

# Battle royal

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A critic once said that an important measure of great literature is that it produces in the reader a healthy confusion of pleasure and disquietude, two effects that are seemingly contradictory but actually complements each other. Pleasure makes the reading a worthwhile experience, ensuring that generations of readers would love the literary work and critics would praise the quality of the writing.

Meanwhile, disquiet makes the material relevant, creating a haunting effect upon the reader, which is important in any work of art since only when one's mind is bothered does the individual bother to reflect upon what he read and even translate the themes and ideas that he gathers from a literary work into action. In Ralph Ellison's *Battle Royal*, pleasure and disquiet are elicited by both the theme of the short fiction and the manner by which the story is told.

Battle Royal refers to an inhuman spectacle most probably practiced in the late 19th and early 20th century when segregation and racial discrimination were norms in society. Young black men are blindfolded and fight each other inside a ring while white men cheer at the show of barbarism disguised as entertainment. In the story, a young unnamed African American, who is the main character, is requested to deliver his graduation speech at a gathering of the town's white citizens at a fancy hotel. He is told to participate in the battle royal which comes before his speech simply because he is black.

Before the actual battle, they are forced to watch a naked blond white woman dance. After the fight, bruised and battered and choking with blood, the African-American delivers his speech. As reward, he is presented with a

calfskin briefcase and a scholarship to the state college of Negroes. The pleasure that can be derived from this fiction is the simplicity and sincerity by which Ellison narrates the story. Told in the first person by the main character, the narration mirrors his innocence and naivete at what he sees and experience that night.

The author captures the confusion that grows within him as the evening progresses. He remembers how his grandfather advises him to “live with your head in the lion’s mouth...overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine them with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction” while at the same time he realizes the inhumanity and humiliation he is being subjected to. In the end, however, he prefers to accept his reward with a sense of pride: a scholarship to a Negro school, something which further promotes his acceptance of his position and the position of all black people in society during the time.

For all its superior writing style, however, the story is a record of an ugly instance from the history of slavery in America and reading it opens old wounds that reflect the continuing struggle that African-Americans face up to today. Times have changed and society has become kinder but some people and communities still hold discriminating views against blacks. They are usually subtle and unspoken, but there. Taking the theme a step further, the story could also refer to other prejudices that exist in society today.

Reading Battle Royal arouses a sense of disquiet on the part of the reader in that it makes him think and compare the past with the present. There might be no Battle Royals being held anymore, but the prejudices that it symbolizes still exist. The voice of the narrator in the story could be that of any victim or minority in the country; people who prefer to accept their

position, swallowing their pride, sometimes rising above the humiliating experiences, just so they would survive like the African-American in Ellison's story.