

Overview: "Battle Royal or The Invisible Man"

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Introduction

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

"**The Invisible Man.**" "**Battle Royal**" is the name adopted by subsequent anthologies to differentiate the story from the novel of the same name.

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

Plot

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

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

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

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

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

Entering the room, the narrator is handed a pair of boxing gloves as he looks around. Through the haze of cigar smoke he sees all the prominent white men of the town--"bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants"--getting drunk on whiskey. The narrator and his schoolmates are shuttled to the front of the ballroom and ringed by a crowd of menacing, curious and amused faces. At the front of the room, there is dead silence as the boys see "a magnificent blonde--stark naked" standing directly before them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Characters

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

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

Colcord, Mr. : An audience member with breath stinking of whiskey, Mr. Colcord tries to force the narrator on to the electrified rug. The narrator not only resists Colcord's efforts but responds by trying to topple Colcord onto the

rug in ways that cannot appear obvious. In town, Colcord owns a chain of movies houses and "entertainment places."

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

Narrator's Grandfather : A former slave who was freed about eighty-five years prior to when the story takes place. He and the narrator's grandmother lived a quiet, industrious life, "stay[ing] in their place and working hard." The grandfather was an "odd" man, however. On his deathbed he tells the narrator some advice that haunts the narrator through the rest of story. In his last moments, the grandfather admits to feeling like a traitor and a spy, living in the "enemy's country." He wishes he had never given up his gun during the first days of Reconstruction. With his dying breath, he urges his grandson to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" and then "Learn it to the younguns." Later in the story, the narrator has a disturbing dream about attending the circus with his grandfather.

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

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

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

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