



# Battle Royal

*Ralph Ellison*

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## Battle Royal Details

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# **From Reader Review Battle Royal for online ebook**

## **Michael Kress says**

This was a great commentary on the anti-SJW crowd of the early 20th century. The peak of the story for me was when the African-American protagonist was giving a speech to some whites on "social responsibility" but accidentally said "social equality" instead. All the old white men had been laughing and talking, ignoring him the whole time he was giving his speech, but when he said that phrase, they got silent, causing him to fear he would be reprimanded. Luckily for him, they didn't notice he said it, and he actually ended up receiving a reward for his efforts. Like all the civil-rights literature I've read, this makes me think of current events. Many people nowadays still get annoyed when somebody brings up social equality.

Ralph Ellison's writing is a good first-hand reminder of what our society was like not too long ago. It's gripping and full of emotion, causing the reader to feel anger and sadness that people would treat others the way they did. This is the first chapter of Ellison's most famous book, *The Invisible Man*, and it convinced me that I must read the rest of the book in its entirety.

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## **Yashira Avendano says**

Reading *Battle Royal* definitely captured my mind and took me through everything African Americans went through during the 1960's. Life for them wasn't easy since they suffered a lot as shown throughout the story. The protagonist was left as an example to follow what was left from his grandfather. All he kept recalling were his grandfather's words "I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction." Many African Americans were humiliated, treated as animals and some were bet while being in the battle. Life was harsh for them since everyone deserves to be treated equally and unfortunately they weren't. The protagonist itself was beaten and at first didn't know how to stand up for herself. However, he realized everything his grandfather had said and decided to change his speech from social terms towards equality. While doing his speech, he won the scholarship & cried because he felt accomplished and knew he had made a difference and an impact to everybody.

Conformity and Racism were two important themes and aspect portrayed throughout the story. African Americans haven't always been treated as they were suppose to be treated and especially during the 1960's when there existed a lot of discrimination, segregation and stereotyping in the South and Midwestern United States. However, at the end of the story, the protagonist knew that he had made a difference in everyone's lives.

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## **Claudefang says**

In the book "*Invisible Man*" chapter one "*Battle Royal*", the narrator's grandfather's disgust at the quality of life endured by African-Americans is contrasted by the narrator and his father's willingness to succumb to the idea of humility and submission to white power as the path to progress within the black community. Obviously, this theme is reflected within the narrator's description of the town hall event, it shows how power and submission are ironically shown when the narrator is forced to partake in the "battle" at first, and

then afterwards he was applauded for his speech. On the other hand, the naked woman with the American flag tattoo which is mentioned in the text can also be representative of how American culture idolizes and disrespects are actually the same thing, just as black progress is made through outspoken submission, which is a contradictory concept.

What bothers me a little is that in the text, the narrator's grandfather said himself that he betrayed someone, obviously, the feeling of betrayal is based on the willingness of submission to white power, but it is hard to tell what he had truly betrayed, himself, his family, or his race. Because all he wanted is the life to be less miserable.

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## **Pamela says**

It's too early to state what I think of this story, with any real level of specificity, as I just read it and looked up these reviews.

BUT, I must say I am discouraged reading many of the Goodread's reviews of "Battle Royal" that sound as if they were written by students who have poor if not completely confused senses of historical context.

Students: this story does not take place in the 1950's or 60's. (This is not to say or imply, of course, that many forms of discrimination did not take place at those times; they did but the 50's and the 60's were a very different era in black history in the US.)

The short story, "Battle Royal", is the first chapter of Ralph Ellison's deservedly famous and influential novel "Invisible Man". "Invisible Man" was published in 1952, the story was published before the novel, in 1948. Thus, we know from these dates alone that the story cannot take place in the 50's or 60's.

However, if one looks at the opening sentence of the story--"It goes a long way back, some twenty years."--there is a suggestion that the action of the story is taking place in the 1920's or perhaps early 1930's. Ellison himself was born in 1914, and the story and the novel are highly autobiographical. If Ellison graduated from high school at 17 or 18, then placing the action of the story in the late 20's/early 30's makes sense (1914 plus 17 years is 1931).

...Now that I got that off my chest, I'm going to re-read the story and look at more reviews later.

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## **Tyler Bice says**

This was a very fun story to read. The story starts off giving kind of a background of the main character in the story. The main character in the story is a black male who lives in a time where there is racism and but is liked by a lot of white men because he is a known speaker in the town. He explains because of his grandfather he feels guilty whenever he's doing well. The authors writing style is very fun and fast paced. A large part of the story is a giant fight scene where all of the people the building are chasing after a naked white women who was dancing in front of all the men. However, the narrator explains in the beginning of the story that some of his friends were going to start of fight or something but he explains that he has a message to tell everyone throughout the story even while he is beaten up pretty badly. And throughout all of the battle royal he still has all of the emotion and adrenaline to complete his speech half dazed and beaten from the

fight. This shows how strongly he felt about what he needed to say. But its interesting that he says "equality" on accident and a white man threatened him. He quickly says it was a mistake from all of the blood in his mouth. This show that times were changing but people were still intolerant and discriminating of African Americans.

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### **Raymond says**

In Ellison's *Battle Royal*, the reader is introduced to a black male who is faced with some very tough tasks but yet only has one thing that is on his mind. The character whose name we never learn has decided to join a "Battle Royal" with other classmates of his (after their high school graduation) and is expecting to give his high school speech at the end of it. When the story begins they are introduced to a white female who is dancing in front of him and other black classmates of his. The men who brought her out are the typical white males that people today have learned about from history. They use her to humiliate the black men and make them feel embarrassed because some can't handle the way she moves and how she looks. To me it is like these white males have to take control of every situation and make sure that they have all power of the room that they are present in. After they humiliate them with the "stripper" they then take all of the men into a boxing ring where they are then blindfolded. Because they are blindfolded the white have control once again are allowed to have free reign on abusing these man. Also the black males end up fighting each other because they are unable to see. Which to me represents that the white men have power and the black males need to stop fighting with one another and come together to have their own power. The character we are introduced to ends up being the last of the black males to be left but then ends up being defeated. They are then once again humiliated when they are told to get on the ground to retrieve their prize, which ends up being an electrified rug, and causing them to be hurt in the process. Before they all leave the character finally has the opportunity to give his speech (which all throughout the story, has continuously on his mind). When he makes a mistake and uses the phrases "social responsibility" the crowd makes him correct it to "equality". If social responsibility was the correct phrase then the way they are treating the black males and humiliating them is an incorrect statement and the white men should take it apart themselves to act in a socially correct way!

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### **Nina Bayart says**

On his death bed, the grandfather talks about how he was disloyal to his own good. Ellison says, "I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction". This unnerves Ellison for quite some time. So he thinks that his grandfather cursed him in some way, but his grandfather was talking about civil obedience. Although this was recently after slavery was abolished, the south was and still is very prejudice. The grandfather called himself a traitor because being civilly obedient; you had to fake your kindness towards the superior ethnicity. His grandfather was very favored in the community for his allegiance. His grandfather was only wise in that he knew the repercussions of advocacy towards the truth. So he called himself a spy because he observed the proper behavior around the elites. He called himself a traitor because he knew how to act and speak so he would not be mistreated. Yet, he knew the way his kin was still treated. Ellison became aware of this fact when he gave his speech. First of all, even though he was giving a speech, which in today's society means you are VIP and get special treatment. Ellison was still forced to fight the gauntlet of blindfolded peers. Everyone talked through his speech and disregarded his struggle. His Scholarship is ironic. Obviously, the white men of the town saw that he was a great kid but they still treated him as they would any other black

kid. His grandfather said that life was a war. His life constantly tested his limits of how long he could be polite. He never cracked. This is not to say he didn't end the war, but he figured out how to survive

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### **Wendy says**

As I was reading Ralph Ellison's, "Battle Royal" I found myself wanting to turn away, flip to the next page, do anything to gloss over the disturbing abuse taking place. This then led me to thinking, that society "glossing over the truth" was exactly what Ralph Ellison was trying to portray throughout his story. The "blindness" of our nation at a time when African Americans were abused, segregated, and mocked will forever be a black stain across our country's shining record. The story begins with our protagonist being haunted by his grandfather's dying words that, "...our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemies country ever since I gave my gun back to the reconstruction." We are immediately left with the question, traitor of what? I believe it to be a traitor of race. From my own interpretations I believe that the grandfather is warning the grandson to always fight for his race and the movement toward equality. Our main character is beaten and humiliated for nothing more than his race. However, in spite of every obstacle he faces he holds on to his pride. This novel provides a glimpse of the kind of treatment that many Americans were subject too, but never spoken about.

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### **Dallas says**

"Battle Royal" by Ralph Ellison is a dynamic piece into the insight of racial equality (or lack thereof). His brutal description of the scene that took place speaks to the horrors of pre civil rights for african-americans. The terrifying plight the main character goes through is one of physical and psychological torture. Who were these white men, seemingly prepared to congratulate this black boy, but there to exploit and destroy who he was as a person. The words of his grandfather that rang in the boy's head ran true through the end. By accepting his place in society he acted as a traitor and by acting subservient he only found pain. Even the prize he was awarded at the end was doused in the aroma of distrust that his grandfather had warned him of. I felt a connection through these images. It illustrated the immense courage and strength one needs to have to gain self-respect and dignity, especially in the torrents of hate and segregation. It is easier to obey what is told, but ultimately by not accepting oneself, it become a self defeating action. It is in this way anybody can relate to the message, even if times and ideals have changed. There is always hate in the world and its how we deal with this hate that defines us as people. Do we accept injustice or do we fight for equality and all that is right? We all enter the ring at some point.

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### **Emily says**

Battle Royal centers itself around the theme of having an identity and a voice. This theme is placed into the mind of the narrator by his grandfather on his deathbed. The narrator claims that, "It was as though he had never died at all, his words had caused so much anxiety," the first textual reference that demonstrates that having a voice can cause an impact on the world and lead to something bigger.

Other symbols are woven throughout the story that represent the larger theme of identity, one of which being the female stripper at the battle royal. As a woman, she represents another minority that becomes abused and cannot defend themselves. It is apparent how much she despises the men at the party by the "terror and

disgust in her eyes” at the men’s behavior, but she still does not speak out once during the abuse. Like the African American men at the dinner, she too was confined and used as a puppet for entertainment as opposed to being treated as an equal.

The battle royal is the biggest representation of a loss of identity when the men are blindfolded and forced to fight one another. The blindfolds make it impossible for the men to see who they are fighting, which makes it impossible to even view each other as individuals. This parallels life outside the ring, referring to how the white men struggled to keep African Americans ignorant and to cause chaos amongst them in order to prevent them from bonding together to fight for the greater issue of freedom.

It is only in the end of the story when the narrator has a Freudian slip and says that there is a need for "social equality" instead of "social responsibility" where he proves that he has a voice in society and that it can leave a lasting impact on others. It was the impact of individuals much like the narrator's that would lead the fight to end slavery.

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### **Rebekah says**

2.7 stars

This is one of the stories they have you read in school to shock you into considering the themes involved. This is not remotely a nice story. Everything is horrible, and nothing good happens. The most prevalent issues are racism and sexism, as the treatment of black people and the woman in this is terrible. I'm sure on a close reading there is a lot to unpack and examine, but after my first reading, I don't really care to.

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### **Andreea says**

'All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: that I am nobody but myself.'

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### **Nick Nemetz says**

I enjoyed Battle Royal as it is well written and pulls the reader into the story. It is successful at appealing to the reader because the descriptions are intriguing to say the least. For example, Wilson describes the naked woman as “the hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollowed and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon’s butt” (Wilson,225). This description is extremely detailed and allows the reader to understand why the woman is so appealing to the crowd, other than the fact that she is butt naked. Also, Wilson does a great job of juxtaposing the naked woman’s situation with that of the boys’. The crowd at the Battle Royal “tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red, fixed-smiling lips 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” (226). After hearing about

the boys situation and how they are being treated so how surprisingly awful the stripper is being treated as well, Wilson effectively links their two situations in more than just a sexual way. I found this as a perfect juxtaposition at this point in the story. There are many more examples of how Wilson is able to convey his message in a way that seduces the reader and that is the reason why I felt myself wanting to read more at the end.

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### **Samk808 says**

Battle Royal is a very interesting look into the mind of a young African American man living in the south in the 1950s. While the story is filled with descriptions of horrible things that African Americans were forced to do in the Jim Crow south, I think that the most interesting part of this story is the internal battle that the protagonist is having in his mind. He keeps remembering his grandfathers words "I have been a traitor all my born days". It is also very important to note that the protagonist claims that he is very much like his grandfather. Meaning he behaved in the manner that whites thought a good and proper black man should. He was respectful, educated and even wrote a speech about the black mans "humility". Yet he wonders why his grandfather labeled himself a traitor.

This mental struggle that the narrator is going through represents the battle between the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington stated that blacks should work hard, get educated and eventually they would gain equal rights. Du Bois on the other hand argued for a more immediate approach to civil rights and argued that Washington was too accommodating to whites. While they were active at the same time, Washington's ideas were much more popular until the 1950s and 60s when this story was written. I would argue that the grandfather felt that he had been too accommodating and should have fought for his rights because whites were never going to relinquish their control of the south voluntarily. This is shown in the last line of Battle Royal. "To whom it may concern, keep this nigger boy running."

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### **Alissa says**

The African American writer, Ralph Ellison, screams at the top of his voice in the story "The Battle Royal" about the extreme acts of prejudice that can occur when one allows themselves to be silent, to be invisible. He becomes invisible in order to survive in the white-dominated society. Initially the reader is impressed by the graphic degradation of the young teenage boys by the town's leading white citizens. The boys are tormented physically and emotionally during the evening festivities as a source of pleasure and entertainment. The actual physical battle that the author endures during the Battle Royal is on the edge of extreme brutality but is just the beginning of his battles. It is the internal battle he endures that is the most significant as he struggles to find a way to overcome racism throughout his "invisible" life.

The exigence of the story occurred at a young age when Ellison takes to heart his grandfathers dying words, "I want you to keep up the good fight" and views them as a directive, a challenge, a battle to be waged for his ancestors and his legacies. His grandfather feels that he has lived his life like a "traitor" to his own people by being meek and living his life within the parameters of the white society. He wants his children and grandchildren to live life differently and tells them, "let 'em swallow you 'til they vomit or bust wide open." His grandfather's analogy to the physical illness graphically explains his internalization of all the prejudices that exist. Ellison knows what he must do to fulfill his grandfather's dying wish, but struggles in his



attempts. He feels invisible when he conforms and is rewarded, but is uncomfortable with social conflict and so he eventually finds his voice through his writings.

A conflict exists within Ellison who is uneasy when he is rewarded for acting the way meek African American's and white society expect. He does well in school and is praised by the white community for his valedictorian speech in which he proclaims, "That humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. But even success has a price. That price first expresses itself when he is invited to talk to the town's leading citizens. That night he challenged on all levels of human importance: morally, physically, and emotionally. He is forced to watch a naked white woman dance, physically beaten to a pulp, and then asked to deliver his eloquent speech on the importance of humility. What an ironic topic for an individual who has just been stripped completely of his dignity on all three levels. The naked white woman dancing is an example of foreshadowing since he describes her as a "fair bird girl" which could be compared to Homer's sirens in the Odyssey who lure sailors to their death. The woman's dance precedes the Battle Royal in which he is nearly killed. Afterwards, the superintendent of schools announces, "This is a good, smart boy" and rewards him with a scholarship. He also remarks, "He makes a good speech and someday he will lead his people in the proper paths." Ironically, the "proper paths" that the superintendent proposes are not the path that Ellison embarks upon as the "proper path." Ellison's path eventually is one that speaks to the world through his writings about the evils of discrimination.

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