

# Ralph ellison's battle royal: a look at the theme of racism

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## **Post-Slavery America: Racism in “ Battle Royal”**

Civil rights activist W. E. B. DuBois described the beginning of slavery as “the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into hell” (qtd in Graff 184). DuBois, born after the legal abolition of slavery, understood the lack of equality free blacks faced in a nation accustomed to slavery. Ralph Ellison, a successful author of the Civil Rights Era, drew inspiration for many of his most famous works from his personal experiences growing up. The grandson of slaves and raised by his widowed mother, Ellison wrote about the struggles African Americans experienced growing up in America (“ Ralph Ellison”). In his short story “ Battle Royal,” Ralph Ellison uses the fighters’ experiences to illustrate the continued racism African Americans faced post-slavery.

The history of racism after the abolition of slavery is imperative to understanding the experiences of the battle royal fighters. Even after 1865 when the 13th amendment abolished slavery in the United States, blacks continued to struggle with racist sentiments (“ House Joint Resolution”). Racism toward blacks persisted, and this aversion to African American equality eventually led to widespread white fears about inter-racial sexual relations and anxieties regarding economic competition from blacks (Rattansi 44). Although the law regarding slavery changed, society’s demeaning attitude toward blacks did not. As result, several Southern states adopted what came to be known as “ Black Codes,” which prohibited blacks from acquiring industrial and skilled work, and confined them to field labor

and sharecropping (Rarransi 44). Research related to wealth accumulation suggests wealth improves a person's social and economic status (O'Connell 715). The unspecialized, low-wage jobs blacks were limited to prevented them from moving up in society or escaping poverty. All of these actions occurred after the abolition of slavery, highlighting the post-slavery racism African Americans faced. In " Battle Royal," the results of social and economic oppression of blacks is shown through the actions of the fighters.

The battle royal fighters were forced to fight due to social constraints and financial necessity. In " Battle Royal," the narrator is a perfect example of the " ideal black person" in the eyes of a white citizen. As the narrator words it, " I was praised by the most lily-white men in town" (Ellison). The narrator is so highly praised, that he is invited to give his graduation speech at a gathering of his town's leading white citizens. Upon his arrival, the racism fueling the battle royal is revealed when the narrator is told the conditions of his speech. In order to deliver his speech, the narrator must first partake in the battle royal, a brutal fight to the end being held by the white audience members in the name of entertainment. A monetary prize would be awarded to the last fighter standing. Due to the economic limitations thrust upon blacks during this time period, the fighters were willing to partake in the battle royal for a chance at the monetary prize.

In the time period in which " Battle Royal" takes place, Blacks were discriminated against in the workplace. Two prominent forms of this discrimination were the convict leasing system and sharecropping.

Sharecropping was " a system in which black families would rent small plots

of land in return for a portion of their crop to be given to the landowner at the end of each year" (" Sharecropping"). In theory, sharecropping was a considerable idea, but the reality of this system led to further African American turmoil. As newly freed individuals, blacks owned neither money nor land. As result, the landowners from which blacks would rent acreage were all white men, many being former slave masters. Because blacks had no money, all of their farming supplies had to come from the white land owners, who would lend the blacks supplies on a credit. This credit became a vicious cycle blacks were never able to fully pay off, in turn making the black sharecroppers slaves to the white landowners. In " Battle Royal," chances are that many of the fighters themselves were victims of this sort of debt, participating in the fight as a chance to pay off what they owed.

The second prominent form of workplace discrimination towards blacks was the convict leasing system. The convict leasing system was created to evade the 13th amendment, which states " Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, nor any place subject to their jurisdiction" (" House Joint Resolution"). To get around this, whites created the convict leasing system, in which state governments would lease black convicts to work at firms doing penal labor. David Oshinsky, an American historian, said that convict leasing " ensured a generation of black prisoners would suffer and die under conditions far worse than anything they had ever experienced as slaves" (Graff). These workplace constrictions kept African Americans in constant poverty. Again, chances are

good that many of the blacks who elected to participate in the battle royal did it out of mere necessity. The battle royal served as a chance for the fighters to help feed their families and temporarily escape the perils of poverty.

Although racist whites successfully constructed a negative financial situation for blacks, they went even further to try and promote conflict within the African American community itself. Creating the battle royal was a way to turn blacks against one another in a time period where black unity was vital. The white cloth used to blindfold the fighters symbolizes the white citizens' attempts to distract African Americans from the greater evils taking place. The narrator describes his blindfolding experience as all ten of the fighters climbing under the ropes of the ring and "allowing themselves to be blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth" (Ellison). While the narrator was being forced to fight in order to give his speech, the other fighters were fighting by their own free will. The fact that the fighters allowed the whites to blindfold them further supports the idea that the blacks were fighting out of necessity. After the blindfolding removes the narrator's sense of sight, his sense of hearing intensifies, sharpening the phrases yelled from audience members. Right before the battle royal begins, the narrator hears a surge of racist phrases such as "Get going in there, I want to tear that ginger-colored nigger limb from limb," and "Let me at that big nigger!" (Ellison). With terror setting in and his sense of sight gone, the narrator can no longer see who is yelling the remarks, leaving his mind free to ponder if the remarks are coming from fellow blacks. By blindfolding the blacks and forcing them to

turn on each other, the white men hoped to distract the blacks from the bigger issue of continued racism. White men could retain their hierarchical power as long as African Americans were kept divided and distracted from fighting for their societal equality.

Race-fueled torment toward the fighters post-fight further exemplifies the racism prominent in society even after the abolition of slavery. After the battle royal, the M. C. introduced the fighters to a rug strewn with gold pieces, dollar bills, and various coins. They were informed that all they could grab was theirs, and so the white men's entertainment continued. The fighters soon discovered that the rug was electrified, and as they fought the shocks to collect the money, belittling prompts filled the room. The white men shouted phrases such as " Pick it up, goddammit, pick it up!" and " Get the money, that's good hard American cash!" knowing the pain involved in gathering the money (Ellison). Some white men even resorted to pushing the fighters onto the rug just to watch their bodies contort in pain. It was not enough for the black fighters to inflict their own pain while scrambling to collect the money, the white males needed the added satisfaction of personally inflicting pain to this group of people the men saw as biologically inferior. This behavior is strikingly similar to that of white plantation owners, who would whip their slaves to establish their control and superiority over the African American race. Chances are many of the white males in the battle royal audience were previously large plantation owners themselves, and saw the fight as a legal way to continue practicing the racism they harbored.

Racism was abundant in post-slavery America. In the years following the abolition of slavery, former slaves and their descendants faced widespread discrimination in both society and the workplace. The discriminatory laws enacted allowed prejudice against blacks to linger in American society years after the legal end of slavery, while the poor selection of jobs blacks were allowed further dragged African Americans into a recurring cycle of discrimination, debt, and poverty. In "Battle Royal," Ralph Ellison exemplifies the measures many blacks were forced to resort to out of financial necessity. Due to racism left over from the slavery era, no matter what African Americans attempted in order to coexist as equals in white society, nothing could accomplish that goal. This was because in early post-slavery America, white people were at the top of the social hierarchy whereas blacks were at the bottom. Today, racist sentiments have greatly diminished due to the fact that many years have passed since the initial abolition of slavery, and mixed-race marriages have created a racially-diverse population. However, shadows of racism prevail in the black community, even in 21st century America. According to a 2006 study, seventy-five percent of African Americans believe they have fewer opportunities than whites, while almost sixty percent of whites think blacks have the same opportunities that they have (Graff 188-89). This indicates that although the white population may see black prejudice as a thing of the past, African Americans are still struggling with certain forms of racism today. Racism, although greatly diminished in 21st century America, still has a long way to go before society can claim black prejudice as a thing of the past.