Battle Royal; or, The Invisible Man Study Guide

Battle Royal; or, The Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Battle Royal" is the name of the first chapter of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. This first chapter was originally published as a short story in the October 1947 issue of the English literary periodical *Horizon* and entitled "The Invisible Man." "Battle Royal" is the name adopted by subsequent anthologies to differentiate the story from the novel of the same name.

Ellison's novel won him fast and sustained acclaim as a major writer of the twentieth century. The story was well received upon publication and alerted many to Ellison's talent. "Battle Royal" presents a startling scene of violence, naiveté and economic power—a scene that implies the philosophical depth behind the institutions of racism and the pathos of asserting an identity in the shadow of historical tragedy.

Author Biography

With the publication of his novel *Invisible Man* in 1952, Ralph Ellison became a widely acclaimed author who is considered among the most important writers of the century. In addition to this novel, he published two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) and throughout his life, he was a frequent contributor to literary and political journals including *New Masses, Nation, and American Review*. After his death, *Juneteenth*, a novel he had been working on for many years but had not completed, was edited and published posthumously in 1998.

Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1914 and was named by his father after Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous American transcendentalist writer of the nineteenth century. His father died when Ellison was four years old, and Ellison and his younger brother were raised by their mother who made sure her children had plenty to challenge them intellectually, socially, and culturally. Oklahoma was a source of inspiration to Ellison's later work. Growing up in the 1920s, he experienced the effects of racial prejudice, formulated in segregative practices of enduring Jim Crow laws. He also was drawn to the vibrant musical forms—jazz, gospel, classical, and folk—that pervaded the city.

In 1933, the nineteen-year-old Ellison left Oklahoma to attend Booker T. Washington's former college, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he initially studied music. In 1936, before finishing his degree, Ellison moved to New York where he would eventually meet Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Richard Wright. Wright, in particular, played an important role in Ellison's early career. During the thirties, Ellison, like Hughes and Wright, was persuaded by the political and social critiques of the Communist Party. As Ellison's career continued, he disassociated himself from organized communism while continuing to critique economic exploitation and racism.

Before receiving a Federal Writers' Project grant in 1936 that allowed him to focus on his writing, Ellison performed many different kinds of jobs in New York: he worked as a freelance photographer, a receptionist, a stereo repairman, and a salesman. Ellison's first story was published in 1939, and many followed in the early 1940s. In 1942, he worked as managing editor of *Negro Quarterly*, and in 1944, he published two more stories, "Flying Home" and "The Bingo Game."

Ellison married Fanny McConnell in 1944 before serving in World War II as a cook in the merchant marines. When he returned to the States, he spent time on a farm in Vermont where he came up with the ideas that would become *Invisible Man*. In 1952, Ellison published *Invisible Man* and began to enjoy an enduring reputation as one of the century's most important writers. The novel was immediately characterized by many as a masterpiece, and reviews were positive even if critical of its political implications. In 1953, Ellison won the National Book Award, which would be followed by many other awards and honorary degrees throughout his life, including honorary doctorates from Harvard, Tuskegee, University of Michigan, and Brown University.

In 1967, a fire destroyed Ellison's summer home and much of his next major novel. He managed to rebuild the manuscript, which ran over a thousand pages. Ellison died in 1994 after battling cancer and was buried near his New York home in Washington Heights.

Plot Summary

The nameless, first-person narrator begins by suggesting that for the first twenty years of his life, he has looked to others to answer questions of selfdefinition. What he has discovered is that it is only he himself who can figure out who he is, but to do this, he must first "discover that [he] is an invisible man!" The story unfolds by narrating a scene in which those who are "blind" are not only the narrator, who literally wears a blindfold, but also those who abuse the narrator, sizing him up as mere stereotype, erasing his individuality and human dimension.

The narrator's question of self identity is not restricted to the mere twenty years of his own life but to the lives of his grandparents, who were born as slaves and freed eighty-five years before. This was a freedom that made them rhetorically part of a "United" States, but that in the social sphere kept African-Americans separate from whites like separate "fingers on the hand."

On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather gives him odd and disturbing advice. The grandfather seemed to live a hardworking and conventional life, but his final words confirm his reputation as an "odd man" who might "cause trouble." He tells the narrator that he has felt like a traitor and a spy his entire life and should have never given up his gun after Reconstruction (see historical notes, below). He advises the narrator to keep up a "good fight" by living with "your head in the lion's mouth." The grandfather continues, "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." The grandfather's final fierce words are "Learn it to the younguns." This dying speech alarms the narrator's folks and haunts the narrator through the rest of the story, especially since the narrator feels so well liked and is even praised "by the most lily-white men of the town."

Although uneasy about the grandfather's final words, the narrator makes a very successful speech at his graduation in which he argues that humility is the secret to success. The speech is so well liked that he is invited to deliver it to "a gathering of the town's leading white citizens."

When the narrator arrives at the main ballroom of the hotel, he is told to participate with some of his schoolmates in a "battle royal." The fight is to take place in a large room with a portable boxing ring, around which chairs have been arranged for all the men with tuxedoes and cigars to sit as they watch. Riding with his schoolmates in the elevator to the room, the narrator feels superior to them, likening himself to a "potential Booker T. Washington" whose dignity might be tarnished through association with such rough characters.

Entering the room, the narrator is handed a pair of boxing gloves as he looks around. Through the haze of cigar smoke he sees all the prominent white men of the town —"bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants"—getting drunk on whiskey. The narrator and his schoolmates are shuttled to the front of the ballroom

and ringed by a crowd of menacing, curious and amused faces. At the front of the room, there is dead silence as the boys see "a magnificent blonde—stark naked" standing directly before them.

With the crowd of white men looking on, the narrator and his schoolmates do not know how to react. Some of the boys "lowered their heads, trembling," fearing the implied threat of being lynched if they demonstrate sexual interest in a white woman. The narrator feels forceful but contradictory feelings. A wave of "irrational guilt and fear" sweeps over him as his teeth chatter and his knees knock. He knows that it is dangerous to look at her, but cannot help but look. He wants to spit on her and touch her, "to love her and to murder her." The woman begins to dance provocatively and one of the narrator's schoolmates faints, another pleads to go home and yet another tries to hide his erection with his boxing gloves. The white men become a near-frenzied mob, chasing her and finally tossing her around as she tries to flee. Finally, some of the more sober men help her escape.

Immediately after the woman flees, the ten young men are ordered to get into the ring to entertain their white audience by fighting each other, blindfolded. The narrator feels a "blind terror" in the darkness and hears shouts like "Let me at that big nigger!" from a voice that sounds like the school superintendent's. The fight is anarchic, cruel and bloody. At one point the narrator is able to begin peeking through his blindfold and is able to move carefully, avoiding blows and pitting one group of fighters against another.

Finally, the narrator is left alone in the ring with Tatlock, "biggest of the gang." All the other fighters planned to leave, setting the narrator up to get pummeled in the final showdown. The narrator attempts to strike a deal with Tatlock, proposing "Fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize." Tatlock defiantly refuses, whispering back "I'll break your behind." The surprised narrator can only ask "For *them*?" Tatlock responds, "For *me*, sonofab—h!" Despite further attempts to buy Tatlock off, Tatlock batters the narrator, and the narrator worries about giving his speech. When the narrator hears the audience placing money on Tatlock, he is further confused about whether he should win the fight. Finally, the narrator is knocked out and pulled up into a chair after the count of ten.

After the fight, the "M.C." invites the boys to collect their money, which appears to be coins on a rug. The boys crouch over the rug, and, when told to start scrambling, they fight each other for the coins. As they do, electric shocks tear through their bodies. The narrator adapts to the shock by laughing, and he continues collecting as many greenbacks and coins as he can. Although the students try to avoid the rug, the drunk men push them on to the rug. One of the young men is lifted into the air and dropped, "wet back landing flush on the charged rug." After agonizing spasms, he manages to escape the rug and to burst out of the room. As the narrator works to avoid similar fate, he also tries surreptitiously to knock the chair of a drunk Mr. Colcord over, spilling him onto the rug. Mr. Colcord laughs and continues trying to push the narrator down. In the end, the coins turn out to be worthless slugs, brass tokens advertising an automobile.

After all of this, the narrator feels awful but is called in to make his speech. As the crowd's applause and laughter subsides, he determinedly begins, choking back blood and spit. His speech is about the importance of education. He recites a story about a ship that was lost at sea whose passengers suddenly sight a friendly vessel which tells the "unfortunate vessel" to "cast down your bucket where you are." Throughout the recitation, the crowd rudely makes fun of the narrator by interrupting him, asking him to repeat phrases. One of these phrases is "social responsibility" which he repeats a few times before accidentally yelling out "social equality" instead. After this slip, the narrator feels a rumble of displeasure and hears hostile remarks. Scared, he follows orders to repeat "social responsibility." A "small dry mustached man" asked if he was being "smart" and the narrator says "No, sir!" and explains that he made the mistake only because he was swallowing blood.

The narrator finishes to thunderous applause. He is presented with a prize by the Board of Education: a calfskin briefcase and a scholarship to a "state college for Negroes." The narrator is overjoyed as his eyes fill with tears. The next day his family and neighbors congratulate him. However, his grandfather haunts him, and the narrator has a disturbing dream that night. In the dream, the narrator goes to the circus with his grandfather who will not laugh at the clowns. The grandfather tells the narrator to open his briefcase and read the letter inside. The narrator tries but opens one envelope to find another inside, endlessly. The grandfather says "Them's years" and then he tells the narrator to open another envelope and to read it out loud. The narrator opens it and reads "To Whom It May Concern . . . Keep this Nigger-Boy Running."

Summary

Summary

Originally published as a short story, "Battle Royal" would eventually become the first chapter of Ralph Ellison's critically acclaimed novel *Invisible Man*. "Battle Royal" is the story of a young black man who is invited to deliver his much lauded graduation speech to a gathering of prominent white citizens.

The unnamed narrator begins with a confession: For twenty years he has allowed himself to be defined by other people's expectations. While he has since come to realize the folly of this thinking, the process of change has been slow and painful. This change began, he reveals, with the discovery that he is an "invisible man."

The narrator presents himself as the product of his enslaved ancestors, now regretting the shame he once held for this heritage. While his parents subscribe to the "separate-but-equal" paradigm, the narrator's grandfather reveals on his deathbed that he has "been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country." He recommends that future generations overcome their white oppressors by feigning obedience, amicability and humility. The family is horrified by the grandfather's words and the narrator, only a child at this point in time, is told to forget what he has heard. This "grandfather's curse" serves the narrator as a source of guilt, calling into question his every success in a white man's world.

The narrator, as a young man, arrives at the hotel ballroom where the gathering is to take place. A portable boxing ring sits on one side of the dance floor. Before giving his speech, he and his classmates are to entertain the assembled men by participating in a Battle Royal, a sort of free-for-all boxing match. Several of the narrator's classmates have already arrived, but he is reluctant to mingle, suggesting that the other boys are "tough," inferior brutes who don't like him anyway.

After donning their fighting togs, the boys are ushered out into a now smoky ballroom filled with drunken "big shots," such as bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers and merchants -- all of them white. The men greet the boys with a mixture of hostility and amusement, crowding around them like an oppressive wall.

A naked blonde appears at one end of the mob, an American flag tattoo on her belly. The sight of this alluring white woman fills the boys with irrational guilt and fear. Some of the big shots threaten the boys if they look at the stripper, others threaten them if they do not. The narrator gazes at her fixedly, filled with powerful ambivalence. The rowdy men finally hoist the woman into the air and toss her around like a play-thing. Above her plastic smile, the narrator sees in the woman's eyes the mirror of his own terror and disgust.

Crying and hysterical, the boys are ushered into the ring and blindfolded with white cloth. Plunged into darkness, the narrator's thoughts turn from his speech to the terrible melee now filling his ears. He is terrified. The raucous white crowd shouts for blood; racial epitaphs flow readily. Finally making contact with the fray, the narrator is beaten down under a flurry of blows laid by multiple classmates. Hurt and bleeding, he pretends to be unconscious, but unseen hands pull the narrator back to his feet and push him back into the combat.

Returning to his feet, the he notes that his blindfold is askew. The narrator can make out shapes in the smoky darkness. He now sees that the fighting is vicious and unchecked, low blows and kicks abound, but with his vision restored he finds that he is less afraid. The narrator uses his sight as an advantage, avoiding blows and playing the blinded boys against one another, but doing so with enough subtlety so as not to arouse suspicion from the audience. The harder the boys fight, the more threatening the big shots become, but yet again the narrator finds his thoughts returning to his speech. How will it go? Will they recognize his ability? What will they give him?

The narrator is one of the two last boys standing in the ring, the other being the largest of his classmates. Both blindfolds are removed as the two boys face one another for the final bout. The narrator tries to collude with the other boy, offering him the winnings in exchange for a fall. The boy is uncooperative, seemingly determined to fight. The narrator fears that losing will ruin his chances of making a good impression with his speech. Only these men, the narrator feels, can judge his ability. Despite his best efforts, he loses, knocked flat by the larger boy. After the fight, the narrator sits in a bloody stupor as the other boys discuss how much they're likely to be paid.

The boys are called over to a rug piled high with money. The men explain that, when they give the word, the boys are to each take as much cash as they can grab. The narrator excitedly notes that there are gold coins in the mix,and begins formulating a plan to block the other boys while he grabs the precious coins and paper money. The word is given and the boys dive into the pile. However, the rug is electrified. The boys howl in pain as the current whips through their bodies. The assembled men lift one of the boys into the air and throw him onto the rug, where he writhes in convulsive agony.

The narrator grabs on to a chair leg to prevent one of the men from lifting him into the air. To his surprise, the narrator finds himself trying to topple the man himself on to the electrified rug. The man responds with a violent kick which sends the narrator sprawling over the rug and into a world of hurt. The rug slides out of place and the coins scatter across the floor. The "gold coins" turn out advertising tokens. As the boys scramble to collect the wayward cash, the M.C. ends the proceedings, telling the boys to go get dressed and to get their money. Each of the boys if paid five dollars, the last boy standing is paid ten. The narrator despairs that he won't have a chance to give his speech after all, when he is called back to the ballroom.

The narrator gives his speech with as much passion as he can muster, not realizing initially that his audience is laughing, jeering and talking all the while. The speech advises blacks to cultivate friendly relations with the Southern white man. The men

often interrupt the speech to ask the young man to speak louder or to repeat himself. The narrator complies despite the pain and despite the blood collecting in his mouth. He eventually makes an error, mistakenly repeating the phrase "social responsibility" as "social equality." The mob turns hostile, demanding that he recant the words. The narrator apologizes, insisting that it was a mistake. The crowd calms down and the narrator finishes his speech. Afterward, the men gift the boy with a calfskin briefcase and a scholarship to the state college for Negroes.

That night, the narrator dreams that he and his grandfather are at a circus. The old man tells his grandson to open the briefcase. He does so. Inside he finds an official envelope stamped with a state seal. Opening it reveals another envelope, and beyond that another and another, endlessly. "Them's years" the grandfather says, "Now open that one." Inside the second envelope is a message in gold letters which reads "To Whom It May Concern. Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." The narrator wakes to his grandfather's laughter ringing in his ears.

Analysis

"Battle Royal" is a reflective narrative. The unnamed narrator tells the story from some indeterminate point in the future. The central character of the story is the narrator as a young man, just out of high school. This young man sees himself as a would-be Booker T. Washington, a black man intent on making his way in a white world. He is defined by both his idealism and his ambition. He believes in his own freedom and, further, believes that the world is such that a young black man can find success.

At several points in the narrative one finds the story penetrated by the narrator's more worldly perspective, now at odds with his younger self. As the young man struggles to give his speech despite constant ridicule and a mouth full of blood, the narrator says "What powers of endurance I had during those days! What enthusiasm! What a belief in the rightness of things!" These words contain a certain admiration mixed with a bitter sorrow. It would appear that our young idealist is doomed to become a cynic, suggesting that our young man is perhaps naive in his present expectations.

The speech is very nearly a quotation from Booker T. Washington's address at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition. Washington argued then that blacks should befriend whites and that, furthermore, blacks should strive for knowledge and education so that they might be worthy of their newfound freedom. This is the social responsibility that our young orator was referring to: the idea that blacks owe it to society to make a success of themselves. This perspective suggests that knowledge and education are the two quickest paths to equality. If blacks strive hard enough, there will be a place for them in the world.

This begs the question: Where is the place of blacks in a white society? When the young man mistakenly says "social equality" he is told by one of the angry white men "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times." In other words, the place of blacks is to be decided by the whites. They are inferior, but so long as they are willing to cooperate, the white man will magnanimously decide to "do right

by" them. This likely is not the sort of relationship that Washington had in mind. This is little more than a compulsory performance demanded of the blacks by the whites.

The narrator's grandfather understood this dimension of performing. He spent most of his life meekly serving the whites, and yet he characterizes himself as a traitor and a spy. Why? And to whom was he a traitor? Some might argue that he has betrayed his race, either by serving the white man or, perhaps, by *pretending* to serve the white man. What he has certainly betrayed, however -- at least in the context of of "Battle Royal" -- is the happy lie that southern whites want to see blacks succeed.

In comparison to his grandfather, the grandson is the young idealist who freely admits that the quality of his speech can be judged only by these white "big shots," his self-efficacy dependent on a white standard. The opinion of his classmates, his fellow blacks, means little to him. He dismisses them as "tough" and inferior. He sees them as obstacles, and they him. His grandfather, however, demonstrates a sense of racial responsibility. He wants future generations to know that they do not have to meet the white standard. They need only *seem* compliant. It is the difference between using the system and being used *by* the system.

The Battle Royal is a metaphor for the black lifestyle under this oppressive standard. The white blindfolds isolate blacks as they struggle against each other for white magnanimity. They are literally and figuratively *blinded by the white*, having internalized a racist standard which encourages divisive thinking amongst their people. When the young man sees the gold coins on the rug, his first thought is on how he will keep them away from the other boys. The "gold coins" turn out to be worthless brass tokens, an advertisement for cars that the blacks likely could not even afford. Not only does the standard set black against black, but the implication here is that the game is rigged. Whites have no intention of "doing right by" the blacks. Nevertheless, the boys pummel each other senseless while the real enemy cheers from the safety outside the ring. Since the whites want the blacks to oppose one another, they do little to police behavior inside the ring.

Just as blacks are blinded by the white, the whites are blinded by the blacks. These "big shots" do not see the boys for the scared adolescents that they really are, but merely as blacks. They do not listen to the speech. Instead they jeer and talk among themselves, not caring what the youth has to say until he says something that suggests that he does not "know his place." This is the point of the Battle Royal, the rug, and the speech - they are all performances by which blacks can demonstrate that they know their place. This "knowledge" is the only quality that whites are interested in measuring. If you're black, it doesn't matter who you are as an individual; you'll be judged on the basis of color and compliance. This is why the narrator refers to himself as an "invisible man." His race has eclipsed his identity. The mob's uncouth treatment of the stripper suggests that women share a similar invisibility.

The naked blonde defines the bounds between the two colors. She is beautiful, she is desirable, and yet she is not *for* the blacks. The unspoken rule, in this time and place, is that the black man must not desire the white woman. It is forbidden. Despite this, the

boys do desire her. She is, after all, a beautiful woman and they, black or white, are young male adolescents. The American flag on her belly suggests that she is a symbol of everything that blacks are denied by the white America. She, like the "gold" coins (not to mention the cars that they advertise) constitutes an empty promise.

Color plays an important role throughout the story: the drunken white men with red faces; the white, blue-eyed woman with red lips; red, white and blue -- all the colors that blacks are not. The subtle implication is that blacks exist apart from the American dream, that they are somehow not compatible with the ideas of freedom and self-governance. As the boys recoil from the electrified rug, the M.C. shouts "Get the money -- That's good hard American cash!" Again, this American bounty is not *for* the blacks. The yellow of the blonde's hair corresponds to the yellow of gold, both treasures reserved for a white America.

The narrator's dream drives home the point. The young man will never achieve enough credibility to satisfy the whites. It does not matter how many documents, certificates or degrees he collects; he will still be black. Like the brass token, an educated black man is not valued. The letter seems to imply that the purpose of the white system is to silence blacks by giving them the illusion of progress. They are so busy "running" that they lose track of their destination.

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Characters

Blonde Who Strips And Is Chased By The Audience

Before the ten classmates fight, they are forced to consider a "magnificent blonde—stark naked." The white men menacingly watch as the young men tremble with fear, knowing that in the time they live, a Black man who demonstrates sexual interest in a white woman risks being lynched. The narrator's description of the woman objectifies her into a "kewpie doll" as he tries to express his contradictory feelings of lust and fear. As the woman dances, the white male audience grows increasingly rowdy until they are literally passing her around over their heads. Finally, the woman escapes and the "battle royal" begins.

Classmates At The Smoker

When the narrator shows up at the hotel, expecting to give his speech, he is grouped with nine of his fellow classmates, all of whom are African American. The main event at the "Battle Royal" is the free-for-all fight between these ten young men who are blindfolded. Except for Tatlock, the story does not fill in individual characteristics for this group. In general, the narrator clearly looks down on them, feeling he is superior to what he perceives to be a rough bunch.

Mr. Colcord

An audience member with breath stinking of whiskey, Mr. Colcord tries to force the narrator on to the electrified rug. The narrator not only resists Colcord's efforts but responds by trying to topple Colcord onto the rug in ways that cannot appear obvious. In town, Colcord owns a chain of movie houses and "entertainment places."

M.C.

A nameless and faceless voice that directs the audience's attention from event to event and stirs up excitement. He is presumably white.

Narrator's Grandfather

A former slave who was freed about eighty-five years prior to when the story takes place. He and the narrator's grandmother lived a quiet, industrious life, "stay[ing] in their place and working hard." The grandfather was an "odd" man, however. On his deathbed, he tells the narrator some advice that haunts the narrator through the rest of story. In his last moments, the grandfather admits to feeling like a traitor and a spy, living in the "enemy's country." He wishes he had never given up his gun during the first days

of Reconstruction. With his dying breath, he urges his grandson 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" and then "Learn it to the younguns." Later in the story, the narrator has a disturbing dream about attending the circus with his grandfather.

The School Superintendent

After the narrator's speech, the superintendent steps forward and congratulates the narrator saying, "some day he'll lead his people in the proper paths." In the name of the Board of Education, he presents the narrator with a prize consisting of a leather briefcase with a scholarship to the "state college for Negroes." Presumably, the superintendent has been watching the entire battle royal.

Small Dry Mustached Man

The "small dry mustached man" sits in the front row as the narrator delivers his speech. When the narrator accidentally says "social equality" instead of "social responsibility," the man interrupts and intimidates the narrator, asking the narrator to repeat what he has said. The man makes sure that the narrator insists it was an accidental slip of the tongue, and when the narrator acts subservient, the man seems satisfied.

Tatlock

The biggest and strongest of the narrator's classmates with whom he is forced to fight. By arrangement, the other fighters bow out of the ring, leaving the narrator in a final showdown with Tatlock. As the audience places bets on the winner, the narrator tries to make a deal with Tatlock. He proposes that Tatlock take a fall and in return the narrator will give Tatlock the winner's purse plus extra money. Tatlock, to the narrator's surprise, refuses with scorn. The narrator asks Tatlock whether he wants to pulverize him for the benefit of the white audience; Tatlock responds that he will beat the narrator up not for the audience but "For *me*, sonofab—h."

Themes

Racism

Through the grandfather's haunting words of advice, the story reaches to presumably the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, issued in the midst of the Civil War. Eighty-five years later, in approximately 1949, the narrator must come to terms with his family's history. The story interweaves various levels of obvious and subtle racism in the projection of a nightmarish racial hatred. The offensive epithets speak for themselves. The economic structure of the spectacles implicitly criticize ways in which money and economic power sustain the expression of racial hatred. As the schoolmates fight each other for coins, trying not to get shocked, it seems that Battle Royal or The Invisible Man Ellison is proposing a parody of what it is like to try to succeed in a segregated society. And, in this segregated world, economic success makes the African-American individual a target to both other African Americans and to whites who are threatened by such success.

More subtle commentary on racism emerges in questioning why the white men are so entranced by the spectacles of violence they stage. While everyone in the audience seems to enjoy commanding economic security, it might seem curious that they still are thrilled to see the narrator and his schoolmates demeaned and abused. What is the logic of the white men's fascination here?

Alienation and Loneliness of Growing into Adulthood

The narrator's experience at the smoker demonstrates that instead of feeling himself in mutual struggle with his schoolmates, he instead holds himself up as superior to them. Ellison also presents the narrator as naive, trusting in the institutions of education and in a conventional belief that one works hard to succeed in a land of democratic citizens, a color-blind meritocracy. The narrator's quest to be like Booker T. Washington reflects his ambition to be great and have people look up to him. In the midst of the battle royal, however, all the narrator can do is hope to salvage a piece of self respect. When the narrator is tearfully overwhelmed at the gift of the briefcase and scholarship, Ellison seems to mock his youthful optimism. The scholarship to the "Negro" college ironically confirms the narrator's sense of superiority to Tatlock and his other classmates. What the narrator grows to understand throughout the rest of the novel is that the scholarship was a reward for his subservience to the powerful white men at the smoker and to white people in general. The image of Booker T. Washington becomes an ironic symbol of greatness, reflecting the narrator's ability to garner self respect by pandering to the white community's sense of "responsibility" at the cost of friendship with other African Americans. Trapped in an illusionary feeling of achievement, the narrator's most intimate connection seems to be with his dead grandfather whose words haunt him.

The American Dream

The novel challenges some basic premises about how to succeed in the United States as an AfricanAmerican man. The idea of the American Dream blends the notion of democracy and competitive business capitalism into a liberating optimism. Rhetorically, everybody has equal opportunity to advance in society by working hard, earning money and planning for the future. The Declaration of Independence asserts this optimism by declaring that "men are created equal" and have rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Power of the Individual

Ralph Waldo Ellison was named after the transcendental philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's essays, like "Nature" and "The American Scholar," invested the individual with a power to overcome and move beyond the past and to project a new, dynamic and liberating sense of the future. His essays looked to the natural world as an expression of the vibrant individual's power to realize his most optimistic and self-expressive visions of greatness. This vitality complemented a national desire in the United States to be exceptional by embracing principles of democratic brotherhood. The energy implied in Emerson's essays is powerful but hard to imagine in the real world. The narrator's sense of individual accomplishment highlights the potential shortsightedness of an Emersonian logic. In the South of the 1940s, it seems that the divisive effect of racial bigotry can only be "transcended" if one overlooks blatant expressions of hatred and systemic forces that concentrate economic power in the hands of dominant white society.

Style

Style

Point of View and Narration

The narration is in first person, addressing the reader directly with a direct and honest tone implying a certain naiveté. The narrator is most capable of conveying his confusion. His sense of accomplishment is rendered pathetic by his constant inability to take offense at the inhumane treatment he endures at the hands of his "benefactors." By rendering scenes of physical and psychological violence to the reader in forceful detail and lyrical immediacy, one expects a statement of anger and resistance. Instead, the reader alone seems to understand the demeaning implication of the battle royal as the narrator progresses toward the ultimately triumphant scholarship award. The final mention of the narrator's dream suggests that this absence of indignation is indeed ironic, an irony that is wound more tightly in the novel as a whole.

Setting

The story takes place around eighty-five years after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, in approximately 1947. It is important that the narrator lives in the South, where slavery played a crucial role in sustaining the economic system of plantation farming until the Civil War. In the days after slavery's abolition, African Americans were prevented from becoming economically stable by the white community. The town of the story reflects a fundamental hierarchy in which white men are those with economic, political, judicial and educational authority. The hotel where the battle royal takes place represents the extent of this white power. It is significant that once inside the room where the events take place, one is either there as an audience member or an entertainer. The audience is composed only of white men being entertained by their perverse manipulation of the young African-American men and the "magnificent blonde" stripper.

Symbol and Images

The narrator's direct statement of the scene seems too simplistic given the frenzied events unfolding and the immediate impact of these events on the narrator himself. This incongruity invites the reader to see in these discrete images a broader significance, reaching to comment on the more general social dynamic that produces the story's violence.

The image of the circus occurs at the beginning and ending of the story. The grandfather urges the narrator to live his life with his head in the lion's mouth, and in the narrator's final dream he sits next to his grandfather at a circus. These images might symbolize the fundamental uncertainty of life. Whereas the conventional ideas of

respectably working, earning and raising a family imply a clear logic, the circus is a spectacle that makes everything both funny and unpredictable. The circus is also a place of masquerade and of power reversals, where clowns enact skits that make those who are supposed to be in charge appear foolish. The circus is also a place that uses the illusion of danger—lions, canons, the tightrope—to dramatic effect. By equating life with a circus, the narrator's dreams seem to enforce the irony of his aspiration to be a respectable figure like Booker T. Washington.

The fight is a central symbol, representing the harsh reality of the marketplace for African Americans. The physical brutality reflects the reality of violence directed against Black men by white society in the North and the South. The scene of the schoolmates being confronted by the stripper represents the ways in which racism against African Americans was expressed sexually. The white, male audience's lurid interest in watching both the stripper and the young men's terrified reaction to her naked body are poignant and disturbing expressions of how deeply oppressive racism can be.

Structure

The story is presented as a retrospective, told from an unknown vantage point in the present, well after the narrated events have concluded. From this vantage point, the narrator remembers his life before he left for college in which two specific events occurred: the death of his grandfather and his participation in the battle royal. This reminiscence incorporates an historical depth by using the grandfather's life to reach back eighty-five years, thus connecting the narrated events to a national history of slavery's abolition and the eventual abandonment of Reconstruction. The reminiscence also suggests that the narrator may have grown into a more accurate understanding of these past events.

Historical Context

Slavery, Reconstruction and Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

The Civil War was fought to keep the United States together as a single nation. While the *Declaration of Independence* asserted that it was "selfevident" that "all men were created equal," the subsequent formulation of the United States Constitution stipulated that slavery would remain legal. Because of the plantation system, the Southern states' economic livelihood depended on having a labor force which it could deny any legal, social or human rights. In the decades before the Civil War, the United States was held together through a series of compromises (*The Missouri Compromise (1820), The Fugitive Slave Act, Compromise of 1850, The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854))* that attempted to balance the political power of slave and free states. One of the most blatant statements of deprivation of Blacks' basic rights of citizenship and the attendant human rights was the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, which stated directly that no black person had rights any white man need respect. Under this ruling, no Black person was allowed claims to citizenship.

The Civil War began in 1861 as the North tried to keep the South in the national Union. Slavery was partially abolished by Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation* of 1863, which did not outlaw slavery in the border states between North and South in an attempt to keep those states aligned neutral in the war. After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment (ratified 1865) outlawed slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment (ratified 1868) guaranteed the rights of citizenship to freed Blacks. The Fifteenth Amendment (ratified 1870) guaranteed the right to vote. While these were important steps, they did not prevent the further oppression of African Americans.

Reconstruction was a federal policy to engineer the inclusion of freed African Americans into the national—political, economic and social—framework. In the 1870s, the North had grown weary of the enterprise and more concerned with facilitating industrial and corporate development. Prejudice against African Americans in the North severely limited their employment opportunities while local laws and social practices in the former slave states intimidated African Americans, and effectively locked them from participation in the marketplace. Local laws like the Black Codes and Jim Crow as well as brutal Ku Klux Klan violence effectively prevented many African Americans from voting, working or living where they would have chosen.

The presidential election of 1876 marks the unofficial termination of federal attempts to reconstruct the South. The election motivated a political compromise that installed the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, as president despite his failure to win a majority of electoral votes and his loss of the popular vote. The Democrats, who represented the interests of the former South, traded the presidency for assurances that under Hayes the last federal troops would be withdrawn from the South. Without the troops, the local governments in the South were able to follow with impunity programs of segregation and intimidation against African Americans. In 1896, the Supreme Court, in

Plessy v. Ferguson, legally sanctioned separate Pullman cars for Blacks and whites, citing the segregation of public schools in Washington, D.C. as social precedent that demonstrated the social proclivity to segregate. The legal sanction of racial segregation structured the school system, employment opportunities and loan opportunities until *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* (1954), which ruled that segregationist policies were inherently unequal. Ellison's novel is published just two years before the *Brown* decision.

African American Resistance and Leadership: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois

In equating himself with his grandfather and with Booker T. Washington, the narrator recalls major figures who served to fight against the marginalization of African Americans, during and after the abolition of slavery. It is notable that the short story and the novel seem to use figures of men as leaders while women serve relatively minor roles. The narrator projects himself into a clearly empowered, masculine agency.

To understand the novel's irony regarding the narrator's reverence of Booker T. Washington, it is important to consider the context in which Washington became powerful. His autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, was published in 1901. It tells of his rise from his childhood status as a slave to being one of the most influential men of his time period. Following the legacy of Frederick Douglass, who in a previous generation had written of rising into social and political prominence after escaping slavery, Washington reached a wide audience with his message of African-American self-reliance and a seeming acceptance of the segregational boundaries in place throughout the United States. Washington founded the Tuskegee Institute, a school designed to educate African Americans in practical industries, vocations and trades. In speeches like the "Atlantic Compromise" that he delivered at the International Exposition in Georgia of 1895, he urged the uplift of African Americans while placating the white audience with a seeming endorsement of segregation. The narrator's speech echoes Washington's words to African Americans, urging them not to migrate to cities and seek integration but instead to "cast down your bucket down where you are."

W. E. B. DuBois was an African-American leader and critic of Booker T. Washington. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois urged African Americans to become central to the functioning of the United States through an education that stressed intellectual achievement. He proposed that a sole focus on vocational training perpetuated the disenfranchisement of the Black community and that if the "talented-tenth" of African Americans were allowed to exercise their mental capacities, it would self-evidently demonstrated that African Ameri cans were crucial components of the national body. DuBois and Washington openly criticized each other's leadership.

DuBois' idea of "double-consciousness" is central to Ellison's novel. DuBois writes in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." DuBois' words seem particularly relevant to both the narrator and the grandfather's sense of divided identity.

The Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson was a famous American philosopher of the nineteenth century. His 1836 book *Nature* became a pillar of transcendental philosophy, a belief in the individual's fundamental agency in the world and potential to move beyond historical circumstance and local environment to fundamentally influence the world through the implementation of one's social vision. In according this power to the individual, Emerson borrows and reformulates within the democratic rhetoric of the United States the romantic energy espoused by the English romantic poets like Coleridge and Wordsworth as well as the dynamic idealism of Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg. Emerson's essay provides memorable quotations such as "Standing on bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." Ellison's blindfolded narrative "I" seems to comment ironically on Emerson's abstract and transcendent individual.

Naming Racial Categories

Invisible Man was published just before the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s began to gain momentum. In terminology used to name African Americans in the story, novel, reviews of the novel, and subsequent criticism, one can see the force of political and social conflict. When the novel was written, the popular press used the term Negro to name African Americans (see Irving Howe's review below). While intending a kind of respect, the term "Negro" is a clear enforcement of separate identity—a separation that included social, political and cultural implications but that was summed up in the simplistic description of one's skin color as black or "negro." The term "colored" also implied this difference. Although it was acceptable at the turn of the century (used to name the NAACP or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), it developed a more pejorative sense in the 1950s, implying the segregationist practices of denying African Americans access to stores, lunch counters, and parks, as well as designating areas on buses or specific "colored" drinking fountains, separate from "white fountains," where African Americans were forced to drink. In contemporary conversation, the terms 'colored' and 'Negro' are both offensive, reflecting the deep prejudice of our nation's history.

The term "nigger" was deeply offensive, as the story demonstrates, touching a sense of white racial superiority and violence that stretched back to the practice of slavery. There is no indication that "nigger" has ever been a commonly acceptable term, free of its offensive implication of subordination and threat of violence. Even when used casually in fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it implies a deeply held belief in

white racial superiority and disrespect of people it serves to name. The terms "black" and "Black" in the United States became acceptable ways of referring to African Americans as the political force of the civil rights movement took hold. The Black Arts Movement in the 1960s is one example of the way in which African Americans used the term Black to symbolize a cultural and communitarian solidarity and power. While its capitalized form is accepted today, the word "Black" can imply a clearer demarcation between people than exists culturally or biologically. While the forces of racism and prejudice have often enforced severe lines of demarcation in the social world, the reality of people's lives is often difficult to consider through the binary categories of "Black" and "white."

This essay uses African American to describe the narrator and his class mates. African American or African-American reflects the political tension of being a citizen of an American national culture that relied on slavery for two-hundred and fifty years and that extended slavery's effects through legally sanctioned social policies after the Civil War. The term emphasizes the cultural history of being Black and having ancestral connection to Africa and its many cultures.

The term "white" has been consistently acceptable, effectively naming a group of people with ostensibly various ethnic backgrounds. It is worth noting that no one's skin is literally white or Black, demonstrating that skin color is part of a system of representation, interpreted within social contexts. This strange consistency and effectiveness of the term "white" in the United States indicates perhaps that "whiteness" is not merely or mainly about one's literal skin tone, but about social (political, economic and cultural) power in the United States. The mere adjective "white" has seemed right for a long time, an often unnecessary descriptor of the "normal" American. This normalization of "whiteness" might provide an ironic index of the extent to which African Americans have been historically disenfranchised.

Civil Rights

This story was re-published as the first chapter of *Invisible Man* in 1952. Ellison's novel elucidated the social anguish of a society predicated on the social and legal principles of segregation in both the North and in the South. Two years after the novel was published, the Supreme Court issued *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas*, overturning *Plessy v.Ferguson* (1896), and declaring that the idea of "separate but equal" was inherently flawed. Segregation produced inequality of resources and opportunity. The Civil Rights movement in the South, led by religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., would strengthen to a point that could no longer be ignored.

Critical Overview

Standing as the first chapter of Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, "The Invisible Man" (a.k.a. "Battle Royal" or "Smoker") shares in critics' emphatic acclaim for the novel and the subsequent rise of the novel to fundamental literary importance. The story first appeared as "The Invisible Man" in the October, 1947 issue of the British literary periodical *The Horizon* (edited by Cyril Connolly). In adapting the story to the first chapter of the novel, Ellison made some minor alterations and added three final sentences to the story:

It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at the time I had no insight into its meaning. First I had to attend college.

The critical review of the 1952 novel was immediately appreciative; Wright Morris reviewed the book in the *New York Times* on April 13, 1952, and wrote, "With this book the author maps a course from the underground world into the light. *Invisible Man* belongs on the shelf with classical efforts man has made to chart the river Lethe from its mouth to its source."

Irving Howe reviewed the novel for *The Nation*, giving it a generally favorable review while criticizing its facile appeal to an "unqualified assertion of individuality." Howe begins the review with a description of the opening chapter, "The beginning is nightmare. A Negro boy, timid and compliant, comes to a white smoker in a Southern town. Together with several other Negroes he is rushed to the front of the ballroom, where a sumptuous blonde tantalizes and frightens them by dancing in the nude. Blindfolded, the Negro boys stage a 'battle royal,' a free-for-all in which they pummel each other to the drunken shouts of the whites."

Saul Bellow, in his review of the novel in *Commentary*, mentions having read "The Battle Royal" scene in *Horizon* five years before. Bellow writes: "A few years ago, in an otherwise dreary and better forgotten number of *Horizon* devoted to a louse-up of a life in the United States, I read with great excitement an episode from *Invisible Man*. It described a free-for-all of blindfolded Negro boys at a stag party of the leading citizens of a small Southern town . . . This episode, I thought, might well be the high point of an excellent novel. It has turned out to be not the high point but rather one of the many peaks of a book of the very first order, a superb book."

Much criticism of the novel echoes Bellow's endorsement that Ellison shuns a "minority tone" in his writing. The last sentence of the novel's "Epilogue" draws attention to the universal reach of the narrator's voice: "Who knows but that, on lower frequencies, I speak for you." Saul Bellow's early review represents this approach in according Ellison a general, humanistic voice that speaks to more than just the experience of race. Bellow writes: ". . . keenly aware, as I read this book, of a very significant kind of independence in the writing. For there is a way for Negro novelists to go at their problems, just as there are Jewish or Italian ways. Mr. Ellison has not adopted a minority tone. If he had done so, he would have failed to establish a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone."

While such a move toward humanistic value is possibly meant to be a compliment and to demonstrate the importance of the novel, there is an unsettling implication. To speak to a general audience, must one put aside the ideas of race? Is the "middle-of-consciousness" perspective a space that transcends racial conflict, racial identity and Bellow's idea of a "minority tone"? It might be more instructive to see how race is central to one's human experience.

Irving Howe noted this tendency in his consideration of the novel, writing, "Some reviewers, from the best of intentions, have assured their readers that this a good novel and not merely a good Negro novel." Howe continues by challenging this characterization and concludes his review, "But of course *Invisible Man* is a Negro novel—what white man could have written it? . . . To deny that this is a Negro novel is to deprive the Negroes of their one basic right: the right to cry out their difference." Surely the anguish of the first scene derives its power in presenting an African-American narrator who must face the smoker's vulgar racist structure as an object of manipulation; might it be that it is only through one's embrace of "minority tone" that a writer can touch common elements of a human experience?

There has been much critical work done on the novel as a whole in which the first chapter is closely considered. An early article in *Critique* by Jonathan Baumbach entitled "Nightmare of a Native Son: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* " explores the way in which Ellison renders "profoundly all of us" through the "southern Negro" protagonist of the novel. The article continues by praising and interpreting the novel. An article called "Imagery in the 'Battle Royal' chapter of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" by Norman German in the CLA *Journal* explores the reach of animal imagery in the chapter. He observes that ". . . the animal imagery graphically highlights Ellison's theme that when one sex or race treats another as an object or animal, both become dehumanized or bestial."

There is much critical work considering Ellison's relationship to a literary and political heritage of American writing. Ellison's commentary on, reworking of, and critique of Emerson's transcendental individualism is explored in Kun Jong Lee's 1992 article in the PMLA entitled "Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Emersonianism Revisited." Lee argues that "Ellison's response to Emersonianism enacts a creative reading of the grandfather's advice: Ellison 'yesses' it to death (in an ironic version of the affirmative Emersonian position) until Emersonianism chokes on him. In this way, like the narrator who reclaims his grandfather as his ancestor, Ellison brings Emerson into his own genealogy while subverting and expanding Emersonianism in the process." William Lyne, in the same issue of the *PMLA* as Lee, explores the valence of DuBois' trope "double-consciousness" in the article "The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness."

The sexual politics of the novel are considered with insight by Daniel Kim in an article published in the Spring, 1997 issue of *Novel* entitled "Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and its Homophobic Critique in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." Kim does a reading of the "Battle Royal" in sexuality." Kim's reading of the "battle royal" focuses on the way in which the "black male body" is botpursuing his broader analysis of the novel.

Kim argues that while Ellison offers a "far-ranging and subtle psychological account of white male racism," this account relies on the "presence of a disturbingly homophobic symbolism that undergirds it—for Ellison figures this homoerotically charged racial subordination, both directly and indirectly, as homoh an object of the white men's physical violence and simultaneously an agent of violence, inflicting pain on other Black bodies. Kim draws attention to the way in which white men instrumentalize the "black male body" as a means of vicariously gratifying their own desires.

More general teaching guides and critical guides contribute greatly to an understanding of the history and literary aspects of the novel and the story. One helpful guide is a documentary companion entitled "Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (edited by Eric J. Sundquist) by Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press. Published in 1995, the collection reprints speeches, essays and Supreme Court opinions that greatly enhance an historical and thematic understanding of "*The Invisible Man*." These include Booker T. Washington's *Atlanta Exposition Address*, excerpts from DuBois' *The Soul of Black Folks*, and the Supreme Court brief ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Mark Busby's *Ralph Ellison* (Twayne Publishers, 1991) lends an overview on Ellison's life and literary achievement. In 1989, the Modern Language Association published Approaches to Teaching Ellison's *Invisible Man*. This collection of essays, edited by Susan Resneck Parr and Pancho Savery, includes discussion of the novel's first chapter. See especially "'Ball the Jack': Surreality, Sexuality, and the Role of Women in *Invisible Man*" by Mary Rohrberger and "Making Invisible Man Matter" by Walter Slatoff.

The Cambridge University Press' *New Essays on Invisible Man* assembles essays from Valerie Smith, John F. Callahan, Berndt Ostendorf, Thomas Schaub, and John S. Wright. Published in 1988, the essays address issues like Ellison's use of the mask trope, of jazz and notions of "primitive" and "cultured" artistic expression, and of the narrative structure of the novel.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Johnson teaches American literature at the University of Pennsylvania where he recently received his Ph.D. In the following essay, he discusses the parallels and differences between the Emersonian reflection of the ideal self and Ellison's "Battle Royal."

In 1846, Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" elucidated the optimistic promise of American individualism. Emerson describes how the wilderness— "these plantations of God"—liberate the human spirit. He writes, "Standing on the bare ground— my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space; all mean egotism vanishes; I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." Emerson's reflection on the ideal self or "I" sets up contradictions that echo in Ralph Waldo Ellison's story "The Invisible Man." Throughout his ordeal, the narrator adopts an Emersonian optimism that enables him to keep looking ahead, thinking of himself as an ideal Booker T. Washington. The brutal scenes of violence test this optimism and suggest the limits that social forces, particularly racism, place on individuals. The following essay considers the narrator's detachment from his actual experience, arguing that this detachment reflects Ralph Waldo Ellison's qualification of an Emersonian optimism in light of the experiences of racial prejudice.

Emerson's metaphor of the "transparent eyeball" is complex. While it seems to imply a transcendent individual who is "part of parcel of God," it also implies a vanishing of individualism as "I become nothing." The metaphor of sight conveys this simultaneous inflation and erasure of the self.Emerson's powerful notion of sight first reaches to the farthest horizon and then reduces the body to mere eyeball, finally dissolving the physicality of the "eyeball" in a liberating transparency. Emerson thus insists on a spiritual correspondence between the world and the individual and proposes a brilliant energy that wraps the individual and the seen world together in a formula for unity and cohesion.

Emerson's ideal "I" reacts to the decade of the 1830s when the United States was deeply divided over the practice of slavery and Westward expansion. While the transparency of Emerson's eyeball implies that it is a universal model, potentially representing all people, Ellison uses the term "invisibility" to counter this idealism. In the time Emerson wrote and published his essay, relatively few could hope to experience the liberating perspective it pronounced. Slavery implied a very different "plantation" than "Nature's wilderness"—a plantation fundamental to the economic stability of the South and the fabric of the nation as a whole. Ellison's narrator demonstrates that even if one believes himself capable of filling the world up with their vision, of dissolving "mean egotism" and becoming transparent, one is more likely limited by people's prejudices regarding race, gender, and social class. Ellison calls these limitations the effect of invisibility, suggesting that it is difficult to achieve the visionary capability of the "transparent eyeball" when one is being seen as a stereotype, rendered an object whose identity is reduced to the color of skin. When the narrator finally stands up to

render his graduation speech at the hotel, Ellison ironically references "Nature's" metaphor of vision in describing the narrator: "There was still laughter as I faced them, my mouth dry, my eye throbbing."

In "The Invisible Man," the narrator looks around the room as if it were possible for him to expand into heroic self-fulfillment; however, the actual events brutally frustrate this elevation. But, even though the narrator never attains his heroic formula, he never concedes it to be impossible. This disjunction between the real events and the narrator's idealism is captured as the narrator reflects: I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington. 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 in the servants' elevator." As the scared teenagers literally rise together to another floor, the narrator clings to Washington's image to elevate himself above the other African Americans. Instead of promoting a solidarity between the classmates who commonly endure the effects of white racism, the narrator sees Washington as a means of access into a higher class world that affords association with whites.

The real Booker T. Washington was born into slavery and eventually became the powerful president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Under his leadership, Tuskegee became a powerful institution, training African Americans in vocational skills. Washington advocated a policy of economic self reliance for the African-American community, a policy that pleased powerful whites in the South whose social and economic power was maintained by the continuation of segregation. In his autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901), Washington includes his address to the Atlanta Exposition of 1895 from which the narrator borrows key phrases in his speech. Speaking to a primarily white audience at the Exhibition, Washington said "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." In promoting segregation, Washington mollified white fears of integration while emphasizing economic and social self-reliance of African Americans. Most pertinent to the narrator's speech is Washington's declaration that "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly."

It is important to consider that Booker T. Washington may have been manipulating his audience both in his autobiography and at the Atlanta Exposition. By knowing what the white power brokers wanted to hear, Washington could manipulate them with his words, performing an endorsement of segregation to gain economic and social power. As Houston A. Baker argues in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Washington may be manipulating stereotypes to a purpose and "The Atlanta Exposition Address" chapter in *Up From Slavery* may be "a *how to* manual, setting forth strategies of address (ways of talking black and back) designed for Afro-American Empowerment." Despite this ironic dimension, the narrator of "The Invisible Man" seems to read and recite Washington's Exposition Address without any conscious irony. It is telling that even in the course of being physically beaten, the narrator still fixates on giving his speech. He remembers, "The harder we fought the more threatening the men became. And yet, I

had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me?" The final question here—"What would they give me"—indicates a potential agency in the narrator, but his concern about his audience recognizing his ability disturbs this pragmatism. As the narrator throws punches at Tatlock in "hopeless desperation," he "[wants] to deliver [his] speech more than anything else in the world" believing that "only these men could truly judge [his] ability."

When he finally renders for a second time the graduation speech, the narrator's one word slip from "responsibility" to "equality" precipitates a surprising effect. The boisterous, jeering laughter hangs "smoke-like in the sudden stillness" before "sounds of displeasure" fill the room. As the narrator has "hostile phrases" thrown at him, a "small, dry, mustached man in the front row blare[s] out, 'Say that slowly, son!'" When the narrator repeats "responsibility" instead of "equality," the mustached man asks, "You weren't being smart, were you, boy?"

The truly disturbing aspect of the narrator's "mistake" is not the mere statement of "social equality" but the idea that the narrator is being "smart"—making fun of the white audience. To be "smart" might imply that the entire speech is in fact a charade, covering over the narrator's actual belief in the necessity of social equality. It is important to realize that in extricating himself from that bind, the narrator is not expected to speak politically or philosophically to his understanding and endorsement of "social responsibility"; instead, he merely grovels, reinforcing the whites' comfortable belief—or illusion?—that he is a mere puppet that has simply uttered the wrong word.

Of course, the narrator's explanation of the mistake makes no logical sense. How would "swallowing blood" make him say one particular word instead of another? In fixating on the literal act of speaking and swallowing blood, the narrator distracts the audience from the deeper meanings of the word "equality." His "swallowing of blood" turns his "mistake" into a physical reflex and invokes the pathetic violence that the narrator had endured before taking center stage to once again entertain his audience.

As the story ends, the narrator's safety depends on his ability to remain literal, speaking safelyscripted words that illustrate his lack of power. The small, mustached man concludes, "Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you but you've got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech." Here the hierarchy of power is clearly formulated. The pronouns "we" and "you" register a distinction that places the narrator in an inferior social category. By instructing the narrator to "know [his] place," the man emphasizes this inferiority; "do[ing] right by you" is another expression of white superiority, coded in a rhetoric of social responsibility. This differentiation and domination is reinforced, finally, by the demand on the narrator to "speak more slowly" and "go on with [his] speech." To conclude the speech, the narrator closes his ears and swallows blood.

In finishing his speech, the narrator reports that it "seemed a hundred times as long as before" and that he knows not to "leave out a single word." The speech is finally reduced to a mere string of stagnant words parroted to avoid impending violence. It sits in stark contrast to the expansive metaphors of Emerson's "Nature." When the narrator,

with tears in his eyes, then accepts the leather briefcase and college scholarship, Ellison's story flattens Booker T. Washington into a one-dimensional image promoting capitulation to white authority. In these reductions—of the narrator to the excruciating recitation of the literal, and of Washington to a mere image of white acceptance—Ellison bridles Emerson's ebullient symbol of the "transparent eyeball." This graduate's eye literally throbs as he struggles to prove to his white audience that he is not "being smart."

Source: Kendall Johnson, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001

Critical Essay #2

Bily teaches at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay, Bily discusses Ralph Ellison's use of paradox to enhance an atmosphere of chaos in "Battle Royal."

Few rooms in literature are as vividly drawn as the fancy hotel ballroom in Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal." Full of smoke, whiskey fumes, the red faces of howling drunken men watching a white woman dancing and a group of black boys fighting, the room calls to mind a chaotic vision of hell by Hieronymus Bosch. Ralph Ellison was fascinated by the chaos of the world, and saw confronting and depicting it as a writer's responsibility. In "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," he explains, "I think that the mixture of the marvelous and the terrible is a basic condition of human life and that the persistence of human ideals represents the marvelous pulling itself up out of the chaos of the universe. In the fairy tale, beauty must be awakened by the beast, and the beastly man can only regain his humanity through love.... Here the terrible represents all that hinders, all that opposes human aspiration, and the marvelous represents the triumph of the human spirit over chaos."

The challenge in pulling oneself up is learning to make distinctions, to see individual details in a chaotic swirl of elements. Ellison's language consistently draws attention to the ballroom as a place where seeing is difficult, where vision is literally and figuratively clouded. The room is entered, like a carnival fun house, through a "big mirrored hall," and what is found inside is not to be trusted. The room is "foggy with cigar smoke" as the boys enter, and the white men are engrossed with something the narrator and his friends cannot see. Against the backdrop of the sensuous clarinet, the narrator repeats the idea that "the big shots were becoming increasingly excited over something we could not see." As the episode begins, the two groups are separated by what they can and cannot see.

The "big shots" eventually push the narrator forward, where the nude woman is dancing, "the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils." Here the idea of seeing/not seeing becomes tangled on itself. The narrator wants to see her and yet not to see her: "I was strongly attracted and looked in spite of myself. Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked." The white men, having pushed the black teenagers forward, cannot decide how they should behave, and "some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not." What does it mean to look, and to see? What effect does looking have on the thing looked at? The dancer seems not to respond to the men's gaze, or to their drunken excitement, but retains "impersonal eyes" and a "detached look on her face."

After the dancer is carried from the room, the battle royal begins, and again the imagery of seeing/ not seeing is insistent. As they are about to fight, the boys are literally "blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth," and the narrator feels a "sudden fit of blind terror." As the fight begins, the voices of the shouting men frighten the narrator, and he tries to move his blindfold aside because "I wanted to see, to see more desperately than

ever before." But the blindfold is too tight, and the narrator comes to realize that a man who can't see is powerless. "Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity."

After a particularly hard blow to the face, the narrator discovers that his bandage has been knocked aside a bit and he has partial vision in one eye. Although the fighters are now out of control and hysterical, the narrator feels more in control, because "with my eye partly open now there was not so much terror." The rest of the boys are still "blind, groping crabs," but the narrator, with his limited vision, plays "one group against the other, slipping in and throwing a punch then stepping out of range." He believes now that his physical vision increases his control, but he soon finds that this is not the case. Although he is able to literally see what the other boys are doing around him, he does not see what they are planning as they exit the ring one by one and leave him to fight the "biggest of the gang."

The distinction between literal and figurative seeing is driven home (to the reader, if not to the narrator) when the boys are ordered to pick up their money where it is lying on the carpet. The narrator sees what the men want him to see: "I saw the rug scattered with coins of all dimensions, and a few crumpled bills. But what excited me, scattered here and there, were the gold pieces." Of course, the gold pieces are a trick, just as the electrified carpet is a trick.

Although the white men certainly bear a large portion of the blame for the boys' deception—they are, in fact, deliberately tricking the boys for their own amusement—Ellison makes it clear that the narrator's youth and inexperience, and his excitement at being asked to give his speech, also contribute to his situation. He is frequently distracted by the prospect of giving his speech. When the blindfolds are being put on the boys, the narrator does not at first realize what is happening to him, because "even then I had been going over my speech." He is thinking about his speech when the other boys start leaving the ring. When he is fighting Tatlock at the end of the battle royal, he thinks again of his speech, and he becomes "confused": "I wanted to give my speech more than anything else in the world"; "Should I try to win . . . ? Would not this go against my speech . . . ?" While his mind is thus occupied, Tatlock delivers the blow that knocks the narrator out.

Beyond the narrator's youthful eagerness, he is also subject to the same human weaknesses as his white tormenters. As he explained in a 1953 essay titled "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison had found that American writers "seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human. Too often what is presented as the American Negro (a most complex example of Western man) emerges an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel. Seldom is he drawn as that sensitively focused process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man." In creating the protagonist of "Battle Royal" and the novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison consciously tried to depict not an innocent victim or "angel," but a full, rich, complex human being, capable of making mistakes, and of learning and growing.

Ellison explained in *The Art of Fiction* that "the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility." He was referring in this line to the whole novel, *Invisible Man*, of which "Battle Royal" was the first chapter. It should not surprise us, therefore, to find that this narrator is often blind, and in many ways ignorant. In many ways, his attitudes and behavior echo those of the white "big shots" in the ballroom.

As brutal and humiliating as the battle royal itself seems to readers in the twenty-first century, Ellison does not entirely blame the white men for its existence. Most of the boys seem to take for granted that fighting this way is a good way to earn money, and the narrator has "some misgivings" only because he "didn't care too much for the other fellows who were to take part." Ellison wrote about the battle royal in *The Art of Fiction*, describing it as "a vital part of behavior pattern in the South, which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all greenhorns are subjected. This passage which states what Negroes will see I did not have to invent; the patterns were already there in society, so that all I had to do was present them in a broader context of meaning."

The narrator is not at fault simply for participating willingly in his own humiliation. He also shares in the white men's feelings of superiority, and is himself capable of behaving as an oppressor. As he rides in the elevator toward the ballroom, he thinks about the boys with him, and thinks, "I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together." As he fights Tatlock, he feels more on a par with the men than with the boy: "I felt that only these men could truly judge my ability, and now this stupid clown was ruining my chances."

The most disturbing example of the narrator's own capacity for cruelty and oppression comes when he watches the nude dancer. His description of the "magnificent blonde" strips her of all humanity, and reduces her to an object, a collection of body parts: "The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt." In watching her and dehumanizing her, the narrator is no different from the white men who are doing the same thing, and his response to her echoes the hatred the men feel for him: "I felt a desire to spit upon her as my eyes brushed slowly over her body." The atmosphere of chaos, of paradox, engulfs the narrator as he watches the dancer, and his feelings are contradictory and overwhelming: "I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her."

When the dancer has been carried from the room, and the boys have toweled off and changed their clothes, the narrator does at last get to present his speech. As the men continue to drink and talk among themselves, the boy speaks eloquently about wisdom and patience and social responsibility. After all he has been through with these men, he is still taken in by their "thunderous applause." When they present him with a college

scholarship, it makes up for everything: "I was overjoyed; I did not even mind when I discovered that the gold pieces I had scrambled for were brass pocket tokens."

Has the boy learned anything from his experience? There is no indication that he has. By presenting the ballroom as a chaotic world where nothing can be trusted, and by presenting the boy as fully human and flawed, Ellison makes a happy ending impossible. There is still too much for the boy to overcome, too much for him to learn. He does not yet know the difference between looking and seeing, and he does not understand that in a world of chaos, a piece of paper is no more to be trusted than a gold piece on a carpet. At the end of the story, though, there is some hope. The narrator is about to embark on a college education, and beyond that a life education. He has not yet pulled himself "up out of the chaos of the universe," but he is about to take the first step.

Source: Cynthia A. Bily, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses figurative language in Ellison's story.

Ralph Ellison's short story, "Battle Royal," first published in 1947, describes an extremely disturbing event, organized by the local elite white men of a Southern town. This event involves the abuse and humiliation of several young black men for the purpose of entertaining a gathering of these prominent and outwardly respectable white men. The narrator of the story, a recent high school graduate, has been invited to repeat a much-celebrated speech he gave at his graduation, in which he emphasizes the importance of "humility" among African Americans. Instead, however, he is grouped with several of the toughest young black men from his high school, and forced to participate in a series of bizarre and grotesque activities as a form of entertainment for the white men. These young men are first forced into the frighteningly uncomfortable situation of being exposed to a beautiful, blonde white woman, who stands completely naked in the middle of the room, as the white men look on. This is an especially intimidating situation for these young African-American men, because they have been strictly taught by a racist Southern culture not to regard white women in a sexual way. The young men are then blindfolded and forced to fight one another in a bloody brawl. Finally, they are forced to scramble for loose change and dollar bills on a rug which has been charged with electricity, subjecting them to painful electric shocks at each point of contact. Only after being subjected to these cruel and horrible activities is the narrator allowed to give his speech. During the speech, however, he is made a laughingstock by the white men, after which he is presented with a leather briefcase containing a scholarship to the state Negro college. Throughout this narrative, Ellison makes use of figurative language to describe this disturbing experience. The following essay discusses the effectiveness of Ellison's use of figurative language in this story, focusing particularly on the recurring motifs of war, circus, and animal imagery.

The central figurative motif of Ellison's story is that of war. Racial relations between black and white in the United States are represented as a state of warfare. This war motif is most strongly asserted through the dying words of the narrator's grandfather, who tells his son that "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." Racial relations in the United States, even after the end of the Civil War, and the era of Reconstruction, are described by the grandfather as an ongoing "war," and the struggle of African Americans to gain equality is referred to as "the good fight." The grandfather describes himself as a "traitor" to white people; he was "a spy in the enemy's country" in that he posed among white people ("the enemy's country") as the type of humble, subservient black man they wanted him to be, while secretly harboring rebellious ideas. The narrator admits that "I could never be quite sure of what he meant," but he nevertheless feels cursed by the statement. The narrator is particularly disturbed by his grandfather's description of

himself as secretly a "traitor" to white people, although outwardly conforming to their wishes.

The story's title, "Battle Royal," suggests that the incidents described in the narrative are just one battle in this ongoing racial war. This battle, however, is not fought between black and white, but among the group of black "schoolmates." The narrator explains that "the battle royal was to be fought by some of my schoolmates as part of the entertainment." They are forced to blindly fight one another in a brutal fistfight, and then to fight one another again in the scramble for money on the electrified rug. This "battle royal" symbolizes the ways in which white society forces African Americans to fight amongst themselves, defeating one another, in a scramble for the limited resources provided them by white society. Instead of banding together to protest their racist treatment by the white men, the young black men find themselves turning against each other for the prize money, and then for the loose change on the rug.

The figurative language of Ellison's story is further characterized by the recurring motif of comparing the experience to a circus. The circus imagery is significant to the story in several ways. A circus is a grandiose spectacle presented for the sole purpose of entertaining masses of people. A circus is also characterized by a variety of acts and events designed to arouse the awe and fascination of the crowds. The young African-American men in the story are forced to participate in a variety of events designed for the sole purpose of entertaining the crowd of white men who fill the hall.

In addition to circus imagery, Ellison's story includes the recurring motif of animal imagery. Sometimes the animal imagery is part of the circus imagery, a circus being characterized by various animal shows, such as lions, dogs, and seals. On one hand, the animal imagery implies that the treatment of African Americans by whites is animalistic and inhumane. On the other hand, the animal imagery in the story reinforces the message that the white men treat the African-American men as if they are no better than animals. Further, the circus animal imagery indicates that these young African-American men are being treated as *trained* animals—they are being taught by white society how to "perform," so to speak, for the entertainment and edification of white people. In the end of the story, the narrator realizes that, even his success as a high school student, and subsequent award of a scholarship to college, is simply further training for him to serve a role of subservience for the "entertainment" of white people.

The first mention of circus animal imagery in the story is uttered by the narrator's dying grandfather. After describing the lives of African Americans as a "war," he goes on to assert his method of dealing with white society in terms which compare it to a lion tamer sticking his head into the mouth of a lion: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth." The narrator's grandfather thus describes white society as a circus lion, a vicious beast in the presence of whom one is always in danger of being swallowed. Further, the grandfather's advice to "live with your head in the lion's mouth" implies that black people are at their best advantage symbolically "taming" the beast of white racist society by outwardly placating white people, while inwardly undermining their power. "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 open." The grandfather's advice is

to be so outwardly agreeable to white people, "let 'em swoller you," as to undermine white society from within by giving it what it thinks it wants, "till they vomit or bust open."

White society is described at several other points in the story, using figurative language which refers to animals. This imagery conveys the implication that the white men's treatment of the black men is animalistic and inhumane. As part of the circus motif, as mentioned above, white society is described as a circus lion. At the banquet hall, the white men, "all of the town's big shots," who attend the event, are described as voracious wolves, "who were there in their tuxedos, wolfing down the buffet foods, drinking beer and whisky and smoking black cigars." The image of white men as wolves indicates both their greed in exploiting black people and the vicious nature of their ardent racism. A wolf is a predator, and the racist white society preys upon the disempowered black community like a pack of wolves. The association of the white men with "howling" wolves is evoked later in the story, when the narrator is punched during a fistfight and, as he reels, sees the crowd of white men as, "howling red faces crouching tense beneath the cloud of blue-gray smoke." The white men in the crowd are later described as deadly snakes, animals almost always associated with evil, particularly by way of reference to the serpent in the Bible. After the narrator is blindfolded, and before he is forced to fight his fellow classmates, he explains that "I felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness, it was as though I had suddenly found myself in a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths."This reference to the "cottonmouth" snake is also appropriate because the mention of "cotton" recalls the use of black slaves in the South to pick cotton for white plantation owners. Although the story is written long after the abolition of slavery, the association suggests that even in the mid-twentieth century, white society's treatment of African Americans is little better than that of slave masters. Later in the story, when the young black men are forced to scramble for change on an electrified rug, one of the white men is heard to yell out, "like a bass-voiced parrot." Parrots are known for their ability to mindlessly mimic the words of human beings, without any comprehension of the meaning or significance of what they are saying. This image implies that the crowd of white men, shouting at the young black men, are no better than parrots, mindlessly repeating the racist words and deeds perpetuated by white society, without any thought or consideration.

The circus imagery continues with the description of the naked white woman in the middle of the room as having hair that is "yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask." Here, the white woman is seen as occupying a similar social station to that of the young black men; like them, she is not treated as a human being, but as an inanimate object, a "doll," brought in as a toy or plaything, part of the circus-like entertainment for the enjoyment of the white men. Although the narrator ultimately seems to be sympathetic to the white woman, he also describes her in terms of animal imagery. He describes her eyes as "hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt." This is certainly an odd descriptive image. However, the association of the naked white women with "a baboon's butt" suggests both disgust and disdain. She is later described more sympathetically as a "bird girl," when the narrator states that, "She seemed like a fair bird-girl in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea." This image suggests that the narrator sees the woman as delicate, and vulnerable, indicating his feelings of

sympathy for her, as she is also being humiliated and exploited by the roomful of white men, who appear intimidating as "some gray and threatening sea." One of the white men lasciviously ogling the naked white woman is described as an animal, "his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda." This "creature" demonstrates the quality of the racist white men as no better than animals in their regard for, and treatment of, the white woman, as well as of the black men.

While the white men are described in terms of animals associated with viciousness, evil, and predatory behavior, the young black men are described as animals evoking very different associations. As they are forced to fistfight one another while blindfolded, the narrator describes the young AfricanAmerican men as defenseless "crabs," doing their utmost to "protect" their vulnerable "midsections": "The boys groped about like blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their midsections, their heads pulled in short against their shoulders, their arms stretched nervously before them." This description goes on to associate the young men with even more defenseless, "hypersensitive" creatures, "their fists testing the smoke-filled air like the knobbed feelers of hypersensitive snails." The narrator later associates himself with an animal, one that is delicate, vulnerable, and beautiful: a butterfly. As he lies knocked to the floor, he watches "a dark red spot of my own blood shaping itself into a butterfly, glistening and soaking into the soiled gray world of the canvas." Even in the moment of utter pain, humiliation, and defeat, the narrator maintains the sense of self-worth to envision himself as something beautiful. Further, butterflies are associated with change and rebirth, as the beautiful butterfly emerges from the plain cocoon. In some ways, this experience is a sort of "rebirth" for the narrator, as he gains a deeper, albeit more troubling, perspective on the nature of racism, and his own position in a white, racist society. When, in the next round of events, the young black men are forced to scramble for money on a rug charged with electricity, the narrator describes himself as a rat, when he describes the experience of being electrocuted on the rug: "A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat." Rats are generally considered among the lowest and most disdainfully regarded of creatures; the narrator here expresses the sentiment that white racist society looks down on African Americans as no better, and deserving no better treatment, than rats. Further, rats are scavengers, who survive by scrambling for whatever food they can find. Similarly, the young black men are made to scramble for the money on the rug, as if African Americans were given no dignified means of supporting themselves within the structure of white society.

Similarly to being treated like trained animals, the young black men are treated like "circus clowns," forced to makes fools of themselves for the entertainment of the white crowd. As the forced fistfight continues, the narrator finds himself one of two men left fighting. He attempts several times to work together with his fellow classmate in fooling the white men while avoiding actually hurting each other. But the other man is too caught up in the desire to win to appreciate this effort. The narrator then describes him as a "stupid clown" whom he felt was ruining his chances of making a positive impression on the white men. The young black men are further described as trained animals displayed for the purpose of entertaining the white crowd, as at a circus, when the narrator describes one of them "lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug." This description

continues with further animal imagery, as the narrator describes seeing the young man, "literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies." Here, the young black man is described as a horse, a beast of burden kept by humans to serve their own ends, just as black people have been used by white society as beasts of burden to perform grueling physical labor. The "many flies" which sting the horse describe the crowd of white men, the narrator implying that they are no better than flies, and perhaps dangerous only because they are "many" in number.

The circus imagery first evoked by the grandfather's advice comes full circle with the dream described by the narrator at the end of the story. The narrator describes a dream he had the night after being forced to participate in this series of events, and then being awarded a college scholarship. He dreams that he was at a circus with his grandfather, who "refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did." The clowns here represent African Americans, who are forced by white society to "perform" acts of self-humiliation for the entertainment and pleasure of white people. In the dream, the narrator's grandfather refuses to laugh at the clowns, because he knows that they are his own people, forced into such acts of submission. At the end of the dream, the grandfather has given the narrator a note that implies that white society will continue to make a clown of him, and that, by association, even the college scholarship is merely another gesture by white society meant to enforce the subservience and "humility" of black people.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Do you trust the narrator's perspective? What are some different perspectives that might add to a fuller picture? How might the story be told through Tatlock's eyes? Through the eyes of the woman?

In 1947, this story was first published as "The Invisible Man." Five years later, the novel was published under the title of *Invisible Man*. How does the absence of the article "The" change the title? How might one interpret the title and meaning of the book differently because of this change?

The M.C. is a strange character. His voice steers the audience's and the reader's attention to particular scenes. Analyze the role the M.C. plays in the story. Why is there so little description of this character?

There is a lot of laughing but it is difficult to discern what is funny. Why are so many of the men laughing? What kind of laughter is it and what does it mean?

Why does the narrator give the speech at the end? Why doesn't he get angry and leave?

Compare & Contrast

1952: Racial segregation is legal, upheld by the Supreme Court decision of 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Schools, housing and employment and businesses in the South maintain separate facilities for Black and white people.

1954: The Supreme Court reverses the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision with the decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas. Declaring that separate facilities are inherently unequal, the court ordered the desegregation of schools throughout the country.

2000: Today, *de facto* segregation continues to frustrate the implementation of the court's 1954 decision.

1860: About forty percent of African Americans living in the city of New York would have to move in order to achieve racial integration. In New Orleans, about thirty-six percent of African Americans would have to move. (Massey and Denton)

1940: About eighty-seven percent of African Americans living in the city of New York would have to move in order to achieve racial integration. In New Orleans, about eighty-one percent of African Americans would have to move.

1990: About eighty-two percent of African Americans living in the city of New York would have to move to achieve racial integration. In New Orleans, about sixty-nine percent of African Americans would have to move.

What Do I Read Next?

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) by James Weldon Johnson. Unsigned on its publication in 1912, the novel was republished in 1927 with Johnson named as author. The story is a narrative about "passing," in which a young boy learns the rules of racially identifying and being identified as an African American at the turn of the nineteenth century. Raised by his African-American mother in the North and virtually abandoned (except for economic support) by his Southern, white father, the narrator ultimately decides to allow society to consider him white. The novel offers an ironic story of self-realization that both highlights and critiques the forces of racism.

The Big Sea (1940) by Langston Hughes. The first volume of Langston Hughes' autobiographical novels, *The Big Sea* is a dynamic representation of learning what race means in New York, in Mexico, in the southern United States, and in Africa. The narrator uses humor, insight and a poetic sense of language to convey his experiences in learning to regard his racial identity and his cultural heritage as a source of strength from which he is able to understand himself as an individual in a complex world.

The Great Gatsby (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is the story of Nick Carraway, a young man from Minnesota who moves to New York to become a stock broker. He tells of his friendship with Jay Gatsby, a man who has followed his first love for many years, trying to become rich enough to marry her.

Notes from the Underground (1864) by Fyodor Dostoevsky. This book was a crucial influence on Ellison's full novel. Dostoevsky was a Russian novelist whose narrator in *Notes . ..* elucidates the feeling of anonymity, isolation and powerlessness that often characterized life in the increasingly industrialized cities of the nineteenth century.

The Souls of Black Folk (1903) by W. E. B. DuBois. DuBois' essays present the enduring challenges facing African Americans in the South after the Civil War and at the turn of the century. He analyzes the political and historical implications of slavery and the courageous lives of those who had to fight for physical and intellectual survival.

The Street (1946) by Ann Petry. The story of Lutie Johnson, a mother who struggles to raise her child in 1940s Harlem. The novel presents a variety of characters to depict the cruel effects of segregation and to analyze the relationship between race and socioeconomic opportunity.

Further Reading

Branch, Taylor, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*, Simon and Schuster, 1988.

This Pulitzer Prize-winning history narrates the intensification of civil rights initiatives and the advent of a national movement that spanned across the North and South.

Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man*, Random House, 1952.

The complete novel develops themes laid out in the short story. The plot follows the narrator to college and then to New York City where much of the novel takes place.

Kozol, Jonathan, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, HarperPerennial, 1991.

This book offers accounts of the state of public education in the United States, demonstrating that racial segregation has endured since 1954, perpetuating inequalities in social and economic opportunity. The book blends insightful interviews of teachers and students with analysis of the current logic behind public policy.

Sundquist, Eric J., ed., *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man": A Bedford Documentary Companion*, St. Martin's Press, 1995.

This book offers fabulous excerpts from a wide range of documents, including Supreme Court decisions, literary essays, historical considerations and political essays. Serves to orient the novel in regard to the historical, political and social context in which it was written, published, and read.

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Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

Morris, Wright, *New York Times*, April 13, 1952.

Neal, Larry, *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings,* edited by Michael Schwartz, Thunder's Mouth, 1989.

O'Meally, Robert, ed., *New Essays on "Invisible Man*," Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Parr, Susan Resneck and Pancho Savery, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Ellison's "Invisible Man*," The Modern Language Association, 1989.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's“For Students” Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on “classic” novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of “classic” novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as “The Narrator” and alphabetized as “Narrator.” If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name “Jean Louise Finch” would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname “Scout Finch.”
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood's “The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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