

Studying Child Psychology in Ralph Ellison's *Afternoon*

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Abstract:

From time immemorial, stories have been narrated and passed down to the people through their ancestors. Stories are vehicles carrying information of geography, history and culture. Ralph Ellison's short stories explore the issues of racial discrimination and post-slavery trauma suffered by the African Americans. In his early stories Ellison talks about the generation change, escaping the racial oppression, adapting in the post-slavery times and promise of equality through the eye of two young African American boys. Set in the early 20th century in America, stories follow two boys Buster and Riley whose bond reflects the challenges and resilience of Black youth navigating the constraints imposed by the systemic racism. The present paper is an attempt to study child psychology and the elements of narrative techniques such as folklore, imagery, symbolism employed by the author Ralph in his story – “Afternoon” that makes his work rich and vibrant. Though these stories are lesser known than his novel “Invisible Man” (1952) but they offer valuable insight into evolving voice and vision. Ellison's rich use of symbolism of wings, folklore and subtle delineation of child psychology add insightful view of his exploration of race, identity and promises expected in the American society.

Keywords: racism, post-slavery trauma, racial discrimination, American society, African American

Introduction of the Author

Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) is the American writer who carved his identity by virtue of his art and intellect. He was an essayist, short story writer and novelist. Born in Oklahoma City on March 1, 1914 to hard-working and highly informed lower middle class parents Lewis Ellison and Ida Millsap Ellison, he is appreciated and considered as one of the most influential and accomplished American authors of the twentieth century known especially for his only and the National Book Award (1953) winning novel *Invisible Man* published in 1952. Although he is not a prolific writer, he is skilled, impressive and lyrical. Between 1938 and 1944, Ellison produced some 57 articles and eight stories.

Buster and Riley Stories-An Introduction

Ralph Ellison in his story writing presents facts in his style. Ellison's three stories, popularly called Buster and Riley stories - "Afternoon," "Mister Toussan," and "That I Had the Wings", are structured on the dialogues between the imaginatively created young boys, Buster and Riley. In these stories the boys are shown enjoying their summer days in Oklahoma and share their childish and raw yet meaningful views on race and bigotry. Ellison has discussed the racial injustice and American dream through these teenage characters. It is his narrative art that Ellison fictionalizes the various complex issues in a unique way. He has applied folklore and knowledge of child psychology to present his themes. Ellison has taken great care in presenting the boys' way of conversation. To complete the portrayal of the other subjects, he also speaks of the restrictions imposed on the teens by the adults. The boys are often taunted by their grandparents who had been slaves. Interesting and thematic dialogues are used through the use of folklore and boys' ideals. The boys are ready to shape their experience and dreams through their exciting adventures.

Taking his life his experiences Ellison colours them into an artistic vision. Commenting on the technique of Ellison's stories says, John Callahan tells in Introduction to *Ralph Ellison: Flying Home and Other Collected Stories* were labeled as "Early Stories".

"In technique and style, subject matter and milieu, the thirteen stories show the young writer's promise and possibility in the late thirties and his gradual ascent to maturity in the mid-forties when, unbeknownst to him, he was about to conceive *Invisible Man*" (xxiv).

Afternoon

"Afternoon" tracks Buster and Riley as they lazily spend a summer afternoon in Oklahoma walking down an alley, talking about the humming high-voltage line and bootleggers, and using an apple as a baseball. Throughout the insignificant events of the afternoon, Buster and Riley test seeming limitations. When Buster asserts that he can break a glass insulator on an electric pole, Riley demonstrates Ellison's humorous and ironic use of color imagery by saying "Buster, you fulla brown. You cain't hit *that* glass, it's too high"(34) and challenges him. Buster, drawing eclectically from a pantheon of heroes, says that he will throw like "ole Lou Gehrig"(34) throwing out runners at first base and immediately breaks the insulator.

Wandering lazily down the alley, they muse about rumors of bootleggers forced to pour their contraband into the toilet during a police raid. Ellison identifies the Oklahoma setting when Buster laughs at the thought that "all the fish in the Canadian River was drunk" (35). The largest east-west tributary in Oklahoma, the Canadian passes through the center of Oklahoma City. Later Oklahoma is reemphasized when the boys sit and listen to the "thump, thump, thump of oil wells pumping away to the south" (38).

As they continue their walk, the two boys begin to chant a raffish folk rhyme. Ellison had collected children's rhymes as part of his WPA project, and this is the first story in which he uses these rhymes to suggest aspects of his characters, exuberant adolescents who respond to the world as any other youthful boy would give their circumstances and background. Verbal playfulness is one characteristic.

"Well I met Mister Rabbit

Down by the pea vine..." (36)

And Buster joining Riley sings:

"An' I asked him where's he gwine

Well, he said, Just kiss my behind

And he skipped on down the pea vine."(36)

Ellison delineates characters with a very sensitive account of child psychology. He balances his subject matter by carefully examining child behavior. Elizabeth B. Hurlock in her *Development Psychology: A Life-Span Approach, Fifth Edition* calls this type of singing a form of creative play. She adds:

Singing is another form of creative play that older children (children above age, six) enjoy. In most case, they do not like to sing at school, during the music period when their singing is likely to be criticized, but rather with their friends when they are away from listening ears of teachers and parents. Few boys make any serious attempt to sing well; they derive their fun just from making a noise or from making up a silly version of a song they already know (171).

As to Ellison's childhood background he called his brother Herbert "Huck" because of his pale skin and blue eyes. Sometimes he associated himself and his friends as being black Huck Finns, so Buster and Riley recall Twain's characters. Walking along the alley, they see and smell a dead cat, and the superstition that characterizes Huck, Tom, and Jim's relationship enters. "You'd better spit on it, else you'll have it for supper," (37) Buster suggests. As they pass the "maggot ridden body," they spit on it and walk on down the alley. Besides echoing

Twain, the maggot-filled cat and Riley's "fulla brown" comment introduce subtly the suggestions of death and decay that contrast with the images of life and possibility in the next experience. As Buster and Riley leave behind the cat's stench, they immediately see an apple tree, and Buster suggests that they get some apples. The more pragmatic Riley, however, cautions: "'Naw, they'll give you the flux. They too green' "(37). Thus, as he has done throughout his career, Ellison builds this early story on duality.

Although the apples are too green to eat, they do not resist the boy's imaginative power of transformation: an apple becomes a baseball. Buster smashes the apple into a pole. Riley, in a phrase that recalls Ellison's bird hunting in Dayton and Hemingway's influence, remarks that the apple "come apart like when you hit a quail solid with a shotgun" (40).

Finally, they wander back to Buster's house, a clean, grey cottage. As they get close, Buster begins to feel guilty for not having come home sooner, since he was supposed to help his mother wash and hang clothes. When she asks him where he had been; he tells her he was with Riley, Buster's mother responds angrily. Although Buster knows that he is partially responsible for her anger, he also understands that her emotions are affected by her relationship with whites. He thinks: "She was like this whenever something went wrong with her and the white folks" (35).

Riley's mother, who has no husband at home, works hard both around her house and for the white folks. She calls Riley a lazy rascal for failing to help her with the wash and for claiming not to know she needs him. Her voice hits him like a slap "You didn't know! Lawd, I don't know why I had to have a chile like you. I work my fingers to the bone to keep you looking decent and that's the way you 'preciates it. You didn't know!" (41)

Through their identification with certain mighty heroes from fact, folklore, and fiction, Buster and Riley feel capable of overcoming all antagonists. "You just wait til I get big," says Riley. "I'm gonna beat the hell outta my ole man. I'm gonna learn how to box like Jack Johnson just so I can beat his ass" (43). Ellison here again is at his best in child imagining. The children being young cannot fully express their anguish and dissatisfaction. They do so by their actions and words. Ellison uses the tool of criticism. Hurlock assesses that the children's criticism follows either suggestion or complaint:

Older children also like to criticize and make fun of other people. Sometimes they criticize people openly, and sometimes behind their backs. When criticizing adults, children generally put their criticisms in the form of a suggestion or a complaint, such as "Why don't you do so and so?" or "You

won't let me do what my friends do." Criticism of other children frequently takes form of name- calling, teasing or making derogatory comments (164).

Undertones of racial conflict surface when Riley tries to console Buster by telling him he ought to be glad that he does not have a father like his who is "so mean he hates himself!" (43). His father hates himself for suffering silently the treatment meted out to him by whites. Riley recalls how his father once tried to beat him until his mother stopped him, saying that she would not allow her son to be treated like "no slave." Such treatment by Riley's father links him to the scar left on him due to the painful experience of slavery in the past.

David Hall while examining the cause of harsh treatment by parents to their children in *Black Children and the American Dilemma: The Invisible Tears of Invisible Children* tells:

The Black adults who stepped into freedom brought with them a mentality, social structure and way of life that had been nurtured through one of the most brutal systems this country has ever employed. To make matters worse, the "incidents and badges" of slavery continue to be imposed upon Black people to this day through customs, laws and new social patterns of invisibility. Thus during slavery and for subsequent generations, the humanity of Black children was drained from them by this societal mapping, and the negative consequences of this social injustice remain with us today (17).

Ellison has shown the charming young boys as mischievous and adventurous, and playfully indulging in taking on the roles of various African American heroes. Yet, Hall's analysis reports that a majority of African American children fight and survive a living nightmare in the present American society:

The reality we face today is that many Black children have stopped dreaming because they do not believe that they will ever wake up from the nightmare. If we continue along the present course, we will continue to make our children invisible as we continue to satisfy our adult theories and needs (23).

Riley and Buster wish to adopt the role of heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson, who is "fast as a cat!"(43). Buster wonders, "Gee, you can throw a cat off the top a house and he'll land on his feet." (43). Riley recalls his grandfather's song:

*'If it hadn't a been
For the referee
Jack Johnson woulda killed
Jim Jefferie, ' "* (44)

As the day was growing into dusk and darkness, the tired boys sat quietly. They watch 'A black-and-yellow wasp flew beneath the eaves, droning,' which disappears into its honeycomb like nest. The wasp's movement into a honey nest symbolizes the boys' assertiveness, and imaginatively shows that they would dare to fight against injustice in the future.

Robert O'Meally regards the storyline as deviating from the author's point. He tells that Ellison at one point concentrates on brutality and at the next moment on the boys' handling of it.

O'Meally points out that the boys' names "announce their sturdiness and high-spiritedness" and points out that they are "aware of social injustices; but they test the values of their society and dare it not to make a place for them" (60-63). Schor concludes, "Afternoon" is concerned with "the internalization of a slave psychology" as it affects "the complex question of Negro identity." Although she finds the boys' assertiveness and self-confidence admirable, she faults the story for being unrealistic because it concludes "with the romantic assumption that the boys can grow up and retain their innocence and transform it into adult assertive power" (50-51).

The story goes overwhelmingly positive. Buster and Riley are the "antithesis of the youthful invisible man" because of their self-confidence and pride in their folk heritage and African American heroes. Not at all confused about their identities, Riley and Buster are on the sure path to manhood. Indeed, Buster and Riley are positive characters who emphasize individuality and freedom, but they are also Ellison's initiates growing aware of the limitations of others' definitions of reality.

Conclusion

. Though historical backgrounds of the African Americans have restricted their freedom even after the emancipation, but it is the first and final thing desired by one and all. The boys in the story explain their ardent desire for freedom.

The Buster and Riley stories demonstrate the richness and complexity of the Ellison's vision. His short stories are a very important and revealing insight into the genius of Ralph Ellison. Compact, technically perfect, intense in thought, rich in imagery and symbolism, they are a testament to his profound vision. The plots, characters, dialogues, settings and backdrop all blend together and are cemented by the strong thematic base. The fluidity and music of the language, and the complex and intricate fabric of expression make a reading of the short stories of Ellison an intellectual and sensuous joy.

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