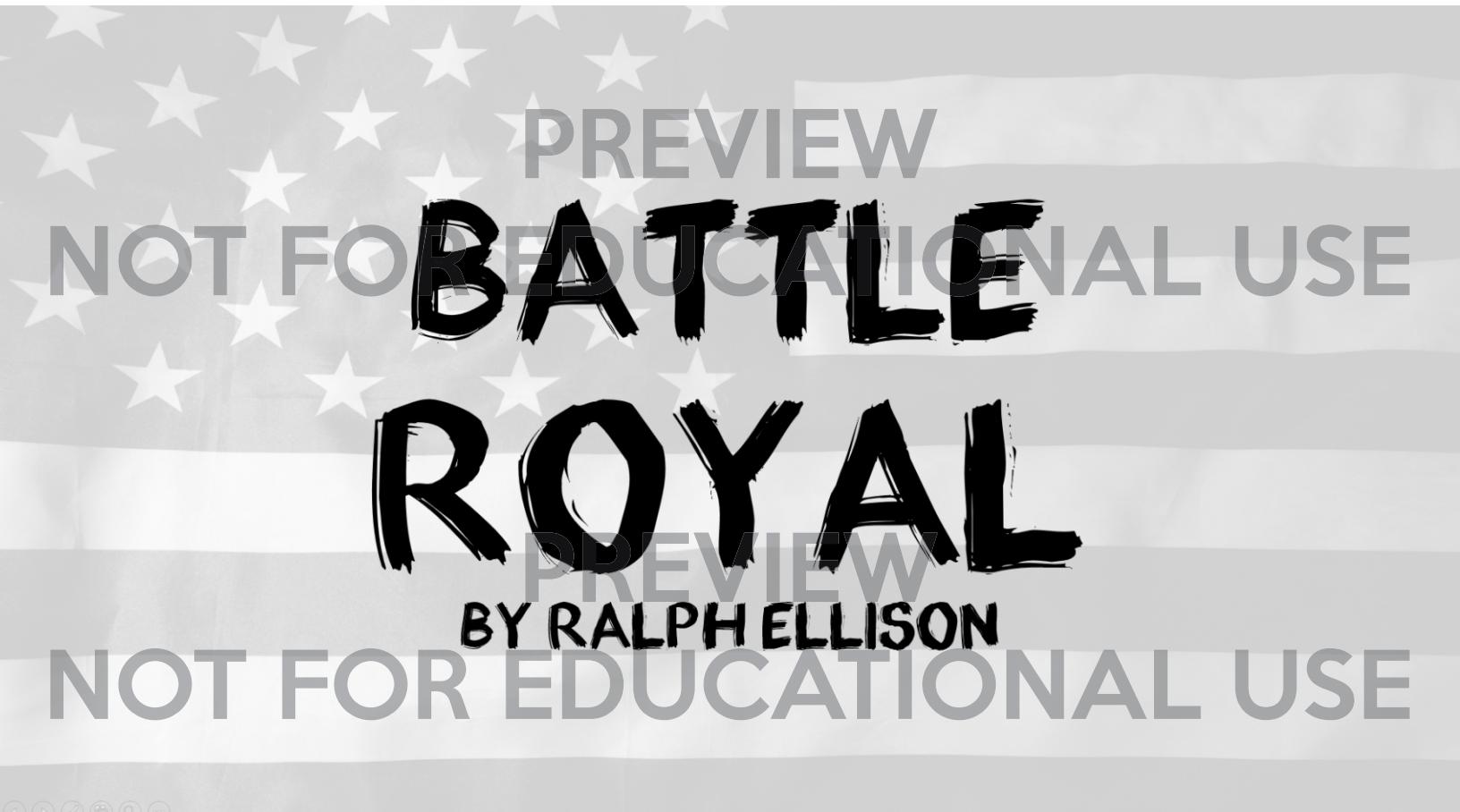


PREVIEW
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A grayscale image of the United States flag, showing the stars and stripes. The stars are white on a dark background, and the stripes are dark on a light background.

PREVIEW
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**BATTLE
ROYAL**
BY RALPH ELLISON
NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

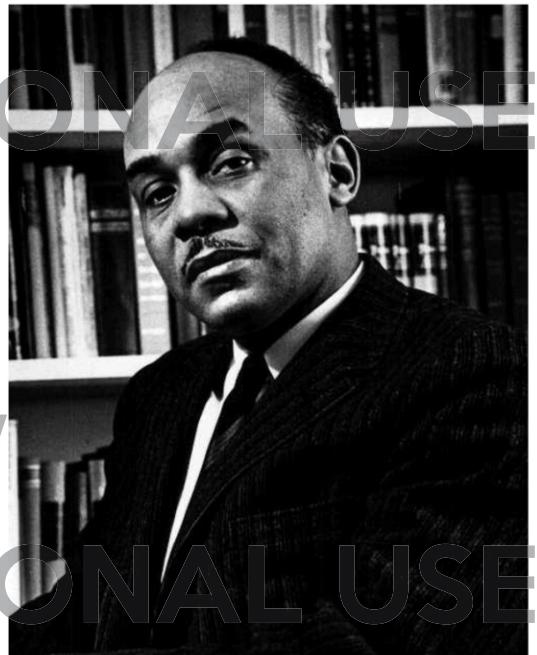
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Ralph Ellison

- Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in 1914, in Oklahoma, and named after the famous poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- Ellison was raised by his mother, as his father tragically passed when Ellison was only three years old.
- Ellison was the grandson to slaves.
- He attended The Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and studied music.
- In 1936, Ellison moved to New York to work as a writer, and he befriended other famous writers, such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.
- Ellison enlisted as a Merchant Marine cook during World War II.
- Ellison died from pancreatic cancer in New York City on April 16, 1994.



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Legacy

PREVIEW

- Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* was published in 1952. It is about an African American civil rights worker from the South who frequently encounters racism, representative of the social inequality of the time.
- The short story "Battle Royal" is the first chapter of *Invisible Man* and was published in 1947, nearly five years before the novel.
- *Invisible Man* is regarded as a groundbreaking analysis on the racial injustice of Black Americans as well as other communities that were historically marginalized.
- This novel was on the best-seller list for 16 weeks in a row.
- In 1953, the novel won the National Book Award.
- For many years, Ellison worked on a second novel which he never completed, titled *Juneteenth*. It was published posthumously in 1999.



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Historical Context

- On December 6, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified which officially ends the institution of slavery in America.
- The Reconstruction Era begins. This era is named for the tumultuous period where the Southern states from the Confederacy had to re-integrate to America. Additionally, there were 4 million slaves that were newly-freed.
- On April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln is assassinated and Andrew Johnson becomes the 17th President of the United States.
- Johnson granted amnesty to most former Confederates and allowed the rebel states to elect new governments.
- These governments, which often included Confederate veterans, enabled the southern states to pass restrictive “Black Codes” to control the labor and behavior of former enslaved people, further oppressing their community.
- Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws were local and state laws which prevented Black Americans from working, voting, traveling and living a life of liberty and prosperity, despite their newly-found freedom.



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PREVIEW

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Historical Context



- Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence, or death.
- The Ku Klux Klan was born in 1865 in Tennessee as a club for Confederate veterans. The KKK later grew into a secret society terrorizing Black communities.
- Black schools, churches, and homes were vandalized and destroyed.
- It was typical for a group of white people to attack, torture, and—in some states—lynch Black Americans.
- Marriage and dating between white and Black people was strictly forbidden. If a Black man even so much as glanced at a white woman, there was trouble.
- Wrongful deaths and frivolous court cases—at the expense of African Americans—were commonplace because former Confederate soldiers served as judges and police officers.

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PREVIEW

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Historical Context

- In 1914, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans relocated to urban cities in the northern states to seek better economic, social, political, and civil opportunities (as well as to escape racial warfare). This is known as the Great Migration.
- In Harlem, New York, The Harlem Renaissance is born. It was an era of cultural opportunity and awakening in the 1920s for African Americans.
- In 1941, America joins World War II. More than one and a half million African Americans serve in the United States military forces.
- Despite their gallant efforts in the war, Black veterans returned home to more unrest. Segregation, violence, and danger was still a regular aspect of African American life.
- In 1945, the post-World War II era saw an increase in civil rights activities in the African American community.
- In the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement emerged.



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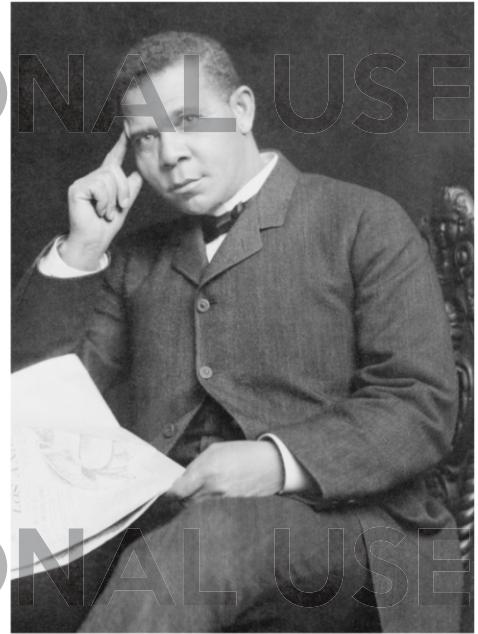
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Battle Royal

- The short story “Battle Royal” is set sometime around the late 1940s – 1950s in one of the Southern states of America.
- Segregation laws were still in place as well as other oppressive, racial measures that fall under the Black Codes and the Jim Crow laws.
- The narrator mentions that he sees himself as “a potential Booker T. Washington.”
- Booker T. Washington (picture shown to the right) was born into slavery, and later founded Tuskegee University and the National Negro Business League.
- Washington had the controversial view that Black Americans could earn the respect from white people through economic means. He felt it was better for Black Americans to focus on their education and industrial skills as opposed to fighting white supremacy through violence.



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Name:

Date:

“Battle Royal” by Ralph Ellison
Vocabulary

contradiction	noun	PREVIEW
exult	verb	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE
meek	adj	
emphatically	adv	PREVIEW
treachery	noun	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE
oration	noun	
misgivings	noun	
anteroom	noun	PREVIEW
prone	adj	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE
fastidious	adj	
apoplexy	noun	PREVIEW
extol	verb	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE
stolid	adj	

Name:

Date:

“Battle Royal” by Ralph Ellison
Literary Analysis

A *battle royal* is a fight—with more than two combatants in a ring—where the last fighter standing is declared the winner.

PREVIEW

1. What internal struggles in the narrator dealing with?

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2. Why is the narrator’s invitation to speak at a town gathering such a triumph for the community?

PREVIEW

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4. What is preventing the narrator from just leaving the party?

PREVIEW

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5. How is the woman’s tattoo of the American Flag symbolic of the American Dream?

PREVIEW

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7. What is the purpose of blindfolding the participants of the battle royal? What is achieved?

8. What concerns does the narrator have about his speech?

9. How does the narrator prove himself to be naive after the fight is over?

PREVIEW

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10. What is the symbolism of the electrified rug?

11. The following excerpt from the narrator's speech are lines quoted by Booker T. Washington from his "Atlanta Compromise" Speech.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, "Water, water. We die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are."

A second time the signal, "Water, send us water," ran up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A third and fourth signal for water was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man who is their next-door neighbor, I would say, "Cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races of whom you are surrounded."

What is the significance of this allusion in the story "Battle Royal"?

12. Why is there such an uproar when the narrator accidentally declares "social equality"?

PREVIEW

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13. What underlying message is sent by the superintendent who delivers a gift to the narrator?

14. What is so significant about the narrator's dream in the end?

PREVIEW

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15. In what ways is the narrator an "invisible man"?

Name:

Date:

“Battle Royal” by Ralph Ellison
Constructed Response

Directions: Answer the following prompts in a minimum of one paragraph each.

1. Explain the meaning of the advice, “Live with your head in the lion's mouth.” What does it symbolize? Why does his grandfather give this advice?

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2. What is the best existential advice you've ever been given OR what is the most profound advice you have for others? Explain.

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3. How did this story make you feel? What are your initial reactions? Do you recommend this story why or why not?

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Answer Keys
“Battle Royal” by Ralph Ellison
Vocabulary

contradiction	noun	a combination of statements or ideas that are opposed to one another
exult	verb	feel or show triumphant elation
meek	adj	quiet, gentle, and easily imposed on
emphatically	adv	in a forceful way
treachery	noun	A betrayal of trust; deceptive action or nature
oration	noun	a formal speech
misgivings	noun	a feeling of doubt or apprehension
anteroom	noun	A waiting room
prone	adj	lying flat, especially face downward
fastidious	adj	very concerned about accuracy and detail
apoplexy	noun	unconsciousness or incapacity resulting from a cerebral hemorrhage or stroke
extol	verb	praise enthusiastically
stolid	adj	Describes someone calm and showing little emotion

Answer Keys
“Battle Royal” by Ralph Ellison
Literary Analysis

A *battle royal* is a fight—with more than two combatants in a ring—where the last fighter standing is declared the winner.

1. What internal struggles in the narrator dealing with?

The story is about a young Black man who is struggling to fit in with a white society. He struggles with pleasing white people, staying true to himself, and most of all, adhering to his grandfather's last words which haunt him. His grandfather's plea on his deathbed causes the narrator to constantly question his own decisions and life choices. The narrator struggles between what he knows is right and what he submits to in order to please his white neighbors and heed his grandfather's advice.

2. Why is the narrator's invitation to speak at a town gathering such a triumph for the community?

This is pre-Civil Rights era, and the fact that a Black man was invited to a white party to speak was a major accomplishment as far as progress. Not only was the narrator breaking stereotypes but there was hope that he would be respected for his abilities and not judged by the color of his skin.

3. What members of the community were present at the party? What is the significance?

There were pastors, bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, and merchants. It shows readers that white people—even those who preach peace, and those who teach unity, and those who heal, and those who seek justice—are all accomplices to the racial inequalities in America at this time. These “respectable” leaders of the community are all hypocritical and culpable for their bigotry. People with real power were abusing their positions with prejudice. Additionally, the narrator mentions this detail to emphasize how nervous he was to give his speech.

4. What is preventing the narrator from just leaving the party?

Although he wants to leave, he is terrified. If he doesn't do what the white men tell him to do, he may be punished with violence. If he leaves, he might also disappoint his family and the Black community; it was a milestone for a Black man to give a speech at an event like this in the first place. Lastly, it is physically difficult for him to escape; he is surrounded by people and it's hard to move around.

5. How is the woman's tattoo of the American Flag symbolic of the American Dream?

The American dream, freedom, independence, and equality are all things the narrator strives for but can't attain. The tattoo on the American white woman is a symbol for The American dream... the narrator can only look, but he can never touch. (The narrator is representative of all Black people at this time.)

6. What can you infer about the guests of this party from the scene with the dancing woman?

The woman is terrified and disgusted with how the men are treating her. They are grabbing her and she tries to escape them. This tells readers that this party is not wholesome or family friendly. The guests are not honorable men. Their behavior is shameful, indecent, and disgraceful; they treat the woman like an animal, so one might assume the Black guests won't be treated with respect either.

7. What is the purpose of blindfolding the participants of the battle royal? What is achieved?

The white men in charge want to humiliate the Black men. They achieve their goal of stealing the dignity from these men who are now forced to fight against their will. It's symbolic of how white people blind the Black people in America and make them feel powerless.

8. What concerns does the narrator have about his speech?

He is concerned no one will take him seriously after the humiliating fight he's been forced to participate in. He looks like a wreck, bleeding, and sweating, and suffering. The narrator thinks if he wins the fight, he can earn their respect and then they will enjoy his speech even more. He believes if he doesn't win the fight, they might not allow him to give his speech at all.

9. How does the narrator prove himself to be naive after the fight is over?

He says, "Everyone seemed friendly now." When the narrator goes to "collect his money," he realizes it's another show for the white people to watch. Again, he is absolutely humiliated in addition to being physically abused and hurt.

10. What is the symbolism of the electrified rug?

The boys are given a chance to take coins and bills from a rug after the battle royal. When they are grabbing the money, they realize the rug is electrified. This symbolizes the difficulties the Black people went through in the struggle for equality. They had to suffer and endure physical pain as the white people were amused. Black people were not given anything they were offered for free; there was always a price attached.

11. The following excerpt from the narrator's speech are lines quoted by Booker T. Washington from his "Atlanta Compromise" Speech.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, "Water, water. We die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time the signal, "Water, send us water," ran up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A third and fourth signal for water was answered, "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man who is their next-door neighbor, I would say, "Cast down your bucket where you are. Cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom you are surrounded."

What is the significance of this allusion in the story "Battle Royal"?

Booker T. Washington recommends that African Americans "Cast Down Their Buckets" and befriend the white people. Instead of getting angry, hostile, or defensive, he suggests they learn to work with the white men and earn their respect. The narrator's speech was written before the night he was humiliated at the party. The reference to Washington's speech shows the narrator's naive way of thinking; he hoped that Black men and white men could get along. He hoped when he gave his speech, the white people would respect him for his talent and his abilities. This allusion also shows (whether consciously or unconsciously) the narrator is adhering to his grandfather's advice to play along with the white man to get ahead.

12. Why is there such an uproar when the narrator accidentally declares "social equality"?

This shows how white people were not ready to accept Black people as equals in the South. Black Americans were still considered inferior and the Civil Rights Laws were not in place yet. White people were uncomfortable with the thought of equal rights.

13. What underlying message is sent by the superintendent who delivers a gift to the narrator?

The narrator has to undergo humiliation to win a scholarship to achieve his dreams. The superintendent is congratulating the narrator for amusing the white people without complaints. This action represents how African Americans must undergo humiliation and adhere/obey the white man in order to get ahead in life.

14. What is so significant about the narrator's dream in the end?

The narrator dreams his grandfather tells him to open a number of envelopes in the briefcase, which ends with a note that says, "Keep this boy running." This represents the illusion white people gave to Black people that they could achieve their goals if they only worked hard enough. This wasn't exactly true since there were still copious amounts of obstacles African Americans had to suffer and endure just to live a decent life.

15. In what ways is the narrator an "invisible man"?

He is unnamed throughout the story because he is seen in society as nobody. All African Americans at the time were denied basic human rights including access to privileges white people had, such as wealth, healthcare, housing, education, and social acceptance. He is invisible because the world can't see him for what he is.

Answer Keys

"Battle Royal" by Ralph Ellison
Constructed Response

Directions: Answer the following prompts in a minimum of one paragraph each.

1. Explain the meaning of the advice, "Live with your head in the lion's mouth." What does it symbolize? Why does his grandfather give this advice?

The narrator's grandfather advises fighting white people in society by smiling and going along with them. This will beat them at their own game. To live with your head in a lion's mouth means living a life of risk and danger. Living side by side with white people symbolizes living dangerously because white people controlled the communities and government. White people would violently attack Black Americans as well as anyone else opposed to their ideals. The narrator's grandfather gives him this advice because he is full of regret and does not want his family to suffer a similar fate.

2. What is the best existential advice you've ever been given OR what is the most profound advice you have for others? Explain.

Answers will vary.

3. How did this story make you feel? What are your initial reactions? Do you recommend this story why or why not?

Answers will vary.