King of the Bingo Game Study Guide

King of the Bingo Game by Ralph Ellison

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Introduction

Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game" was first published in the literary journal *Tomorrow* in November, 1944. The story is customarily examined as a prototype for Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, but the work was intended to stand on its own. The theme of alienation has been treated by many authors, but in "King of the Bingo Game," Ellison examines the specific alienation felt by blacks in the United States. The protagonist of the story, the Bingo King, is alone in the world and his isolation is further highlighted by the potential death of his wife, Laura, who is seriously ill.

Structurally, the story is complex, combining harsh realism with a dreamy surrealism in a way that approximates the mind of the Bingo King. The story also provides an interesting examination of a segment of the American population often ignored: the working-class blacks of the day who were new to urban life. The Bingo King is not an idealized character; Ellison gives him characteristics such as a backwoods cluelessness and inner yearnings he has trouble understanding and articulating. The story's conflict centers around one of the oldest themes in literature: a person's helplessness before the hand of fate and the individual's irrepressible desire to overcome that helplessness. In "King of the Bingo Game" Ellison provides an examination of this relationship with fate, and more specifically, a black man's confrontation with fate.

Author Biography

Bom in Oklahoma City on March 1, 1914, Ralph Ellison was raised in a cultural atmosphere that encouraged self-fulfillment. He was awarded a scholarship by the state of Oklahoma in 1933 to attend Booker T. Washington's prestigious Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Ellison later expressed negative feelings about the scholarship, because he felt that the program was a way for Oklahoma to prevent black students from enrolling in its state universities. At Tuskegee, Ellison studied music, but he never graduated. In the summer of 1936, he went to New York City, where he met Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes Scholar and leader of the Harlem Renaissance arts movement, and Langston Hughes, renowned poet and author. Ellison never returned for his senior year of school.

In New York City, Ellison familiarized himself with Harlem while he looked for opportunities for a career in the arts. In 1938, after several financially difficult years, he joined the Federal Writers' Project, part of the Works Progress Administration which provided jobs for unemployed writers, editors, and research workers during the depression. With the confidence that this job gave him, he soon began to publish stories in magazines. "King of the Bingo Game" appeared in the left-leaning political journal *Tomorrow* in 1944. After returning from wartime service in the merchant marine, Ellison was invited to spend time in Waitsfield, Vermont, where he began to form ideas for what was to become his most important work, the novel *Invisible Man*. The novel appeared in 1952, won the National Book Award, and quickly became recognized as a seminal American work defining race relations in America from a black perspective.

Twelve years later, Ellison published a collection of essays and interviews, *Shadow and Act*. In the intervening time, he had been celebrated, accoladed, and awarded numerous grants, fellowships, and honors. He collected honorary degrees from, among other schools, Harvard, Williams, and Tuskegee. From the time of the publication of *Invisible Man* to his death, Ellison was working on a second novel. In 1967 a fire destroyed 350 pages of the manuscript, and the novel has never been published. Ellison died of cancer in 1994, and since then the *New Yorker* has published two of his early stories.

Plot Summary

"King of the Bingo Game" opens with a man sitting in a movie theater watching a movie he has already seen. He is hungry, and he can smell the peanuts that the woman in front of him is eating. Readers are able to access his thoughts as he envisions being in the South where he could ask the woman for a peanut and she would give him one. He also thinks the same thing about a pair of men who are on his right, drinking wine. He is broke and his wife, Laura, is sick and dying, Watching the movie, he thinks about how the characters in the movie are able to escape their predicaments, but he is not. He also thinks of what would happen if the woman in the movie were to take off her clothes.

He falls asleep and dreams that he is back in the South, where he lived when he was a boy. He dreams that a train is bearing down on him. Although he jumps off the tracks, the train follows him onto the highway and down the street. He wakes up screaming, and an old man next to him gives him a drink of whiskey. As the movie ends, a bingo game begins. The protagonist has brought five cards with him; he worries that the bingo-caller would not like this if he knew, but he needs to get money for a doctor for his wife and he needs the extra chances. Although he becomes flustered trying to keep up with the numbers being called, he ends up getting bingo, and has a chance to spin the bingo wheel in order to win the day's jackpot. Initially afraid that he has marked the wrong numbers, he is reassured as the authorities confirm his victory.

While on the stage, the bingo caller, a white man, begins to make fun of the Bingo King, talking "jive" and sneering at his rural upbringing. The protagonist must push a button in order to make the bingo wheel spin; if the wheel stops on double-zero, he will win the jackpot of $36.90. Confident that he has the right strategy, he pushes the button. "There was a whirl of lights, and in a second he realized with finality that though he wanted to, he could not stop." He keeps his finger on the button and the wheel spins faster. The audience begins to get impatient and starts yelling at him to get down, but he cannot. He feels that he has control, and he thinks that this experience "is God!" The bingo caller puts his hand on the Bingo King's shoulder, but he brushes it away violently, a deplorable action considering his upbringing in the South.

As the Bingo King remains on the stage, he refuses the bingo caller's demand for him to finish. He looks out on "all the Negroes down there" in the audience and feels that "most of the time he was ashamed of what Negroes did himself. Well, let them be ashamed for something this time." He feels powerful. As the wheel continues to spin, he feels in control; he is "the-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo." Still on the stage, the man's nose begins to bleed and he starts to think of running away with his wife, running down the subway tracks. As the crowd sings mocking songs at him, he thinks, "I'll do what I got to do."

Finally, the crowd begins to applaud. The Bingo King does not let go of the button even as two men in uniform approach him. He runs from them from one side of the stage to another, tries to avoid them, but finally they wrestle him to the ground. As they take the button away from him, the numbers land on double zero. "You see," he tells them, trying

to explain that he is a winner, and he believes he "would receive what all the winners received." However, as the story closes, the only thing that he receives is the "dull pain exploding in his head" from the blow the police give him.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"King of the Bingo Game" is a short story that takes place within a movie theater located in a northern city.

The story's main character is an unnamed man. This man is not at the theater to see the show - he has seen it already - but rather to participate in the bingo game that will take place after movie ends. The man is hungry and although the woman next to him is eating peanuts and the men on his other side are drinking wine, he is not comfortable asking them to share their food.

The man thinks about how life in the North is different from his southern hometown; in the South, people tend and help each other out and stick together more. The nameless man can use some help. He does not have a job. His wife, Laura, is seriously ill, and they cannot afford a doctor.

The man's thoughts are interrupted when he realizes his favorite scene in the movie is about to begin. He quickly loses interest in the scene, however, and his thoughts turn to how much better the movie would be if the woman in the scene he had just been watching had taken off her clothes.

Soon, the man falls asleep and dreams of his boyhood in the South. In his dream, he is walking along a railroad trestle when he sees a train approaching. He runs off the trestle as quickly as he can possibly go, only to find the train has left the track and is following him down the street. Adding to his horror is the fact that white people are lining the street, laughing at him while he runs from the train.

The man awakes from his dream, screaming, which prompts the man next to him to offer him a drink. The man accepts the bottle in the paper bag and, after taking a drink, the man realizes it is not wine, like he originally thought, but whiskey.

Soon after, the movie ends and the man prepares for the bingo game. The man has five cards and while he fears this may get him in trouble with the theater's manager, he is desperate to win. He has trouble keeping up while the numbers are called. When he finally realizes he has a bingo, it takes him several minutes to come forward.

When the man makes his way to the front of the theater, he begins to worry that he has made a mistake and that he hadn't won after all. The bingo caller checks his card and verifies that he has indeed won.

As the winner of the bingo game, the man has an opportunity to spin a wheel for the chance to win the day's jackpot: $36.90. He receives his instructions: push a button to make the wheel spin, if it lands on double zero, he will win the jackpot. The man begins

to panic and tries to leave the stage. The bingo caller calls him back and begins to make fun of the man's rural southern roots.

When the bingo caller places the button in the man's hand, he reviews his strategy. The man is certain that giving the wheel a short spin will increase his chances of winning. Even so, when he pushes the button, the man seems to become entranced by the bright lights and spinning of the wheel. He continues to press the button, feeling as though as long as he continues to do so, he will remain in control of the jackpot.

Before long, the audience grows impatient and begins to yell for the man to leave the stage. Someone advises him to not take too much time, and even though the man nods in agreement, he continues to stand on the stage, pressing the button. While he does this, the man has a revelation: he believes that he has found the existence of God.

The bingo caller places a hand on the man's shoulder, telling him he has taken too long. The man brushes his hand off, and then, realizing the inappropriateness of this action, calls the bingo caller over. He explains to the bingo caller that he just wants to win the jackpot and asks the caller to let him show everyone how to win.

While he continues to press the button, the man looks at the audience, recognizing the fact that they are ashamed of his actions. He ignores this and decides it is alright for them to be ashamed of him, because most of the time, "he was ashamed of what Negroes did himself".

When the crowd's screams become louder, the man begins to realize that the wheel is controlling him just as much as he is controlling it. He also begins to realize that, if he stopped pressing the button, he might lose and his wife would die. He implores his wife to live, an outburst that momentarily quiets the crowd.

The man realizes that his outburst has caused his nose to bleed. He also begins to think that the audience's impatience is caused by their desire to win the jackpot. The man decides that he will never let them in on his secret, instead he will keep the wheel spinning forever, since as long at the wheel continues to turn, his wife would be safe.

He begins to imagine that he is running along the subway tracks with Laura in his arms, just ahead of an 'A' train. While people are imploring him to stop, he knows that if he does, he and Laura will almost certainly be killed by the oncoming train.

The man is jolted from his daydream by the sound of singing. The audience is singing songs to mock the man, but he remains firm in his resolve to complete his task. Soon, the singing fades, and the audience breaks into applause. The man thinks for a moment that he has won the jackpot, but realizes that could not be possible since his thumb is still pressing the button.

The man sees two uniformed men approaching him and tries to avoid them by running from one side of the stage to the other. The men finally wrestle the man to the ground and, despite his protest, they pry the button from his hand. The wheel stops at double zero and the man believes he has won. When the curtain goes down, one of uniformed

men delivers a violent blow to the man's head. It is at that moment that he realizes that his luck has run out.

Analysis

Ralph Ellison's short story "King of the Bingo Game" is a story that relies heavily on symbolism and irony, while it explores the themes of fate and race.

Written in 1944, the story describes a black man's struggle to take care of his sick wife, while living in an unfamiliar northern city. The man is unable to work and is hoping to win a bingo jackpot of $36.90 to help pay for his wife's medical care.

The most significant symbol in the story is the bingo wheel. It is to this wheel that the man in the story is pinning his hopes and dreams. He truly believes that if he is able to control the wheel, he will have better control of his life. In reality, the wheel is a game of chance, over which the man has little control. This effectively sums up the position of most black people living in the United States during that time period: they had little control over their destiny and fate and in many cases became victims of circumstance.

The bingo game itself is also symbolic of the black man's experience in the United States during that time period. Their ability to rise above their circumstances occurred as direct result of their own persistence and willingness to take a risk. Similarly, the man in the story took a risk by bringing five cards to the bingo game, even though he was sure it would anger the manager of the bingo hall.

In order to win the jackpot, the wheel needed to stop at the space marked "double zero". Again, the use of symbolism as well as irony is apparent here. The irony exists in the fact that "double zero" is the magic number that will seemingly solve all of the man's problems, yet the number zero is usually symbolic of losing. In this story, "double zero" represents the man's current situation, as well as the extent to which it will improve should he be lucky enough to "win" the jackpot of $36.90, an amount scarcely enough to solve his financial crisis.

The sequence of events that unfolds while the man is spinning the wheel is also symbolic of the seemingly futile position in which black people found themselves during this time period. It is obvious the man knew his situation was hopeless and his wife would likely die, yet, he manages to convince himself that as long as he continues to press that button, he could somehow suspend reality and keep things just as they are. Letting go of the button would be equivalent to accepting that position, something the man is not willing to do.

It is also significant that the man remains nameless throughout the story. Later we learn that the man's name actually was given to him "by the white man who had owned his grandfather a long time ago down South". Leaving the man nameless enables him to represent an entire class of people who resorted to games of chance and other types of risk in an effort to establish their own identities. Had he been given a name, it would

have been easier for the reader to dismiss the man's difficult circumstances as being the result of his own actions.

By the time we get to the end of the story, we realize that even though the wheel did in fact stop at "double zero", the man will not win the jackpot. This should not have come as a surprise, however, because the two dreams the man has during the course of the story foreshadow this outcome.

First, when the man falls asleep during the movie, he dreams a train is chasing him, and even though he feels he has finally reached safety by jumping from the trestle on which he had been walking, the train leaves the tracks and follows him through the streets. Next, while the wheel is spinning, the man imagines he and his wife are trying to outrun a subway train. Knowing that he is certain to die if he stops, the man continues to run along the tracks.

It is interesting that both dreams involve the man running from a train. This is symbolic of the fact that he will never escape his fate and shows us how difficult it was to be a black man living during that time period.

Characters

The Bingo Caller

The bingo caller is the man who calls out the bingo numbers and who acts as the master of ceremonies. When the Bingo King wins the chance to spin the wheel, the caller introduces him and makes fun of his rural upbringing. At first the caller is amused by the King's refusal to relinquish the button, but then he gets angry at the King's demand to remain in control. The caller represents the low-level forces of authority: he does not make the rules, but he must enforce them.

The Bingo King

The Bingo King, the protagonist of the story, remains unnamed throughout. As the story opens, he is watching a movie for the fourth time, enjoying a scene in which a woman is tied down to a bed. However, his mind is also troubled by thoughts of his sick wife. The Bingo King is originally from the South, and as he sits in the movie theater he thinks about the difference between his home, where "folks stuck together ... they didn't even have to know you," and how it contrasts with the everyone-for-himself mentality of the Northern city in which he now lives.

When he wins the chance to spin the bingo wheel, however, he overcomes his Southern reticence and naivete. Seeing the opportunity to control his fate at last, he refuses to let go of the button that spins the wheel. All of the frustrations and hardships of his life flash before him as the wheel spins, and while he continues to push the button he feels that he can suspend time. However, the real world finally intrudes upon him when he receives a literal kick in the head, jolting him back to reality as the story ends.

Laura

Laura is the Bingo King's wife. She is suffering from an unspecified serious ailment, and the Bingo King needs money to pay the doctor. She only appears in the story in the Bingo King's thoughts.

Themes

Fate and Determinism

In "King of the Bingo Game," Ellison explores the relationship between man and fate. The bingo wheel represents the "Wheel of Fortune," an ancient image used to depict man's position among the fates. The concept of the wheel attempts to explain how a person can be fortunate and prosperous one day and destitute the next by positing that people are on a wheel, moving up and down unpredictably. This concept holds that any person who is experiencing difficulties should persevere because eventually that position will reverse. For the Bingo King, though, the Wheel is a joke that does not fulfill its assigned role. The Bingo King has been perpetually on the bottom. When the story opens, he is almost penniless, he is new to an unfamiliar and unfriendly city, and his wife is dying. He attempts to stack the odds in his favor by buying five bingo cards, but when that plan succeeds he is confronted by another difficult problem: how to make the bingo wheel stop on the double zero he needs in order to win the jackpot.

When he actually starts to spin the wheel, though, the Bingo King has a flash of understanding. Unless he continues to spin the wheel, thereby suspending its final judgment, he will again end up on the bottom: "high and dry, dry and high on this hard high slippery hill and Laura dead." Consequently, he decides to take control of his own fate by continuing to spin the wheel, deferring any judgement or decision momentarily. For the time that he continues to press the button, he is able to stand outside time and be the one being that is not subject to Fortune's whims: "This is God! This is the really truly God!!" he exults.

However, Fate's enforcers—the bingo caller and the police—are finally able to wrestle the button away from him, and in that instant he returns to his accustomed place at the bottom of the wheel. At the end of the story, he receives his accustomed justice: "as he warmed in the justice of the man's tight smile he did not see the man's slow wink, nor see the bow-legged man behind him step clear of the swiftly descending curtain and set himself for a blow. He only felt the dull pain exploding in his skull."

Race

Although the story's theme is certainly applicable to all, Ellison makes it clear that he is focusing on how the "Wheel of Fortune" affects black Americans in particular. The Bingo King is by no means an Everyman: he belongs to a historically oppressed social group, and even within his own social group he is a member of a less fortunate minority. Ellison immediately injects the racial theme into the story when the Bingo King watches the movie surrounded by black men who imagine themselves in a room with the bound white woman. Sex between black men and white women was greatly feared by whites in the South and considered a terrible transgression. Even the whispered fantasies of the Bingo King's neighbors must be terrifying to him: people were lynched in the Bingo

King's home of North Carolina for lesser transgressions than whispering. The way the Bingo King's neighbors talk about undermining this fundamental rule of white society foreshadows the King's own rebellion against the laws of fate.

Ellison underscores the way the Bingo King is alienated from his own race as well. When he stands on stage, the emcee asks the Bingo King where he is from. "Down South," the King answers. The emcee then subtly ridicules his rural accent and down-home ways which are different from the hard cynical ways of the audience, who call "Let that fool up there!" when he gets his bingo. However, the Bingo King gets his revenge (if only in his own mind) as he stands on the stage, overcoming Fate. "All the Negroes down there were just ashamed because he was black like them. Most of the time he was ashamed at what Negroes did himself. Well, let them be ashamed for something this time. Like him." In a further ironic twist at the conclusion of the story, the Bingo King receives precisely the same brutal treatment that any other member of his race would experience.

Style

Narration and Point of View

"King of the Bingo Game" utilizes a third-person narrator who is inside the consciousness of the Bingo King. The narrator relates the Bingo King's thoughts and his memories. At first, the narration is relentlessly realistic, and almost naturalistic in its depiction of the mind of a poor, downtrodden, yet still-hopeful man. The introduction of his sick wife into the narrative gives the story a melodramatic tone.

However, as the story continues, the realism lessens and the narration approximates the consciousness of the Bingo King, becoming a mouthpiece for him as he is taken over by the power of the bingo wheel. "This is God! This is the really truly God!" the narrator tells us. "He was reborn. For as long as he pressed the button he was The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo." But as the story ends, the narrative voice recedes, and as the power of the wheel is separated from the Bingo King by the authorities, the realistic narration that was present in the beginning of the story returns.

Irony

Ellison uses irony, a characteristic modernist device, throughout the story. It is ironic, for instance, that the number the Bingo King needs to hit in order to win the jackpot is double zero; "zero" being what American blacks felt they had received from the established white society. It is also ironic that the Bingo King's freedom from circumstances is attained through playing the numbers. The hope peddled by numbers runners drained significant amounts of money and hope from the poor people who bought chances. The fact that the "jackpot" is only $36.90 is also ironic; such a small amount of money would barely begin to bring the Bingo King out of poverty.

Deeper irony resides in other parts of the story. The Bingo King ensures an even harsher punishment for himself by refusing to relinquish the button. As he returns to the real world, away from the suspended reality of the spinning bingo wheel, he bitterly tells the men surrounding him, "You see." "It's O.K." But as one of the men smiles at him, another readies to kick him in the head. Though he has overcome fate and taken control of his destiny in the world of the bingo game, and though the wheel of fortune brings the Bingo King up to the top, at the end of the story he finds himself at a point even lower than where he began.

Symbolism

The main symbol in the story is the bingo wheel. That wheel represents not only the capricious nature of Fortune or Fate, but also the futility of the hopes of the black people in the audience, once the Bingo King strikes 00 and still loses. However, many of the

smaller items in the story also have symbolic value. The bag of peanuts eaten by the woman in front of the Bingo King represents all that he desires but cannot have: money; pleasure; a better life; the feelings of "sticking together" that he remembers from the South. Their smell "stabbed him like a knife." The whiskey that the man in the theater gives to the Bingo King recurs in a symbolic way when the King is on stage and the audience sings "Shoot the liquor to him, Jim boy!" Whiskey or liquor here symbolizes the release from daily existence that is both welcome and extremely dangerous. To the men in the audience, the Bingo King simply seems drunk, while in his own mind, he is transcending the bonds of everyday reality.

Historical Context

Race in the South

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, and during his childhood he encountered opposition from the city's white establishment. His mother was persecuted for her political activities on behalf of the Socialist Party Oklahoma's governor during Ellison's early years was the white supremacist "Alfalfa Bill" Murray. Murray established a very unfriendly atmosphere for blacks in Oklahoma, and the state saw at least one serious race riot during that period. Although Oklahoma is not a part of the South proper and was still Indian territory during the Civil War, the state has absorbed a Southern cultural heritage from its neighbors Texas and Arkansas. Part of this heritage included Jim Crow laws, the system of de jure and de facto (meaning unwritten but enforced) racial segregation laws that persisted until the 1960s.

Ellison believed an effort was made by the state to ensure that black students would not attend Oklahoma state universities by offering scholarships to promising students for study out of state. Ellison received such an offer and accepted it. He attended the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the most renowned black school in the country. While travelling by freight train to Alabama, Ellison was forced off the train in Decatur, Alabama. Decatur was the town in which the Scottsboro Boys were being prosecuted for the alleged rape of two white women aboard a freight train. Fearing the worst, Ellison fled and managed to escape.

As a result of the brutal conditions in the South, millions of blacks moved to the cities of the North in the period 1910-1950. This "Great Migration" was opposed by the white power structure in agricultural states such as Mississippi and Alabama, Needing the labor that black sharecroppers provided, the states and localities attempted to stop blacks from leaving. However, cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and New York each absorbed hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Though these immigrants were not treated well in the North either, they provided a labor pool from which the cities of the North became industrial powerhouses. Ellison's character, the Bingo King, is one such Southern immigrant.

Race in New York City

In 1936 Ellison moved to New York City and therefore avoided much of the brutal racial oppression that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s in the South. Ellison's early neighborhood, Harlem, had by the 1920s become a haven for blacks coming north from Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia. However, although the North did not have the Jim Crow laws that characterized the South, it was by no means a land of equality. Blacks in the North suffered from limited educational and economic opportunities. They were the "last hired and the first fired" for most jobs. Harlem was often a rude shock to poor blacks fleeing the South. Expecting a friendly reception in a proudly black city, they

were greeted by crime, poverty, and the New York attitude that disdains newcomers and country people.

However difficult life was in Harlem, it was regarded as better than life in the South, and for this reason many of the leaders of African-American culture flocked to the city. In the 1920s the neighborhood enjoyed a cultural high point called the Harlem Renaissance. Writers such as Langston Hughes (one of Ellison's first friends in New York) and Zora Neale Hurston, musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and many other artistic and intellectual figures made Harlem and New York a haven for African-American culture.

Although New York was often difficult and daunting, Ellison remained there for most of his life and taught for a decade at New York University. Ellison became a fixture in the city's intellectual and cultural life and cultivated long-term friendships with many of its most important writers. The city of New York is a dominant image in his novel *Invisible Man*. The conclusion of the novel finds the protagonist living in Harlem, a situation that mirrors the choice of many artists and writers to move to this cultural center during the Harlem Renaissance.

Critical Overview

Because a collection of Ellison's short stories has not yet been published, these works have received very little critical attention in comparison to the large body of criticism that has grown up around his novel *Invisible Man*. For years the stories were difficult to find; they appeared in small magazines and few were anthologized. Consequently, criticism of "King of the Bingo Game" tends to focus more on the story's relationship to *Invisible Man* than on the story's position in Ellison's short story *oeuvre*.

As a precursor to *Invisible Man*, however, "King of the Bingo Game" demands attention. The Bingo King, like the protagonist of Ellison's novel, remains unnamed. He is alienated from his surroundings, and he combines the existential anxieties of the traditional modernist hero with the specific experiences of blacks in America, experiences which only heighten his alienation. Leonard J. Deutsch asserts that the story "seems a rehearsal for *Invisible Man* in that it features a nameless character who, despite the absurdity of his situation, tries desperately to manipulate his fate and forge his own identity."

Like James Baldwin and unlike Richard Wright, Ellison claimed a place for himself not as a black American writer, but simply as a writer. Like both of those writers, he examined the plight of the African American in a country that was hostile to his very existence. For Ellison, this hostility serves to deepen the already profound difficulties all people have in establishing an identity. Yet Ellison also felt that the black American experience endowed writers with a special perspective from which to view the historical developments of the century. Ellison discussed this feeling with author John Hersey during an interview presented in Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays. Commenting on the black author's position in society, Ellison said: "Although we were outside the social compact, we were existentially right in the middle of the social drama. Thus we saw things, and we understood the difference between ideal assertions and cruel realities."

Critical opinion on "King of the Bingo Game" generally springs from these principles. Willi Real points out the movement from realism to surrealism in his essay covering Ellison's story included in *The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century*. Real believes that Ellison is ironically modeling the Bingo King's "development towards ego-identity," and demonstrates the Bingo King's "disintegrating personality." The story is a "total defeat" for the protagonist, and Real quotes Ellison's comment on this: "The nature of society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are."

Pearl I. Saunders' article in the *CLA Journal* agrees with Real's assessment of the story. For her, Ellison's intention was "to elucidate the complex struggle of the black American for personhood, for positive identity, and for recognition." She agrees that the story results in a defeat for the protagonist but outlines the development of the protagonist's life before the bingo game in greater detail. "With a false belief in deterministic fate, he revolts against the absurdity of existence and strives towards authenticity," only to find that revolt blocked by the forces of society, which are personified by the bingo caller and

the police Examining its symbols, she sees the story as that of the universal search for identity seen through the particularly difficult experiences of the African American. Saunders writes: "The bingo game is suggestive of the chances Blacks take; the nameless protagonist is representative of the unauthentic selfhood created by a repressive society; the bingo wheel is symbolic of the Black American's destiny in an existentialist tradition enforced by a white majority."

"Much of the rhetorical and political energy of white society went toward proving to itself that we were not human and that we had no sense of the refinement of human values," Ellison told Hersey, referring to black Americans. "But this in itself pressured you, motivated you, to make even finer distinctions, both as to personality and value. You had to, because your life depended on it and your sense of your own humanity demanded that you do so. You had to identify those values which were human and preserving of your life and interests as against those which were inhuman and destructive." The Bingo King fails in this; he is unable to make the right choices and to preserve his own self-interest. In the process, he sees his own identity slip away along with the fate that he controlled while he held the button.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Greg Barnhisel is a writer and editor at the University of Texas at Austin. In the following essay, he addresses the narrative structure of "King of the Bingo Game." Barnhisel also discusses themes within the story and Ellison's feelings about being a black writer in America.

Ralph Ellison struggled through much of his career with his role as a black American writer. Alternately patronized and exalted in his early career, by the 1960s the militant tone of the black intellectual world deemed him irrelevant. Activists of the civil-rights movement preferred the militancy and anger of works like Black Boy, (written by Richard Wright, one of Ellison's mentors) over Ellison's moderate stance. Ellison never felt comfortable with what he saw as the limitations of the genre of "Negro literature." "I am a human being, and not just the black successor to Richard Wright," he wrote, "and there are ways of celebrating my experience more complex than terms like 'protest' can suggest."

Ellison was educated in the two most important "schools" for black intellectuals and artists of the time. He attended Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, the college founded by Booker T. Washington, and lived in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, a period which produced an explosion of critically acclaimed literary and artistic works that originated with black artists living there. He also felt the strong influence of the late nineteenth century's most important black American thinkers: Washington, who argued for tolerance and patience in racial

In 1952, Ellison published *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award and has since gained recognition as one of the most important American novels of the twentieth century. The novel, modeled after Fedor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, tells the story of a young black man who leaves his small town to attend a school much like Tuskegee, then moves on to New York where he falls in with a radical group. Ellison's protagonist does not see militancy as a legitimate solution, and at the end of the book he remains as alienated from his surroundings as he was in his segregated hometown. In this, Ellison is closer to modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf than he is to writers such as Wright.

"King of the Bingo Game," from 1944, is in many ways a precursor to *Invisible Man*. As in the later novel, the story's unnamed protagonist does not feel connected to any of the other characters in the story (although he is dedicated to his sick wife Laura, who does not appear except in his thoughts). He seeks to turn his marginality into a mechanism by which he can control his own fate. This marginality is symbolized by his own particular personal situation, his identity as a rural Southerner in the urban North, and his identity as a black man in a white-dominated society. The topics of alienation and control were written about extensively by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The presence of these themes within "King of the Bingo Game" demonstrates the influence Nietzsche had on Ellison.

The story is almost perfectly divided in half. The themes, events, characterization, and even the style of the narration abruptly shift at the halfway point. This is not to say that the story is not unified; each half comments on its counterpart, and complements the other.

In the first half of the story, we meet our unnamed protagonist. He is sitting in a movie theater, watching a movie, and feeling the pangs of hunger as he smells the roasted peanuts that the woman in front of him is eating. Throughout this half of the story, the protagonist is passive and has no control over his surroundings. He is also vaguely dissatisfied: "'If this was down South,' he thought, 'all I'd have to do is lean over and say, 'Lady, gimme a few of those peanuts, please ma'am,' and she'd pass me the bag and never think nothing of it ... Folks down South stuck together that way." We see immediately that he does not feel at home. The solidarity of the oppressed which black people shared in the South is lost here, and the (relative) freedom from the Jim Crow segregation laws is cold comfort to our hungry hero.

As he watches the movie, the protagonist thinks to himself that "They had it all fixed. Everything is fixed." He already knows what is going to happen, not only in the movie but in his own life. He dreams of what might happen if the events in the film were somehow altered. The protagonist's daydream about the white woman removing her clothes implicitly suggests a violation of one of the most crucial elements of Jim Crow laws, the prohibition against any sexual relationship between whites and blacks. But obviously, this does not happen, and the protagonist is trapped in his fate. He is poor and unemployed, his wife is dying and he cannot afford a doctor, and he cannot count on the even superficial friendliness that he would have found among Southerners.

The story begins to shift as the protagonist "felt for his bingo cards, smiling." The curtain rises, suggesting the suspension of reality which the stage symbolizes, and the bingo game begins. The protagonist has improved his odds on winning by buying five cards, and although he has difficulty keeping up with the caller's numbers (much as he cannot keep up, financially, with the demands of his wife's illness), he ends up winning. The fact that he "stumbled up the aisle" and that the audience refers to him as "fool" indicates to us that this minor victory is not yet enough to save him. As the authorities check his number, he is still at the mercy of forces beyond his control, and he remains so as the bingo caller makes fun of his accent and upbringing.

However, as he takes the button from the bingo caller and prepares to try to win the jackpot, his outlook changes. "He steeled himself; the fear had left, and he felt a profound sense of promise, as if he were about to be repaid for all the things he'd suffered in his life." In the second half of the story, the protagonist is transformed: he finally has power, not only over his own fate, but over the entire audience. The wheel spins and spins and he watches it, both frightened and enthralled by the unfamiliar thrill of being in control. "He and only he could determine whether or not [the jackpot] was to be his. Not even the man with the microphone could do anything about it now. He felt drunk."

The protagonist is drunk with power. The power that the button gives him allows him to step beyond the limitations on his actions imposed by his race, class, and origins. As the spectators watch him, impatiently yelling at him to hurry up and finish, he looks down on them from the stage, both figuratively and literally: "Those folks did not understand what had happened to him ... He watched the wheel whirling past the numbers and experienced a burst of exaltation: This is God!"

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And as if God was on his side, the protagonist defies a white authority figure, an act of defiance that he would never have dared to commit before. The bingo caller's "hand fell on his shoulder . He brushed the hand violently away. 'Leave me alone, man. I know what I'm doing.'" In the face of the potential jackpot, all men are equal.

The protagonist even takes his newfound equality a step further as the wheel continues to spin madly. The crowd yells at him to come down from the stage, but by now he has transcended not only his race but his humanity. "He was a long thin black wire that was being stretched and wound upon the bingo wheel; wound until he wanted to scream; wound, but this time himself controlling the winding." With his hand upon the button, he has somehow tapped into the power of the Fates that control the universe.

The spinning wheel as the arbiter of fate is one of the oldest images in Western literature. Ancient Roman literature often refers to the Wheel of Fortune, and in the *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the Roman statesman Boethius meditates on how the spinning wheel, which once placed him in high and prestigious positions, now has overseen his death penalty from the imperial government. Chaucer, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, also uses the concept of the wheel of fortune to explain people's seemingly inexplicable shifting fates. In Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game," the hero clearly has spent most of his life on the bottom of the wheel, and his initial victory at bingo indicates to readers familiar with this image that he will now have the pleasure of fortune's favor.

The bitter irony of the story lies in the fact that the protagonist's triumph is momentary. Confronted by the spinning wheel of Fate, he seeks not to trust in the wheel's wisdom, but rather to control it.

The wheel, in the story, is indeed God: it determines the fates of the bingo victors. The protagonist's fault here is another one with an ancient heritage; he suffers from hubris, the belief that one is superior to fate and the gods. By the end of the story, the crowd which he previously commanded is mocking him, stomping and singing derisive rhymes, and the authorities are called. He runs away from them in circles, looking to the audience like an actor in a slapstick sketch, and finally is knocked down and kicked in the head as the audience applauds.

Another parallel for Ellison's story is the Gospel narrative of Jesus before the mob. At first encouraging and eager, the crowd quickly turns ugly and before long sides with the authorities who oppress them. Both the crowd and the protagonist here are black and

the authorities are white; in the Christ story, Jesus and the mob are Jewish and the authorities are Roman. In both cases, the individual who is chosen feels separated and alienated from what should be his people.

As in much of Ellison's writing, "King of the Bingo Game" weaves together communal themes of racial oppression and individual themes of alienation. Ellison's refusal to indicate which of the two is more fundamental to his characters' predicaments condemned him to a marginal place both among the modernist writers (who valued the theme of individual alienation above all) and the radical black writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s (who felt that racism was the most important topic to explore). However, it is precisely that indeterminacy that helps Ellison capture the complexity of the dynamic between self and society.

Source: Greg Barnhisel, for Short Stories for Students, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Diane Long Hoeveler is the author of several books and numerous articles and reviews. In the following essay, Hoeveler discusses the game imagery in "King of the Bingo Game," describing how certain symbols represent the futility and repression many African Americans feel.

Game imagery in Black literature utilizes two major motifs: language as game and the image of gaming itself as an expression of the difficulties that face Blacks struggling toward authentic identity in an alien and alienating culture....

The focus of this paper, however, is on the second major motif: the image of game playing and the theories surrounding games as an expression of both the futility and the special challenges posed to Black culture in contemporary America. Central to this motif is the notion that Blacks are the victims not only of an unfair and discriminatory social situation, but also they are, like all human beings, the victims of fate and chance. Whereas Blacks seem to be playing a game of double jeopardy with the "deck stacked against them," Ellison implies in "King of the Bingo Game, that Blacks must break the vicious cycle of despair and delusion in order to achieve selfhood and respect. The urge to escape into a fantasy realm, the realization that one has nothing to lose, the fear that one can never win because the odds are hopeless, all of these gaming motifs function throughout Black literature, but most blatantly in Ellison's early short story, "King of the Bingo Game."

In his adaptation of the nameless and alienated hero's dilemma, Ellison depicts a man's transformation from paranoid weakness to a commitment to responsible action. At the beginning of the story the hero is filled with self-hatred and anxiety about his inadequacies as a man trying to survive in a northern urban environment. By playing the bingo game the hero learns that salvation is not something handed to you; it is a goal that one must strive for all one's life. There can be no easy or quick fixes for anyone, least of all Blacks, and to hope for one is to waste one's time and efforts on a mirage, Ellison's short story subtly condemns those aspects of Black culture that would seek to offer Blacks the promise of sudden riches without hard work and diligent responsibility. The numbers game, whose odds of winning are over 75,000 to 1, is a panacea, an illusion held out to Blacks, just as is the bingo game. More cruelly, however, the numbers game drains poor Blacks of the money they do have. By betting on an illusory future, they lose their chances to take responsibility for the present. By choosing to play the game, they actually forfeit their hold on life, on the realities that must be faced if they are to achieve their potential.

Ellison's story, then, is dominated by the bingo game and the wheel of numbers, both games relying on the placement of numbers in a "winning" sequence. The players, though, have no control over those numbers, while the winning sequence is a purely arbitrary result of chance. The application of these two facts to the realities of Black life is, of course, rather blatant. Ellison's challenge as an artist lies in transforming this

blatant game imagery into a powerful expression of futility, despair, and ultimately transformation....

As game-theorist Anatol Rapoport has pointed out, the nonzero-sum, non-negotiable games like bingo and the numbers wheel are nuclear conflict games in which each "player assumes that the other is individually rational, but both can rationalize a strategy which is not collectively rational." He develops this theory by stating that these sort of games raise the "possibility that the player may be acting rationally and yet the system in which he operates remains utterly crazy in relation to some larger context." Thus, Ellison's protagonist attempts to play the bingo game in such a way that he can rationally circumvent the operations of chance. He does this by playing five bingo cards at once in order to increase his odds of winning But his victory, which he thinks will somehow enable him to save his dying wife's life, is fleeting, for he wins the bingo game only to find that he has to play another game in order to actually win die jackpot....

In order to win the evening's jackpot, a paltry $36.90, the hero has to spin the wheel so that it stops at the double zero, an appropriate symbol for the emptiness of both the game he is playing and his current prospects. At this point the hero realizes that since the birth of his parents and his own birth he had always been handed the "unlucky cards and numbers" in life. As he presses the button that controls the wheel, he becomes filled with "a profound sense of promise, as though he were about to be repaid for all the things he's suffered all his life." The game has assumed for him religious significance, for it must somehow redeem the injustices that real life has inflicted on him. Therefore, he cannot let go of the button because he knows that it "held his fate" and "as long as he pressed the button, he could control the jackpot."

The originator of modern game theory, John Von Neumann, has observed that all games are based on the premise that the game has a "stop rule," an ending that is built into and logically proceeds from the rules of the game. He compares this stop rule to a brick wall erected at the end of the universe, and his imagery is appropriate for the circumstances of Ellison's protagonist. Although the master of ceremonies urges him to let go of the control button, the hero cannot. He is mesmerized by "watching the wheel whirling past the numbers." He experiences for the first time a sense of power and control over his own destiny. He has replaced the domain of fate and chance with his own power and he "experienced a burst of exaltation: This is God! This is the really truly God! He said it aloud, "This is God!"'

The hero has, unfortunately, fallen into the trap of playing the game and believing it. One is reminded of the vet, a character who advises Ellison's hero in *Invisible Man* to play the game without believing it. But the king of the bingo game thinks he has undergone a spiritual transformation at this point. He tries to scream his message to the audience; he tries "to tell them the most wonderful secret in the world," that they can momentarily escape the tyranny of fate and chance and take those powers into their own hands. The emcee, functioning as the voice of white society and perhaps its white God, insists that the hero stop pressing the button. Their conversation reveals that the rationality required for two-player games has broken down. Instead while both think they

are playing a game, they are actually discussing issues of free will, destiny, and salvation. .. .

But the hero cannot release his grip on the button, for it is his final link with the past. If he releases the control he returns to his old identity as a believer in life as a game. As long as he holds the button he has no identity. He realizes that "he didn't need that old name; he was reborn.. .as long as he pressed the button he was The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-pnze-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo." This moment of epiphany, of self-ordained godhood, however, is rudely shattered when two men in uniform approach to remove the hero from the stage. He makes a desperate dash to avoid diem and "discovers by running in a circle before the wheel he could keep the cord from tightening." This is the final phase of the series of games that the hero has played. At this point he becomes a wheel himself, imitating its movement by going nowhere. As the uniformed men wrench the button from his hand, "the wheel spins slowly to a stop. Without surprise he saw it rest at double-zero." He has won the game, but nothing else. Ellison deflates this moment of the story specifically to show that the game means nothing in itself; it is simply a means to an end and that end is self-knowledge.

At this point the hero recognizes that the wheel is an image, just as games are games and not life. By seeing the bingo wheel as an image, a fictional expression of the powerlessness of Blacks, the hero is able to escape its power over his life and dreams. He realizes that he has given fate and chance, the key elements in any game, power over him by admitting their inexorable ability both to crush and to save him. Ellison takes a qualifiedly optimistic view by insisting on the openness of the universe in opposition to the closed world of games. The hero leaves the stage with a new, albeit muted, attitude of confidence: "Well, let 'em laugh. I'll do what I gotta do."

We have seen that in many ways Ellison's utilization of game imagery corresponds to recent commentators on game theory like Piaget, Caillois, Huizinga, and Rapoport. But there is another purpose in using gaming in both this story and in *Invisible Man*, in which that nameless hero also finds himself involved in a number of games and is associated with dolls, masks, and machines, Ellison, in an interview with John Hersey, remarked that human beings cannot be treated the way Blacks have been "Without developing a very intense sense of the precariousness of all human life, not to mention the frailty and arbitrariness of human institutions." This frailty and arbitrariness can best be represented in art by the image of games, those make-believe simulations of real life with rules that are as arbitrary and yet as binding as are the rules that govern society.

Source: Diane Long Hoeveler, "Game Theory and Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game'," in *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer, 1992, pp 39-42.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Sounders describes some of the symbols in "King of the Bingo Game," such as the double zero and the other instances of invisibility, which help to create the theme of "powerlessness of Blacks in America."

Ralph Ellison's short story, "King of the Bingo Game," recounts the experiences of an unnamed black man who struggles to survive to be recognized in an environment that insists on catering to his invisibility. This nameless man lashes out against the restrictive and stultifying aspects of his victimized black life style. Faced with a dying wife, Laura, who needs adequate medical care, he engages in a bingo game held at a moviehouse, hoping to win money to defray the medical expenses. Subsequently, he receives the winning bingo card. However, in order to win the jackpot of $36.90, the bingo wheel must stop between the double zero, symbolic of his invisibility. The wheel becomes the interpreter of his destiny. Realizing the meaninglessness of his life, he deliriously revolts against his fate. No longer fate's scapegoat, he proclaims himself the King of the Bingo Game. For the first time in his life, he has control of his destiny; he has temporarily become the determiner of his fate. But fear grasps him; so he is indecisive toward the testing of his moment of control or power by allowing the wheel to stop. He knows that as long as he presses the button, he can control the jackpot. But when the cord is finally extricated, the wheel ironically registers between the double zero. However, the unlucky man finds that he is not allowed to win the jackpot or the game. To elucidate the complex struggle of the black American for personhood, for positive identity, and for recognition, Ellison employs the bingo game to depict life as a risk and a gamble, the nameless protagonist to reflect the social invisibility Blacks experience daily, and the bingo wheel to exemplify the powerlessness of Blacks in America,

Ralph Ellison relates the unnamed protagonist's life to a bingo game, a game of chance. This man is faced with the dilemma of a dying wife who needs proper medical care, but he has insufficient money to defray incurred expenses. Overcome with desperation, he surrenders his humanity to risk his luck, viewing this decision as the price for a painful reality. He has to take the chance of winning the jackpot for his loved one's life and for his own destiny. Since Ellison's hero is filled with self-loathing over his own inadequacies, he feels that "he doesn't have much of a chance. For Laura, though, he has to have faith." The existentialist hero's vulnerability and capacity to be easily victimized is illustrated in the dream of his childhood:

He is a boy again walking along a railroad trestle down South, and seeing the train coming, and running back as fast as he can go, and hearing the whistle blowing, and getting off the trestle to solid ground,...looking back and seeing with terror that the train has left the track and is following him right down the middle of the street, and all the white people laughing as he runs screaming.

This dream revealing the high social invisibility, humility, and alienation the nameless man experiences, is the basis for his defeated attitude toward life that "everything is fixed." Ironically, the man's attitude is refocused after he wins the bingo game. With a

false belief in deterministic fate, he revolts against the absurdity of his existence and strives toward authenticity. The hero, "feeling a profound sense of promise, as though he is about to be repaid for all he has suffered all his life," proclaims himself king of the bingo game. Perhaps now he can gain freedom, continuation of love, and individuality, and a positive self-image; he is no longer life's scapegoat, but a real person.

Certainly, the bingo game is symbolic of the black hero's experiences in white America, because his experiences require a certain amount of risk and determination. Even with certain advantages the chances of obtaining visibility are very rare. Ellison demonstrates this point when he describes the futile efforts of the protagonist to win at the bingo game by using five cards, instead of just one: "Well, not everyone plays the bingo game; and even with five cards he doesn't have much of a chance." In his frenzy, as the self-proclaimed Bingo King releases the cord controlling the wheel, it registers a double zero, symbolic of and similar to the rewards received by Blacks for their efforts, generally nothing.

In addition, Ellison's symbolic employment of an unnamed protagonist represents the namelessness, the invisibility, or lack of identity experienced by the black American. Ellison appropriately places his hero in a darkened theatre, which Edward Guereschi fittingly calls a "modern psychic confessional," to reveal his concept of self and others. "Well, I ain't crazy. I'm just broke cause I got no birth certificate to get a job, and Laura 'bout to die 'cause we got no money for a doctor. But I ain't crazy." This "confessional" not only engenders a self-analysis, but it allows him to rationalize his relationship with others. He is surrounded by indifferent and unfriendly people who treat him as though he were an apparition, a non-existent being, the epitome of invisibility. As his stomach growls from hunger, people around him eat and drink; they never extend their generosity to him. He thinks that If this was down South .. all I'd have to do is to lean over and say, "Lady, gimme a few of those peanuts,

Obviously, Ellison's emphasis on symbols in the 'King of the Bingo Game' reflects the suppression of Blacks in an indifferent white America."

please ma'am," and she'd pass me the bag and never think nothing of it. Or he could ask the fellows for a drink in the same way Folks down South stuck together that way; they didn't even have to know you. But up here it is different Ask somebody for something, and they'll think you are crazy.

The anxiety and alienation engendered by these roles explain the protagonist's defeated attitude toward life. Moreover, on having control of the bingo wheel, he rebels against "the unlucky cards and numbers of his days," and he assumes the stance of a metaphysical rebel, when he cries out: "This is God!" Ellison's hero now has temporarily shed his sense of powerlessness, and he emerges from a restrained and insignificant role to one filled with efficacity. Now, in control of his destiny, he can attest to his uniqueness and aliveness. He realizes that his destiny has always been guided by hatred; hatred of self and of his race, caused by the repressiveness of a white controlled and white dominated society. He stood pressing the button, the voices of the crowd reaching him like sounds in distant streets Let them yell All the Negroes down there

were just ashamed because he was black like them. He smiled inwardly, knowing how it was Most of the time he was ashamed of what Negroes did himself.

Having exchanged his birthright for pottage, a mere $36.90 jackpot, he realized that somehow he had forgotten his own name . That name had been given him by the white man who had owned his grandfather a long lost time ago down South. The unnamed man feels that King of the Bingo Game is a better title and reflects a more positive identity than the one given him by the white man. Holding onto the buttons as if it were his life, he screams, "I can't give it up." Immediately, the destiny of his black heritage becomes a reality as the button is wrested away and the wheel "spins slowly to a stop ... at double zero." In this moment of defeat, it becomes quite apparent that his luck has expired; he has failed in his attempt to win the jackpot, that which he has sold his soul for, and he establishes a bona fide selfhood in the game of life.

Undoubtedly, the most important symbol Ellison employs is the bingo wheel, representative of life's destiny and the "system" that decides the fate of Blacks. As the protagonist presses the button of the bingo wheel, he realizes that his whole life is determined by the bingo wheel; not only that which will happen now that he is at last before it, but all that has gone before, since his birth, and his mother's birth and the birth of his father It has always been there, even though he has not been aware of it, handing out the unlucky cards and numbers of his days

The Bingo King feels that the wheel is symbolic of his destiny, because it determines whether Laura lives or dies. If he cannot control it and win the jackpot, he would be penniless; therefore, Laura would not receive adequate medical care and would eventually die. Likewise, if Blacks cannot influence the "system," so that it also works to their advantage, then they also would metaphorically die. He is enslaved by an understanding that makes his black heritage something more than a mere acceptance of circumstances, because he knows that as long as he presses the button, he can control the jackpot, his life. By holding unto his destiny, the cord to the wheel, he controls the existentialist universal need for identity and self-reliance. Edward Guereschi feels that the bingo wheel represents the wheel of fortune to the Bingo King, who possesses and is possessed by it. He asserts that the wheel is an ironic symbol of psychic enlightenment. The wheel suggests, to the protagonist, a glittering enlargement of life.

Gazing at the glistening wheel (the protagonist) is overcome by the twin desire to regard it as the interpreter of his fate, as well as to ascribe to it his ... despair. As a symbol of destiny, defining his submission, the wheel is in deed the harbinger of bitter truth

Furthermore, Guereschi feels that because of the great impact the wheel has on the protagonist, he fears to put his fortune to the test of reality by allowing the wheel to spin to a halt. Instead, he remains frozen, pressing the button mechanism that leads surreahstically to his subconscious.

The nameless man's destiny becomes a reality as the cord is torn away from him, and the wheel registers the winning double zero. Ironically, even though he wins the game

according to the rules, he loses his individuality. He comes to a full awareness of his place in the game of life.

Obviously, Ellison's emphasis on symbols in the "King of the Bingo Game" reflects the suppression of Blacks in an indifferent white America. The bingo game is suggestive of the chances Blacks take; the nameless protagonist is representative of the unauthentic selfhood created by a repressive society; the bingo wheel is symbolic of the Black American's destiny in an existentialist tradition enforced by a white majority.

Source: Pearl I. Saunders, "Symbolism in Ralph Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game'," in *CLA Journal*, Vol. XX, No. 1, September, 1976, pp. 35-9.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Chaffee discusses the symbolism of the "slippery stage" and the "slippery brink" that the narrator of "King of the Bingo Game "feels himself to be on, which is indicative of his mental condition.

The Black man in Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game" crosses a "slippery stage"; he feels himself standing on a "slippery brink," left on a "slippery hill." In his efforts to escape from the police officers who will both free him and crush him, he dashes forward, "slipping and sliding." To express the protagonist's elusion of the officers, Ellison says "he slipped them ...." After receiving a blow on the head, the bingo player knew his luck had "slipped out of him." This repetition of the words "slip" and "slippery" is no accident. On the contrary, by this means Ellison, who uses words like a poet, points to the heart of the story. Like the protagonist in *Invisible Man*, the nameless bingo player wanders on a slippery psychological no man's land, alternately touching reality and swimming in fantasy, and occasionally caught in a mesh woven from the interlocking of both worlds. He drifts between other polar states, also, shifting from despair to hope to a suspension of despair and hope; from a sense of power to a sense of impotence to a confusion of both power and impotence; from a certainty of identity and sanity through an anonymity and instability to a new identity. He moves back and forth between the roles of spectator and actor, between feelings of coldness and warmth, between periods of darkness and light.

The bingo player's slippery hold on reality is both dramatized and symbolized. It is dramatized, first, through his assertions of his identity and the undercutting of those assertions by himself or by Ellison. When the Master of Ceremonies at the bingo game asks him where he is from, he responds, "'Rock' Mont, North Car'lina.'" At this moment he holds two identities—one present and real, one past and fantasy. He is an isolated alien in a hostile Northern city, but he identifies himself in terms of what he remembers as a comfortably predictable environment where he would not hesitate to ask for a handout even from a stranger because "Folks down South stuck together that way " Consciously he contrasts the hostility of the North with the camaraderie of the South. Yet this is the same South which his unconscious has presented to him as inescapably oppressive when, in a feverish dream, he sees himself pursued by a train down the street of a Southern city, "and all the white people laughing as he ran screaming." And this is the South which, at a later point of ambiguous identity, he renounces.

Caught in the spell of the bingo wheel, he forgets his name. In rapid succession, his response to this experience passes from that of a "sad, lost feeling" to a recognition that the name was not his own but "had been given to him by the white man who owned his grandfather" to a rejection of "that old name" and personal assumption of a new name reflecting his feeling of power: "For as long as he pressed the button he was The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-the-Bingo." Incorporated into this process of rebirth is his question to the audience: "Who am I?"' The answer he receives and ignores suggests an identity no closer to reality than his own:" 'Hurry up and bingo, you jerk!"' His final identification of himself as winner, based

on the wheel's stopping at the lucky numbers, is immediately contradicted by "the dull pain exploding in his skull." He does not know who or what he is; he is unable to perceive himself in relationship to objective reality, past or present.

Closely related to the man's problem with identity is his tendency to cross from sanity to a state of mental and emotional instability. This slippery sanity, however, is balanced by his meditations which suggest, sometimes to the reader alone, sometimes to the bingo player as well, the absurdity of the world he lives in. He becomes, then, a kind of wise fool, though a very different one from Lear's fool. He has no idea that he is cast as fool; he does not stand apart from the world and judge its foibles—he is one of its foibles. His sanity is indeed precarious. Even before the bingo game his self-reassuring thought "I ain't crazy" is shadowed by "a pinpoint of doubt." Within the context of this attempt to evaluate his own rationality, he reflects that for lack of a birth certificate he has been denied the work that would earn money for essential medical care for his beloved Laura. Whether the requirement of the birth certificate is a ruse of prejudiced employers or whether it is a legitimate formality, Ellison's purpose in using the incident is clear. A world in which two people face death—one a physical death, the other an emotional death— because a man cannot produce legal proof of birth is a crazy world. Later, in states of varying degrees of delirium, the bingo player unwittingly identifies the two major symbols in the story. As he fantasizes somewhat unstably during the pre-bingo movie, he concludes that the projection beam will never drop half-way to the screen and the hero will never rape the heroine because "Everything was fixed" and "If a picture got out of hand like that those guys up there would go nuts."

Later, drunk with weariness, excitement, and two gulps of whiskey on an empty stomach, he leaves the dark world of the mere spectator and enters, for a brief time, the brightly-lit world of actor, only to become hopelessly confused about the extents to which he is simultaneously actor and acted upon. He has a plan, a plan for controlling the bingo wheel which he fully intends to carry out, but even as he reviews that plan, he sees in this wheel the omnipotent, impersonal Wheel of Fortune:

He felt vaguely that his whole life was determined by the bingo wheel; not only that which would happen now that he was at last before it, but all that had gone before, since his birth, and his mother's birth and the birth of his father. It had always been there, even though he had not been aware of it, handing out the unlucky cards and numbers of his days.

In the few minutes of his mystical relationship with the wheel he experiences both supreme power and supreme submission.'One moment he can think of his power over the audience, the Master of Ceremonies, the laughing white folks down South, his would-be employers: "He was running the show, by God! They had to react to him, for he was their luck." Another moment he can think in panic: "Didn't they know that although he controlled the wheel, it also controlled him, and unless he pressed the button forever and forever and ever it would stop, leaving him high and dry, dry and high on this hard high slippery hill and Laura dead?" He closes the episode in a role of passive actor. He receives the blow from a policeman, but he is still on stage, not in the audience.

Like the wanderer in *Invisible Man*, the bingo player remains nameless. He, too, is Everyman, bewildered by the contradictions in his life. Ultimately, however, Ellison's view in this story is more grimly negative than that in *Invisible Man*. Here there is no waiting for resurrection. Slipperi-ness lies in the stage, the hill, and the brink, and in escape. The security implied in power and freedom is an illusion. The impotence, ignorance, and blind submission of the figures on the movie screen are conditions for sane survival.

Source: Patricia Chaffee, "Slippery Ground: Ralph Ellison's Bingo Player," in *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol 10, No. 1, Spring, 1976, pp.

Topics for Further Study

Research the "Great Migration" of African Americans from the South to the large Northern cities in the 1930s and 1940s. How does the character of the Bingo King represent those immigrants?

What was the racial makeup of New York City in the 1940s? Where did most black residents of the city live? Investigate the differences between the treatment of African Americans in the Northern areas of the country as compared to the practices in the South during this period.

Bingo and other forms of gambling have surged in popularity in recent years. Why do you think this is so? Are people's hopes for winning based on the same hopes that drive the Bingo King's behavior?

Compare and Contrast

1944: Many Southern black Americans move North in what is known as the "Great Migration" in an attempt to secure jobs.

1996: 915,900 immigrants enter the country, according to U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and countless others sneak in illegally.

1944: *In Smith v. Allwright*, the Supreme Court rules that an American cannot be denied the right to vote because of his or her race. Southern states continue to prevent blacks from voting, however, using methods such as literacy tests and poll taxes.

1996: The Supreme Court holds that Congressional districts drawn specifically to ensure a racial majority are unconstitutional.

1943: A race riot occurs in Harlem on August 1.

1991: A jury acquits white Los Angeles policemen of the beating of black citizen Rodney King, triggering the worst violence and looting in U.S. history with over fifty deaths and fifty square miles of Los Angeles property devastated.

What Do I Read Next?

Invisible Man, Ellison's only published novel, is one of the acknowledged classics of twentieth-century fiction. Published in 1952 and modeled on Ellison himself, the novel portrays a young black man in search of his own identity.

The short story "Sonny's Blues," (1957) by Ellison's contemporary, James Baldwin, tells the story of two African-American brothers in New York City. One, a high school teacher, has accommodated himself to living in white society, while the other, a jazz musician with a heroin problem, channels his frustrations and his "blues" into his music.

Published in 1940, Richard Wright's Native Son, is a much angrier and more pessimistic story than "Sonny's Blues" or *Invisible Man*. The novel draws a portrait of Bigger Thomas, a young black man driven to violence by the oppressive nature of white society. matters; and W. E. B. DuBois, who urged a more confrontational stance.

Further Study

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale Research, Inc , Vol. 54, 1989, pp. 104-49.

A presentation of several critical essays examining Ellison's work.

O'Meally, Robert. The Craft of Ellison, Harvard University Press, 1980.

Presents a discussion of Ellison's development as an author.

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Deutsch, Leonard J. "Ralph Ellison," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 2. *American Novelists since World War II,* Gale Research, Inc, 1988.

Herman, David J. "Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game': Finding Naturalism's Trapdoor," in English Language Notes, Vol. XXIX, no. 1, September, 1991, pp 71-3.

Hersey, John, editor. Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Real, Willi "King of the Bingo Game," in *The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century*, edited by Peter Brack, B. R. Grimer, 1977.

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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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