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A Battle Royal for Equality: An Analysis of Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal"

"Battle Royal" provides a realistic portrait of the difficulty of being a black person in a country dominated by white men. Ellison uses several symbols in "Battle Royal" to illustrate the black struggle for equality. These symbols include the stripper, the flag tattoo on the stripper's stomach, the blindfold, and the battle itself. The stripper is symbolic of the connection between women and black people in the eyes of white men, and her tattoo symbolizes the freedom that the black men want. The blindfold is symbolic of the narrator's blindness to the actions of the white men, as well as the limitations binding black people, and most evidently, the battle royal symbolizes the black fight for equality.

The stripper, as a symbol in "Battle Royal," contributes to Ellison's description of the struggle for equality. She is symbolic of how little choice both women and black people have in a world dominated by white males. Ellison writes, "Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not" (Ellison 265). The black men are reprimanded for watching the stripper, which is not permitted during the time period, as well as for looking away from the stripper. This left the men with no feasible option and serves as a reminder to the blacks that the white men have control over the situation. The stripper also has virtually no choice because she must dance, though she does not want to, for the white and black men. Ellison writes of the stripper's lack of enthusiasm: "As the dancer flung herself about with a detached expression on her face, the men began reaching out to touch her" (265). She is also viewed by the white men in the same

manner the black men are viewed: less than a person. This is shown by the narrator of the story observing the stripper's reaction to being touched, chased, and lifted into the air by drunken white men: "I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys" (265). In this way, the stripper acts as a common link between how women and blacks are treated in a society ruled by white men, further supporting the struggle for equality.

The stripper also carries symbolism in the flag tattoo on her stomach. This tattoo, and its placement on the woman's body, symbolizes the freedom black men will have when they are equal to white men. The black men desire the stripper, a white woman, as they desire freedom and equality. The narrator in "Battle Royal" reflects on his desire for the stripper:

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, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (264)

When the black men are able to desire and make love to a white woman without shame, they will have attained the freedom and equality that they crave. The black men's freedom is in the womanhood of the white woman, and the stripper in "Battle Royal" wears the flag tattoo on her lower stomach to represent the equality that the black men are still trying to attain.

Another symbol is the white blindfold that the narrator wears during the battle royal. It is representative of his figurative blindness to the intentions of the white men. The misunderstood intentions include the money scattered on a rug, and the white men's intentions toward the narrator and his speech. At one point during his presentation, the narrator misspeaks, and a

white man responds by saying, ““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”” (271). In this instance the white man is trying to make the narrator feel as if the whites are on his side, yet still maintain that they are superior to him. The white man is also trying to uphold his power and control over the situation by gaining the narrator’s trust. The narrator is naïve in his understanding when he receives a leather brief case and a scholarship after delivering his speech: “My fingers a-tremble, I complied, smelling the fresh leather and finding an official-looking document inside. It was a scholarship to the state college for Negroes” (272). Although the white men provide the narrator with a scholarship, it is for the black college, which is undoubtedly inferior to any white college. Another instance in which the narrator does not fully understand the intentions of the white men occurs when the black men are ordered to scramble for money on a rug after the battle. It appears that the men are going to receive money for participating in the battle; however, the rug is electrified and the coins are not real. The white men are merely being entertained at the expense of the black men, which the narrator realizes this once he is electrocuted when he tries to pick up a coin. The narrator’s figurative blindness to the intentions of the white men makes the struggle for equality even harder.

The white blindfold is also symbolic of the restrictions put on blacks by white men. This is shown when the white men put blindfolds on the black men before the battle royal. The white color of the blindfold is symbolic as well; it represents the binding power that white men have over the blacks. The narrator expresses his feelings about being blindfold before the battle by stating, “Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity,” (266). The blindfold makes the men feel dehumanized, as did slavery. The narrator continues to describe

the actual battle: "Quite a struggle was going on. . . . I wanted to see, to see more desperately than ever before. But the blindfold was as tight as a thick skin-puckering scab and when I raised my gloved hands to push the layers of white aside a voice yelled, "Oh, no you don't, black bastard! Leave that alone!" (266). The white men force the black men to fight each other blindfolded so that they are unable to see what they are doing or whom they are fighting, and to prevent the blacks from seeing how inhumane the battle is. It also gives the white men more power and control because the black men are at the mercy of the whites. The narrator does not understand that the blindfold is intentionally done by the white men in order to restrict the power of the blacks. Even though the narrator does everything that is asked of him, he will still be kept in a lesser social position. He is accepted neither by the blacks he is trying to rise above nor by the whites he is trying to join.

The battle royal itself is the strongest symbol of the fight for equality in Ellison's story. The irony of the battle is that the black men are physically fighting each other, but emotionally fighting the white men, which is a larger battle that the blacks cannot win in their present situation. Ellison writes of the battle scene: "Everyone fought hysterically. It was a complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long" (266). The black men are taking their anger out on each other rather than focusing their efforts on trying to attain equality and reduce the control the white men are exercising. Yet, as the narrator goes on to explain, "The harder we fought the more threatening the men became" (267). The reactions of the white men encourage the black men to fight harder and feel as if they need to prove themselves. Even the narrator seeks approval from the white men as he is fighting and thinking of his speech: "I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability. . . . Should I try to win against the voice out

there? Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?" (268). The battle royal is symbolic of this struggle for acceptance and equality in the eyes of the white men.

Throughout "Battle Royal," Ralph Ellison uses a variety of symbols to convey his message about the black struggle for equality. The stripper represents the oppression of women and blacks by white men, and her tattoo stands for the freedom the blacks long to have. The blindfold is symbolic of the narrator's figurative and literal blindness, and the battle itself is representative of the black fight for equality. "Battle Royal" expresses the difficulty facing black people as they try to achieve social equality.

Work Cited

Ellison, Ralph. "Battle Royal." The Bedford Introduction to Literature. Comp. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford, 2005. 262-272.