

Ralph Ellison's *King of the Bingo Game*

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Ralph Ellison's short story *King of the Bingo Game* was published in 1952, at a time when the civil rights movement was just beginning to emerge into the national consciousness as a major issue. Like the classic *Invisible Man*, which appeared the same year, it's a story about a black man driven past the point of sanity by his exclusion from the economic and cultural mainstream of American society. I'd like to present some of the significant features of the story which make it, to me, such a powerful piece of contemporary literature.

The narrative of the story is told from a third-person perspective, as if observing the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of the main character with a detached indifference. The main character has no name, and is referred to throughout only as "he," "him," and "himself." Similarly, none of the other characters in the story have names, either. To illustrate the protagonist's feelings of alienation from them, the other bingo players are identified with phrases like "the shadowy audience," "vague faces," and "the yelling mouths." Individuals are described in sketchy, nondescript terms -- "the man with the microphone," "two men in uniform" and even simply as "a voice" -- with no further details added. The overall effect is one of emotional distance and separation.

The jarring simile's that author Ellison uses in his story evoke the main characters intensely nervous demeanor. Appearing frequently are passages like "Then, like the sudden shriek of a subway whistle, a doubt tore through his head," "the smell of peanuts stabbed him like a knife"... and "He was like a long thin black wire / that was being stretched and wound upon the bingo wheel, wound until he wanted to scream." There are no simile's with positive connotations.

To make broader points about the negative, deeply traumatic effects being poor, black and completely disenfranchised can have on an individual's psyche, Ellison created a protagonist who is severely alienated and emotionally isolated from the people and environment around him. He is extremely insecure and anxious, constantly worried that he'll make some kind of mistake and suffer terrible embarrassment, that the white man with the microphone wants to make a fool out of him. He's described at various junctures in the story as paralyzed with fear and feelings of helplessness; tense, trembling, stumbling forward and staggering backward.

The main character is also defined by a pervading sense of desperation. Because he's so poor, winning the bingo game is the only way he can pay a doctor to treat his sick wife. He *must* win the game, because it's his only chance to save her. Eventually, the protagonist's feelings of acute desperation and powerlessness reach a breaking point and he loses touch with reality. After he gets the chance to spin the bingo wheel and win the jackpot, he comes to believe that saving his wife's life is dependent upon his ability to keep the wheel in motion. More, he believes that the only way to gain control over his own life is to keep the wheel going, and refuses to relinquish the button that makes it start and stop. At one point, he even thinks the wheel is somehow representative of God.

Though as I read this story I felt sympathy for the main character and what finally happens to him, I can't say I *liked* him; he remained essentially a stranger to me from beginning to end -- someone I didn't know and didn't really want to know. However, I think this may be precisely the reaction Ralph Ellison wanted, because it demonstrates one of the author's central points -- that when people are different than us, alien to our experience, often we don't see them as real human beings, but as "other," foreign, almost as inanimate objects.

The overall tone of the story is very dark, intense, and claustrophobic. If there are light touches or comic moments innocent of ironic undertone, I must have missed them. Rather, it has a kind of nightmare-ish, sick-to-your-stomach quality that makes for difficult reading. The main reason it was hard to read was that I knew almost from the moment I began that the protagonist would somehow come to a bad end.

The themes of *King of the Bingo Game* center around the elements I've already mentioned -- emotions like alienation, desperation, and powerlessness, as well as an unacknowledged inner rage. The main character is convinced that the bingo wheel controls his destiny, and symbolically, it becomes a "wheel of fortune," arbitrarily dictating his fate. I think this is Ellison's metaphor for the situation he and other blacks found themselves in at the beginning of the 1950's.

Some of the author's points -- Ellison appears to argue that the white world has robbed blacks of their true identities: At one point in the story, the protagonist forgets his name -- a name given to his grandfather by a *slave-owner* -- and then decides to discard it, believing himself to be "reborn." Moments later, he concludes that the other blacks playing bingo don't know their names either, calling them "poor nameless bastards." The implication is that they don't really know who they are. He even screams "Who am I?" but no one, not the white man with the microphone or the black people in the audience, seems to hear him...

The most important point Ellison makes in his story is that the interrelated emotions of powerlessness, desperation, and rage are what lead to the main character's insanity. He's only dimly aware of the rage seething inside of him, and while another man in the same situation might explode in violence, he turns that unexpressed rage against himself, unable to cope with the strain and finally losing his grip on reality. In larger terms, I believe that Ellison is saying that the emotional turmoil and insanity experienced by his protagonist are the inevitable by-products of a society which excludes, obstructs and marginalizes blacks and other "minorities."

Ultimately, *King of the Bingo Game* is a depressing story, and though I don't generally seek out this kind of subject matter, I am glad I read it, because I think it has important things to say about what it meant to be black in this country forty years ago. I also believe that one of the greatest functions of literature and art is to explore the darker side of human nature and confront people with issues most of us prefer to ignore. Although I found the story unpleasant, it had a definite emotional impact on me, and that's what made it worthwhile reading.