -185.