

Professor Madden

English 150F

The Battle Royal: An Episodic Rerun of The Invisible Man

In describing the protagonist of his soon to be novel, The Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison writes, "[The narrator of the novel] had either to affirm the transcendent ideals of democracy and his own dignity by aiding those who despised him, or accept his situation as hopelessly devoid of meaning; a choice tantamount to rejecting his own humanity" (xii). In short, Ellison's novel captures our universal struggle for identity through the eyes of a young ^{CF} black male, whose constant failure to achieve a significant role in society forces him into a state of self-realization.

The struggles of this narrator are divided into episodes, which all have an importance in the development of the plot. One such episode is Chapter's One's battle royal scene, which not only foreshadows what is to come for the narrator in the rest of the novel, but also represents the novel in miniature. The battle royal scene also acts as a picaresque story, rich with existentialist themes and lessons with which the narrator learns in his naivete.

The battle royal episode of The Invisible Man is an integral part of the novel's plot simply because without it, the narrator may never have discovered his invisibility to society or have uncovered the power of this invisibility. In truth, the battle royal scene is the narrator's first real encounter with white community leaders ~~of~~ whom he regards with high esteem for their status in society. This encounter gives readers a first glimpse of the narrator's naivete in his view of upper-class whites. ^{when he} ~~The narrator~~ admits, "I was shocked to see some of the most important men of the town quite tipsy. They were all there – bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors,

clear, effective intro - but happens here

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fire chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors" (Ellison 18).

ref Likewise, he is quite naïve to believe that his invitation to speak at such an important gathering is such an important accomplishment for himself and for blacks, calling it "a triumph for our whole community" (Ellison 17). However, the narrator is unaware that he is being invited, as a black man, to be entertainment for the white community leaders, not to be heard or seen for his brilliant oratory ^{skills} and scholarly achievements. To the white community leaders' amusement, the narrator catches his first, foretold glimpse of how it feels to have his whole inner essence ~~be~~ overlooked because of the color of his skin. It is after much ridicule and humiliation during the barbaric fighting match that he is rewarded a briefcase, a briefcase carrying a scholarship to a school that will begin the eradication of his hope to be an important person of society, hence redefining his existence. Overall, if the narrator never received the scholarship ^{nor} ~~and~~ met Mr. Norton, he would not have been sent to New York and have learned of his invisibility.

good The battle royal scene is important specifically for how it serves as a gateway to the novel's plot. Yet, in greater detail, it can also be seen as a miniaturized version of the novel in general. From much of what is seen during the battle royal, certain aspects of the event bear similarities to later episodes in the novel. For instance, there are striking similarities with how the white leaders use the black participants and the naked woman for their own benefit, and how the Brotherhood uses the narrator and Harlem for their own benefit. The black participants and the naked woman of the battle royal episode serve as entertainment for the white community leaders. Likewise, the narrator and Harlem are pawns in the Brotherhood's acquisition of social and political power. In other words, the white leaders and the Brotherhood operate ^{by} ~~on~~

oppressing others. The white leaders' oppression of the narrator, the black participants, and the naked woman can also be compared to Mr. Norton's treatment of the narrator in Chapter 2. The

shifting away
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white leaders strip the narrator and the naked woman of their identity and dignity by re-identifying them as entertainers, just like ^{as} ~~how~~ Mr. Norton denies the narrator and other students the opportunity to find self-identity in their own achievements by claiming their fate as his own. This stripping of identity during the battle royal episode can also be compared to Brother Jack's (and the Brotherhood's) stripping of the narrator's identity by giving him a new name.

Blindness is another theme influential throughout the novel that the battle royal represents in miniature. The act of whites blindfolding the narrator in the match is one other example of whites oppressing blacks. Yet symbolically, the blindfold conveys several interpretations. One interpretation is that it foreshadows the narrator's fear of confronting his own invisibility and black heritage, for it is when he is blindfolded that he must face the "nothingness" of darkness. This confrontation provokes an anxiety in the narrator, who states, "But now I felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness" (Ellison 21). His inability to embrace the "nothingness" during the battle royal episode is, in miniature, representative of his inability to accept his invisibility in society throughout the course of the novel. ^{It} The blindfold also acts as an oppressive agent, shielding the black narrator from the hypocrisy of high-esteemed, white community leaders who behave in a very uncivilized manner. This blindness to hypocrisy carries on throughout the novel, as later seen with Mr. Norton, a high-ranking founder who ⁱⁿ the narrator continues to view with such high regard, believing (while in New York) that if only Norton could see him, "[Norton] would remember that it was [the narrator] whom he connected so closely to his fate" (Ellison 169). The narrator is also blind to the hypocrisy of Brother Jack and the Brotherhood. Brother Jack once states that the Brotherhood is the voice of the people, claiming that "things must be changed [...] by the people [...] because the enemies of man are dispossessing the world" (Ellison 307). Later, however, he proceeds to tell the narrator,

"We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them" (Ellison 473). In essence, Brother Jack and the Brotherhood fool the narrator by giving ^Dhim a false sense of duty. In reality, he is their pawn just as he and the black participants had been to the white community leaders, who had given them the false opportunity to win gold coins (which turned out to be brass). The fake gold coins turn out to be just as false as both Dr. Bledsoe's sealed letters of opportunity, and the political power and greatness the Brotherhood promise to the narrator.

The narrator's fight to give his speech and be heard is a ^{red}comprised version of what The Invisible Man represents. He is given an opportunity to speak, ^{red}and yet nobody hears him. What they hear is what they want to hear, as seen when he changes "social equality" to "social responsibility." To the narrator, it is a battle throughout the novel to be recognized by others for who he is and what he has to say, an opportunity he believes to have received when Brother Jack asks him to join the Brotherhood. In the end, he simply becomes an instrument, or puppet, to the Brotherhood's ideas, just as he had been to the white community leaders who placed words in his mouth. awk

Overall, the novel is about identity and the oppression of it. Just like what is seen in the Battle Royal episode, the narrator seeks to be an important part of society by fighting for recognition and the opportunity to be heard. He continually believes throughout the novel that he can be just as great as Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe, the Founders, and Booker T. Washington by simply being recognized by others for his skills and achievements. However, according to Sartre, "existence must precede essence," explaining why, in existentialist fashion, the narrator fails to find recognition and acceptance in white society: He will not seek out, from within, an identity awk

from his invisibility. Only after so many failed attempts to be someone in society^{CF} does he go through the self-realization that it is he, not others, who must define his place in society.

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ago In short, Ellison's novel captures our universal struggle for identity through the eyes of a young black male, whose episodes of constant failure in achieving a significant role in society forces him into a state of self-realization. The battle royal episode is one of such episodes beginning the narrator's first glimpse into an existential identity, therefore capturing the basis of the novel in miniature and allowing it to stand on its own. However, in the battle royal episode, the narrator does not escape his existential crisis through self-realization. Rather, the episode acts as a reader's reference point to a coming of age story – a coming of age story of how the narrator arrives from being a naive, young ~~black~~ male lacking identity, to an experienced, older black man with a self-identified, accepted identity of invisibility. It is with this in mind that the battle royal episode becomes an important anecdote within the novel that the novel simply cannot function without. The intricacy of these such episodes illustrate the complexity to which the novel is written, not only demonstrating the brilliance of Ralph Ellison, but also forcing us to see the reality of the existential dilemma we all must face if we are to embrace our own existence.