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American Literature

May 3, 2022

## Dehumanizing a Man with Words

### An Analysis of Imagery in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In “Imagery in the ‘Battle Royal’ Chapter of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” Norman German states that in the novel, especially the first chapter, the use of objectification and animalistic imagery essentially ends up dehumanizing the aggressor and the victim as well. Ellison employs this wording and imagery not only to reinforce his themes but also to add vitality and vividness to his storytelling (German 399). German mentions the grandfather’s dying words in regards to the imagery found in his advice. The theme of this chapter and the main character, IM himself, are shaped by what his grandfather says. The grandfather’s words preach submission and appeasement, thus instructing to act “proper” and accordingly under the oppressor. While German argues that this imagery of behavior can dehumanize both parties, I would add that it can also be viewed as something that undermines and counters the ideology of the grandfather.

This novel is a story of a young black man’s life in the south and later up north in New York experiencing life and the dark side of how African Americans are treated by white people during the 1940s. He goes through many violent, heartbreaking, and essentially eye-opening experiences that shape his identity from an impressionable and vulnerable young man to a more self aware black man. In the first chapter of this novel, the protagonist is haunted and heavily influenced by his late grandfather’s view on how black people should conduct themselves in a

white man's world. His grandfather preaches that submission and meekness to whites are the keys to social happiness and success. Throughout the chapter, the narrator conducts himself in this manner and is praised for this behavior by the white men. But he presents himself and his grandfather for this. His grandfather also resents this behavior as well and deems it to be treacherous and dangerous. The young man is invited to read a speech first delivered at his high school graduation. Before giving his speech, he is met with violence, ridicule, and humiliation from the white men in the crowd. Ultimately these white men end up gifting him a briefcase with a scholarship to a black state college. On that night the narrator has a dream where he's at a circus with his grandfather who gives him a briefcase that has an envelope with a state seal on it. The letter inside contains racist and threatening language. The grandfather laughs as the protagonist reads it, and he continues to be haunted by his grandfather's laugh. IM concludes that to understand this dream and inherently his grandfather's words, he needs to go to college.

German brings attention to the vast amount of creative imagery in the text. The imagery is objectifying and animalistic and further plays into the concept Ellison portrays in this work. The types of imagery that German brings attention to include, animalistic, objectifying, reference to the racial situation as a circus, and colors/color pairs. German continues to provide examples that might have been overlooked in the text and explains their significance to them in the theme and the impact of Ellison's storytelling. German spotlights the subtle yet powerful imagery used in the first chapter of the novel. These examples are not reserved for just the black men; the white men, too, are described in inhumane terms. For example, Ellison writes: "the room fills 'with the uproar of laughter' (p. 32)" (German 394), "into her flesh and runs '*howling* after her' (p. 23)" (German 395). These are said about the white men in the crowd. Those men are supposed to be civilized, yet they are shown to be debased once they start spewing hate and

losing sight of the humanity of others, especially in the young black men and the naked blond woman. Said in reference to IM and the black men: “symbol of peace freedom; ironically, IM’s blood shapes ‘itself into a butterfly’ on the canvas (p. 28)” (German 395), “Another boy ‘whimpers’ like a dog over his crushed hand (p. 28)” (German 396), and also “The young black men are also depicted as animals, subtle at first, as they are ‘*crowded* together in the servants’ elevator’ (like cattle) and ‘*led out* of the elevator’ into the hall (p. 21)” (German 395). German claims that as the plot develops, the comparison of the young men to animals grows even more obvious.

Moreover German notes Ellison’s use of circus imagery, specifically the circus mentioned in IM’s dream. Some examples include “The grandfather tells his son to live with his head in the *lion’s* mouth (p. 19). The naked woman’s hair is ‘yellow like that of a *circus* kewpie doll’ (p. 22), and she has ‘red, fixed-smiling lips’ like a clown (pp.23-24). IM calls Tatlock a ‘stupid *clown*’ (p.28), and the boy thrown onto the rug looks like a wet ‘*circus* seal’ (p.29)” (German 397). The white men orchestrate a metaphorical circus when they force the 10 black men to take part in the battle royal. They serve as entertainment for the night, further showing the lack of respect for them. In the dream, IM’s grandfather refuses to laugh at the clowns because the “clowns” are truly the black Americans ridiculed in life and he doesn't find this amusing at all, but on the other hand, he laughs at IM when he reads the threatening letter from the briefcase, laughing at his grandson's expense because he doesn't yet realize that he was used by the white men.

The grandfather's dying words have obviously left a heavy impression on IM. IM seems to value submission and “killing them with kindness.” He receives praise and “respect” from white men for this behavior. He even idolizes and admires Booker T. Washington for his similar

views. The IM acts accordingly to this ideology, with emphasis on “acts.” Deep down he hates himself and his grandfather for this damaging mentality. This mentality can be dehumanizing to the individual as well. They are taught to dismiss and diminish their sense of worth just to appease the masses. One example of this division in IM’s mind is apparent when he slips up during his speech and says “social equality” rather than “social responsibility” (Ellison 25). He quickly corrects himself but we can’t help to wonder, was that an honest mistake or a subconscious slip?

Acting like an animal is in contrast to the submissive and gentle approach I.M. and his grandfather live by. The purpose of this approach is to keep peace and somehow gain respect in the long run. However, we still see that IM is not in peace or treated with respect even though he follows the approach. German mentions something that the author of the novel, Ralph Ellison said while talking about how ““Our social mobility was strictly, and violently, limited”” (German 396). This concept is depicted in the “Battle Royal” with the boxing ring symbolizing “the blacks being socially confined” (German 396). Ellison says this idea goes along with the effort “white society went towards proving to itself that we are not human....” (German 396) This claim by Ellison supports how the Battle Royal was dehumanizing and degrading to the men. It also attests to how I.M. truly isn't to gain respect from the white men even though he fully complied to participate and appeased and entertained the men.

In German’s article he focuses on the animalistic and objectifying imagery in the first chapter of *Invisible Man* and makes a claim that this use of language dehumanized both the black men and the white men. I agree fully with this claim and decided to add that imagery can also be viewed as something that undermines and counters the ideology of the grandfather.

I.M.'s grandfather left him and his family with advice on how to navigate the world and hopefully attain peace and respect. It was very apparent in this first chapter, I.M. did not achieve that goal by using his grandfather's advice. It may seem like he did when he was applauded and awarded a scholarship but with further analysis of the text and specifically the imagery, it shows that he is looked as an object or an animal rather than the respectable young man he's growing to be.

Works Cited

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