The Black Ball

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH ELLISON

Ralph Ellison, who was named after the writer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, was born in Oklahoma City. His father died in an industrial accident when he was a young boy, so his mother took him and his brother to Gary, Indiana, where she thought they would find better opportunities. (This move is no doubt the inspiration for the first story in *The Black Ball*, "Boy on a Train.") They eventually returned to Oklahoma, and Ellison worked a series of odd jobs while growing up. As a teenager, he was a star football player and became particularly passionate about music, which won him a scholarship to the Tuskegee Institute (a prominent Black college) in 1933. While he found many aspects of Tuskegee frustrating, particularly as he was much poorer than most of the other students, it also gave him the opportunity to hone his musical skills and begin seriously studying literature for the first time. Instead of finishing his degree, he decided to leave and move to New York, where the Harlem Renaissance was underway. He met many of the movement's most prominent figures, including fellow writers Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, and began publishing articles, book reviews, and short stories. During this period, he also worked on the Federal Writers' Project (a New Deal program to provide work for writers during the Depression), joined the Communist Party, and married the actress Rosa Poindexter (but they divorced in 1943). Ellison also joined the Merchant Marines near the end of World War II and then married the writer Fanny McConnell in 1946. He dedicated the next five years to writing his masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award for Fiction and made him an international celebrity. He spent the rest of his life writing and teaching at various universities, primarily in the Northeast of the U.S. Famously perfectionistic, Ellison was never fully satisfied with *Invisible Man* and spent the rest of his life writing a second novel, which he never finished. (Different versions were published after his death as *Juneteenth* and *Three Days Before the Shooting…*) In fact, the only other books he published during his life were the essay collections *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, and to this day his name is virtually synonymous with *Invisible Man*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Twenty-first-century readers most often encounter Ralph Ellison's work through the lens of the civil rights movement, which began shortly after the publication of his major work, *Invisible Man*. Indeed, the stories in *The Black Ball* chronicle the harsh conditions that Black Americans faced between the 1920s and 1940s, and they show why major political change offered their only viable route to freedom. The injustice of segregation appears front and center in "Boy on a Train," in which James and his family are forced to ride in the train's sweltering baggage compartment because they are Black. And racism was still pervasive outside the South: for instance, in "The Black Ball," John knows that his boss could fire him at any time and replace him with a white man, and he warns his son against playing with white kids because he knows that he will inevitably get blamed if they get into any sort of conflict. Major historical events play a greater role in "Hymie's Bull" and "In a Strange Country." "Hymie's Bull" is set among freight-hoppers—people who illegally rode on commercial trains around the country—during the Great Depression. At the time, widespread poverty and unemployment led people to migrate around the country in search of work, and riding the rails was simply the cheapest way to do so. And "In a Strange Land" is set in Wales during World War II, when countless Black American soldiers found themselves fighting for freedom and democracy abroad, while facing segregation and repression at home. In fact, they brought together these two causes in the Double V Campaign, which called for victory both at home (over segregation) and abroad (in the war). Like the story's protagonist, Mr. Parker, many Black soldiers found that white Europeans treated them far better than white Americans ever did—and this motivated them to participate in the civil rights movement later on. It also led many of them to migrate out of the South, just like James's parents in "Boy on a Train." Specifically, they took part in the Great Migration—the massive movement of six million Black Southerners to the North, Midwest, and West between 1915 and 1970, which is largely responsible for the distribution of the nation's Black population today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ralph Ellison is by far best known for his complex, philosophical 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, which is universally considered a major landmark in 20th century American literature. However, he scarcely published anything else during his life—he left thousands of pages of drafts for an unfinished second novel, and different edited versions of it have been published in 1999 (as *Juneteenth*) and 2010 (as *Three Days Before the Shooting…*). The only other book that Ellison did publish during his lifetime was the essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964). Many of Ellison's early stories, including all of the ones in *The Black Ball*, were published after his death in the collection *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1996). (The most widely read of these is probably "A Party Down at the Square," which is about lynching.) Ellison is often compared with other major writers of the post-Harlem

Renaissance era, including his friend Richard Wright (whose major novels include the 1940 *Native Son* and the 1945 *Black Boy*) and who is best remembered for the 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and the 1955 essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*. While few major Black American authors are known primarily for their short stories, virtually all also wrote them, from Wright and Baldwin to Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Many anthologies have collected their work, such as Clarence Major's *Calling the Wind: Twentieth Century African-American Short Stories* (1993).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Black Ball
- **When Written:** 1930s–1950s
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1944 ("In a Strange Country"), 1996 ("Boy on a Train," "Hymie's Bull," and "The Black Ball")
- **Literary Period:** 20th-Century African American Literature, Civil Rights Movement Era
- **Genre:** Short Stories
- **Setting:** A train in Oklahoma in 1924 ("Boy on a Train"); a freight train from Chicago to Birmingham, Alabama in the 1930s ("Hymie's Bull"); an apartment building in an unnamed southwestern U.S. city, likely in the 1930s ("The Black Ball"); Wales during World War II ("In a Strange Country")
- **Climax:** James decides that he will kill whatever is hurting Mama ("Boy on a Train"); Hymie kills the railroad bull in self-defense ("Hymie's Bull"); Mr. Berry wrongly blames John's son for throwing a ball into his window ("The Black Ball"); Mr. Parker sings "The Star Spangled Banner" in a Welsh singing club ("In a Strange Country")
- **Antagonist:** Segregation, racist violence, racist labor exploitation (all stories); the white butcher ("Boy on a Train"), the railroad bull ("Hymie's Bull"), Mr. Berry ("The Black Ball"), the American soldiers ("In a Strange Country")
- **Point of View:** Third Person ("Boy on a Train" and "In a Strange Country"); First Person ("Hymie's Bull" and "The Black Ball")

EXTRA CREDIT

Lost and Found. "Hymie's Bull," "Boy on a Train," and "The Black Ball" were completely unknown until after Ellison's death. In fact, his executor found them hidden in a box of papers under his desk.

Autobiographical Context. Like *Invisible Man*, many of the stories in *The Black Ball* were based indirectly on Ellison's personal experiences. For instance, like the protagonist of "Boy on a Train," Ellison left Oklahoma City as a young boy with his mother in search of better opportunities after his father's death. Similarly, "Hymie's Bull" is loosely based on Ellison's experience hopping freight trains to travel to his college, and in "The Black Ball," the white union organizer says he's from the place Ellison went to college: Macon County, Alabama.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Black Ball" is a posthumous collection of four little-known short stories from the early career of renowned African American novelist Ralph Ellison. Set between the 1920s and 1940s, the stories use moments of racial awakening as an entry point to explore how Jim Crow segregation and white supremacist violence shaped Black life and American national identity in Ellison's time.

In the first story, "Boy on a Train," a little boy named James leaves Oklahoma City with his mother and his baby brother Lewis in 1924. They have to sit in the back of the segregated **train**, in the luggage compartment next to the engine. It's uncomfortably hot, but soot will fly inside if they open the window. A fat white butcher groped Mama when she first boarded the train, but she knows that she can't do anything about it: a white man's word will always count for more than a Black woman's. James and Lewis look out the window at the passing scenery: autumn leaves fall, wild horses gallop across the hills, and farmers lead their cows through cornfields. James remembers his caring, attentive, intellectual father (Daddy), who has recently passed away. Now, the family has to move to the only place where his mother can find work: the rural town of McAlester.

The train stops at a different small country town, and James notices local white men staring at him through the window. He doesn't understand why white people are so hostile to his family, but he suspects it has something to do with their color. Later, he points out a passing grain silo, and Mama breaks into tears. She says she remembers passing the same silo when she and Daddy first migrated from the South to Oklahoma City to seek a better life. But now, Daddy is gone, and life is not much better than it used to be. She tells James that he will be the man of the house now, and he has to make sure the family sticks together. He promises to do so. Mama prays for God to help her family survive the hardship they will encounter. James decides that he will protect Mama by killing whatever is making her so sad, even if it's God.

The next story, "Hymie's Bull," is also set on the American railroad. The story's unnamed Black narrator explains how he left home in search of work during the Great Depression, only to end up freight hopping his way around the country, like so many other unemployed young men. He explains that the railroads hire brutal security guards called "bulls" to kick bums (freight hoppers) off the trains. They specifically target Black bums, often grievously injuring or even killing them. But sometimes, bums get to the bulls first. The narrator remembers how he saw a white bum named Hymie kill one of the bulls.

Hymie had spent much of the day sitting on top of a train, sick and vomiting from a bad stew. In the evening, the narrator climbed atop the train to watch the sunset. He saw Hymie go to sleep, and then a bull approach and start beating him. Hymie pulled a knife out of his pocket, stabbed the bull in the chest and throat, pushed him off the train, and disappeared into the night. The next day, the other bulls wanted to lynch a Black bum in retaliation for the bull's death. But the narrator narrowly escaped.

The title story, "The Black Ball," focuses on one day in the life of a Black single father named John, who works as a janitor at a ritzy apartment building somewhere in the American southwest. In the morning, he cleans the building's lobby, then rushes to his quarters above the garage to make breakfast for his four-year-old son. His son asks if he's Black, because the gardener's son, Jackie, is making fun of him. John says that he's actually brown, but that the best thing to be is *American*. John returns to work, but a white stranger approaches him while he is polishing the brass door handles. John assumes that the stranger wants his job, because the manager, Mr. Berry, has been firing his few Black employees and replacing them with white people. But actually, the stranger is an organizer with a local union. He says he wants to help John and his coworkers win better wages and working conditions, but John thinks unions are only for white people. The man shows John his hands, which are covered in scars, and explains that a white mob attacked him back home in Alabama after he defended a Black friend against false rape charges. He invites John to an upcoming union meeting and leaves.

On his lunch break, John eats with his son, who plays with a toy truck and says that he wants to be a truck driver. John tries to read, but ends up looking out the window and taking a nap instead. His son goes out to play with **his ball**, and John warns him to stay in the back alley instead of going to the front lawn, where the white kids play. But John's son doesn't listen—when John wakes up from his nap, he finds his son in the front lawn, crying because "a big white boy" took his ball and threw it into Mr. Berry's window. Then, Mr. Berry comes over, furious: the ball ruined one of his plants. He warns John that he will be "behind the black ball" (out of a job) if his son keeps playing on the lawn. Back inside, John's son asks what Mr. Berry meant—after all, the ball is white. John muses that his son will spend his whole life playing with the black ball (learning to deal with racism), and he decides to go to the union meeting.

Finally, "In a Strange Country" follows Mr. Parker, a Black American soldier, on his first night in Wales during World War II. The story opens in a pub, where a Welshman named Mr. Catti brings Parker a drink. Parker is dizzy and has a black eye because, as soon as he arrived in Wales, he came across a group of white American soldiers—and they called him "a goddamn n[—]" and punched him in the face. In contrast, Catti is "genuinely and uncondescendingly polite" to Parker. He says that Welshmen love "Black Yanks," and he invites Parker to a local singing club. Parker agrees, but he wonders whether Catti is playing some kind of trick on him. At the club, the manager greets Parker warmly, and the choir sings Welsh folk songs. Parker can't understand them, but he finds them beautiful and moving. He realizes that Black Americans and the Welsh have a lot in common as subjugated peoples within larger nations (the U.S. and U.K.). He wishes that Black Americans could find the same kind of national pride and unity that the Welsh seem to have. He also realizes that white people have never treated him so well in his whole life, and he wishes he didn't have to return home to the U.S. The choir sings the Welsh national anthem, then "God Save the King," the "Internationale," and finally, in Parker's honor, "The Star Spangled Banner." Parker feels a dizzying combination of confusion, guilt, and pride, and then he starts to sing. After the song, he's completely speechless.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

James – James, a Black boy who is probably about four or five years old, is the protagonist of "Boy on a Train." During the story, he is traveling from Oklahoma City to the rural town of McAlester with his mother (Mama) and baby brother (Lewis). He spends most of the story looking out the window at the scenery, wondering what life will be like in his new town, remembering his father (Daddy), and comparing himself to the young white boys he sees in the farms and on the **train**. He wishes he could be like them, because he has a vague sense that their lives are better than his, but he doesn't fully understand why. He knows that it has something to do with race—just like John's son in "The Black Ball," he slowly learns about racism by observing how people treat him and his family differently from white people. In the second half of the story, Mama tells him that he will have to be the man of the house, now that Daddy is gone. Crying and praying, she laments how difficult it is to survive under segregation. James takes his promise to protect Mama so seriously that he decides to "kill this mean thing that made Mama feel so bad"—even though he doesn't quite know what it is. (He thinks it may be God.) Between racism and his father's death, James is forced to confront serious adult challenges and emotions at a young age. In short, he will have to grow up fast, and he will miss out on the innocent, carefree childhood that the white boys he sees around him will get to have. While it's difficult to know exactly how autobiographical "Boy on a Train" is, James certainly represents Ralph Ellison himself, as he also left Oklahoma at a young age on a train with his mother after his father's death.

Lewis – In "Boy on a Train," Lewis is James's baby brother. He is capable of little more than looking out the window and copying different animals' sounds. His complete innocence about the world makes him a character foil for James, who is gradually

learning about the racism, hardship, and discrimination that his family has faced over the course of the story.

Mama – Although not the story's protagonist, James's mother is arguably the central character in "Boy on a Train." During the story, she rides in the segregated Black car of a **train**—which is also the baggage car—with her two sons, James and Lewis. They are heading from Oklahoma City, where she has been living for the past 14 years, to a small town called McAlester, where she has been promised work. Her husband (Daddy) has recently died, and so she is both grieving and dealing with the immense pressure of making a living as a single working Black mother in 1924. Worse still, as soon as she boarded the train, a white butcher tried to grope her—she defended herself and spat in his face, but he grew furious, and she is still resentful about the situation throughout the story. She worries deeply about her family's future, and in the story's climax, she tearfully tells James that he will have to become the man of the family and prays for God to give them all the strength they need to survive. Her experience demonstrates the personal and emotional cost of racism: it shows how much hardship and violence Black Americans—and Black women in particular—faced under Jim Crow in the early 1900s, and how this impacted them emotionally and psychologically. But she also shows how they built strength and resilience in order to confront this condition with dignity.

Daddy – In "Boy on a Train," James's father has recently died. James remembers him as attentive, kind, and intellectual, and Mama's stories suggest that he worked as a construction worker to provide for his family in Oklahoma. His death leaves the whole family with the sense of emptiness and desperation with which they try to cope over the course of the story.

The White Butcher – In "Boy on a Train," the butcher is "a big, fat white man with a red face" who frequently comes to the baggage car where James and his family are seated in order to retrieve candy and magazines, which he sells to white passengers in the other cars. Mama explains that the butcher groped her before the story began, and James hopes in vain that he will give him some candy. The butcher's behavior shows how Jim Crow gave ordinary white people power over ordinary Black people by tilting the legal and economic system in their favor.

The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" – The narrator of "Hymie's Bull," who never names himself in the story, is a young Black man who spends his time hopping freight **trains** throughout the U.S. during the Great Depression. In addition to recounting how he saw Hymie kill a railroad bull (security guard) in self-defense, he also tells the reader about how Black and white bums (freight-hoppers) often get along on their adventures, but the bulls generally target their worst violence at Black bums. His speaks in a working-class Black vernacular, and his sense of alienation and peril represents the broader Black American experience in the early 20th century.

Hymie – In "Hymie's Bull," Hymie is a white bum (freight-hopper) from Brooklyn whom the story's narrator watches kill a railroad bull (security guard) in self-defense atop a moving **train**. Hymie's actions disprove the racist stereotype that only Black bums carry weapons and reflect the widespread sense of threat and culture of violence that surrounds the freight-hopping subculture.

John – John, the protagonist of "The Black Ball," is an honest, hardworking Black single father living in an unnamed city in the Southwestern U.S. He began working as a janitor in an upscale apartment building a few months before the story begins, and he works tirelessly in order to please his meticulous, racist boss, Mr. Berry, who has been replacing the building's Black employees with white newcomers. During the story, a white union organizer tries to recruit John into his new multiracial building workers' union. John isn't sure what to do: he knows that his working conditions are poor and would do almost anything to improve them, but he also feels that unions are for white people and sincerely believes in the American ideal of advancing in life based on hard work alone. Indeed, his actions during the day reflect this belief: he spends his free time studying, and he tells his son that it's even better to be American than to be Black or white. After all, his driving concern in life is to provide a better life for his son. And yet the day's events show him that he may not be able to do this unless he can unite with others to change the social, economic, and political conditions of Black life in the U.S. When his son asks to play outside with his **ball**, John asks him to play in the back alley, instead of in front with the white kids. But his son goes to the front alley, where a white boy steals his ball and throws it into Mr. Berry's window. Mr. Berry blames John and threatens to fire him. And John takes the blame—he knows that no white person will ever believe the truth. He realizes that, even if he does everything right at work, circumstances outside his control could still cost him his job. In other words, working hard and acting respectably are not enough to overcome racism. So he decides to attend the organizer's union meeting. John's new political consciousness represents all Black people: Ellison thought that their only chance of truly improving their situation was through collective political action.

John's Son – In "The Black Ball," the protagonist, John, is the sole parent to his unnamed four-year-old son. John's son spends the whole day playing alone, as he is too young to go to school and he could face violence, discrimination, or other problems if he plays with white kids. In this way, racism isolates him and deprives him of many of the basic pleasures of childhood. (However, he does occasionally play with the gardener's son, Jackie.) He is intensely curious: in the morning, he asks John if he is really Black, and in the afternoon, he tells John that he wants to be a trucker when he grows up. (Trucking has long been a heavily unionized industry, so this comment makes John think seriously about joining the union for the first

time.) The major conflict in the story occurs after John's son takes his **ball** outside to play, but a white boy steals it and throws it into the building manager Mr. Berry's window. Mr. Berry blames John and his son for the commotion, and John's son is surprised and confused when Berry predicts that John will end up "behind the black ball" (blacklisted, or fired). John's son points out that his ball is white, not black, which shows that he doesn't fully understand the situation that his father is facing. Much like James in "Boy on a Train," thanks to the events in this story, John's son starts to realize that people treat him differently from white people solely based on race—but he still doesn't fully understand the U.S.'s racial hierarchy. While what he is learning will prepare him for the rest of his life as a Black man in a deeply unequal society, it is also depriving him of the innocent, carefree childhood that Ellison suggests all people deserve.

The White Union Organizer – In "The Black Ball," the union organizer is a thin, red-faced Southern white man who approaches John while he is working and invites him to join a multiracial union for building service workers in the area. John is initially skeptical of the organizer's intentions—he assumes that the man wants to take his job, or that his union will only benefit white workers. But then, the organizer shows John his hands, which are badly scarred, and explains that he got the scars after he defended a Black friend who was falsely accused of rape in Alabama. A white mob attacked him, then lynched his friend. This story shows John that the man truly is fighting for racial justice, and so he seriously considers the offer. The union organizer's story and work demonstrate how white and Black people can work together for racial justice, and how white and Black working class people often share the same political interests. Indeed, the story suggests that because white people hold most power in American society, multiracial coalitions like the organizer's union are crucial to political progress for Black Americans.

Mr. Berry – In "The Black Ball," Mr. Berry is the strict, humorless building manager who employs John. As Berry has been systematically firing his Black employees and replacing them with white people, John works especially hard to stay on his good side. However, in the early 1900s, this simply isn't enough to counteract the effects of racism. At the end of the story, when a white boy throws John's son's **ball** into Mr. Berry's window, ruining one of his plants, Berry furiously blames John and threatens to fire him. Berry's actions show how racism holds Black people back, limiting their job opportunities and enabling white people to scapegoat them for any problems that arise. His behavior pushes John to join the organizer's labor union, which might be his best chance at winning back some power as a worker.

Jackie – In "The Black Ball," the gardener's son Jackie, who is white, is about the same age as John's son, who is Black. Jackie taunts John's son for his race and doesn't face consequences for mischievous behavior, like pulling a flower off from a bush. In contrast, Mr. Berry blames John and his son when a white boy throws **John's son's ball** through the window. This double standard shows how racism limits Black children's freedom and opportunities from an early age.

Mr. Parker – In the story "In a Strange Country," Mr. Parker is a Black American soldier who arrives in Wales during World War II. As soon as he arrives, a group of white American soldiers call him "a goddamn n[—]" and punch him in the face. But then, he receives an astonishingly warm welcome from the local Welsh people, particularly Mr. Catti. This contrast serves to highlight how deeply racism cuts off the bonds between white and Black Americans, to the point that they often struggle to view each other as fully human. In fact, Catti is the first white man who *ever* treats Parker as an equal, in his whole life. Even though he recognizes that the U.K. played a major role in spreading slavery, colonialism, and racism around the globe, he finds profound inspiration in Welsh people's pride for their culture and nation. In fact, he learns that their struggle for justice and recognition within the U.K. is similar to Black people's within the U.S. As a result, his night in Wales helps him imagine what a racially harmonious future would look like and better love his own country. At the end of the story, when he sings "The Star Spangled Banner" at the local Welsh singing club, he feels a sense of relief and national pride for the first time ever.

Mr. Catti – In the last story, "In a Strange Country," Mr. Catti is the local man who graciously welcomes the Black American soldier Mr. Parker to Wales. He drinks with Parker, tells him how much he appreciates Black Americans and their culture, and even brings him to a local singing club. Parker is so taken aback by Catti's generosity and respect that, at times, he wonders if Catti is playing an elaborate practical joke on him. But he isn't: since he hasn't grown up under the U.S.'s system of racial hierarchy, Catti simply treats Parker like any other man and doesn't harbor any prejudice toward him. In fact, he sees Welsh people and Black Americans as kindred nations because they both face similar kinds of oppression within their countries. His attitude shows Parker and the reader what it would be like to live in a racially just society.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hymie's Bull – In the story of the same name, "Hymie's Bull" is the railroad bull (security guard) who viciously attacks Hymie atop a moving **train**, and whom Hymie kills in self-defense.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in

black and white.

RACE, NATION, AND BELONGING

The Black Ball collects four of Ralph Ellison's little-known early short stories. In "Boy on a Train," a young boy (James) migrates out of Oklahoma City on a segregated train after his father's death with his baby brother (Lewis) and his mother. In "Hymie's Bull," an unnamed Black narrator who lives as a bum, riding freight trains around the U.S. during the Great Depression, tells the reader about watching one of his white counterparts (Hymie) kill a railroad bull (security guard) who violently attacked him. "The Black Ball" takes the perspective of a young Black father and janitor named John, who meets a white union organizer and nearly loses his job after his manager, Mr. Berry, blames his young son for something he didn't do. Finally, "In a Strange Country" focuses on a Black soldier, Mr. Parker, who arrives in Wales and is astonished that the locals treat him as an equal (something his white American fellow soldiers have never done).

The core issue in these stories is what it means for Black people to be American—or to find a sense of identity and belonging in a country that actively rejects, denigrates, and exploits them. All four of Ellison's protagonists are outsiders in white-dominated spaces (trains, workplaces, and military units), and they all recognize that they will never be treated as equals because of their race. For instance, James and his family are forced to sit with the baggage in the back of the train, while John knows that Mr. Berry will probably give his job to a white man if he can find one willing to do it. In each case, the protagonists' exclusion from such white-dominated spaces is a metaphor for Black people's overall marginalization in American political, social, and economic life.

The protagonists' frustration about this exclusion mirrors Ellison's conflicting feelings about Black people's attempts to achieve equality and integration in the U.S. Ellison and his protagonists struggle to love the U.S., a country that has enslaved, segregated, and lynched their people, and whose white majority has never truly seen them as fellow citizens. At the same time, they also recognize that the U.S. is the only country they have. These complex feelings about nation and identity are clearest of all in the final story, in which the protagonist, Mr. Parker, visits a local singing club and learns how Welsh people take pride in their identity as a subjugated nation within the United Kingdom. In fact, the Welsh men he meets understand and respect Black American culture in a way white Americans never have. At the end of the story, the Welsh choir even performs "The Star-Spangled Banner" in Mr. Parker's honor. The performance causes Parker to feel "a wave of guilt […] followed by a burst of relief," because for the first time, he is being treated as a true American—and he feels proud to be one. This relief represents the sense of national belonging that Ellison hopes Black people can eventually achieve in the U.S. Thus, while the four stories in *The Black Ball* show how racism has long prevented Black Americans from truly feeling at home in the U.S., it also ends with a vision of the inclusive, loving, diverse national community that Ellison believed the U.S. could become in the future.

RACIAL VIOLENCE AND INJUSTICE

All four stories in *The Black Ball* show how, throughout most of the 20th century, white Americans used racist violence as a tool to terrorize Black people into accepting a subservient position in society. First, Ralph Ellison shows how Black Americans live in an atmosphere of constant threat. And second, he shows how Black people adapt to this situation by learning to accept racial hierarchy, avoid confrontation, and take responsibility for injustices that white people inflict upon them. Racist violence lurks in the background of all four stories in this book. The first story starts after a white butcher gropes James's mother on the train, and the last one begins after Mr. Parker meets a group of white American fellow soldiers in Wales—and they greet him by calling him the N-word and punching him in the face. In "Hymie's Bull," the narrator explains how railroad bulls (security guards) specifically target Black bums (freight train hoppers) with sadistic violence. (Whenever anyone of any race attacks a bull, he explains, the bulls "make some black boy pay for it.") In all these cases, the protagonists are not surprised when white people attack them—they are used to it, because in 20th-century American society, white violence against Black people was simply the norm.

Ellison also shows how Black people learned to adapt to this norm and avoid conflict at all costs, because they knew that practically anyone with power—including their bosses, the police, and the government—would inevitably blame them. This is clearest of all in "The Black Ball," when the building manager Mr. Berry blames John's son for throwing a ball into his office—even though a white boy actually did it. Still, John takes the blame and resolves to work even harder in order to appease Mr. Berry and keep his job. Though John's son is too young to understand, John tells him that young Black people must eventually start "learning the rules of the game." Of course, "the game" is the way that Black people have to accept injustice and act subservient to white people in order to survive in a racist society. Playing "the game" is just a fact of Black life in the 20th century—and as John puts it, his son will have no choice but to "play until he [grows] sick of playing."

POLITICS AND SOLIDARITY

In *The Black Ball*, Ralph Ellison's bleak portrait of American racism shows how racism prevents Black Americans from living free, prosperous lives and how, as individuals, they can do very little to stop it. At the same time, *The Black Ball* has an optimistic undercurrent: Ellison also

suggests that Black people can achieve progress through political organizing, and specifically by building coalitions across racial lines. In these stories, Ellison captures Black Americans' fundamental desire to live in a just, equal society. The family at the center of "Boy on a Train" dreams of a brighter future, and at the end of "In a Strange Country," after seeing how the Welsh take pride in their unique identity and unite to fight for inclusion in the U.K. as a whole, Mr. Parker has an awe-inspiring, tear-provoking vision of how Black Americans could do the same.

Meanwhile, the other two stories hint at Ellison's vision of how Black and white Americans must work together if they want to build a diverse, prosperous nation. "Hymie's Bull" describes an interracial friendship between men facing the same dire social and economic conditions (the narrator and Hymie). And most importantly of all, the plot of "The Black Ball" focuses on a relatively poor, powerless worker—a janitor named John—deciding to join a multiracial labor union. At first, John doesn't trust the union organizer, but in the story's closing lines, he realizes that the union is his best chance at job security and decides to join it. Ellison suggests that, if John can get white faces and a major institution on his side, he will finally have the bargaining power he needs to improve his situation. John's awakening represents Ellison's belief—at least at the early point in his career when he wrote these stories—that Black people's best chance for advancement was by uniting with working-class white people through labor unions and left-wing politics.

CHILDHOOD AND INNOCENCE

Two of the stories in *The Black Ball*—"The Black Ball" and "Boy on a Train"—feature children who begin to learn about the ugly truth of American racism while their parents struggle to decide whether and how to reveal it to them. In "Boy on a Train," young James's Daddy has died, and James's mother (Mama) has to move him and his baby brother Lewis to a rural town, which is the only place she can find work. James wonders why his family has to sit at the back of the train with the luggage, why the white boy who passes wears nice clothes, and "why [...] white folks stare at you that way" when the train pulls through a station. He can tell that his world is divided by color, but he does not understand why or what it will mean for him. Later, Mama tells him that life is hard for Black people, and he will have to become his family's protector. He realizes that the color line has something to do with his Mama's distress, but he doesn't fully understand why—he still thinks that he can "kill this mean thing that made Mama feel so bad." Even though he is barely old enough to be in school, he doesn't have the luxury of a carefree childhood because he already has to confront adult problems that racism has created for his family.

"The Black Ball" also shows how racism deprives Black people of a privilege that most white people take for granted: childhood innocence. Early in the story, the protagonist, John's, four-year-old son starts asking difficult questions about race, beginning with, "Daddy, am I black?" When the boy wants to play with his ball, his father tells him to play in the back alley, not in the front lawn with the white boys. But surely enough, John's son ends up in the front yard, and then a white boy steals his ball and throws it through the building manager, Mr. Berry's, window. Berry blames John's son, and John has no option but to accept the blame on his son's behalf. Telling the truth would be far too dangerous, as the white boy's family could easily get him fired, and Berry likely wouldn't believe him anyways. Like James's mother, John struggles to balance his desire to let his son play innocently, like any child should, with the practical need to teach his son about the grim reality of racism (which means that others will never see him as innocent). Racism, Ellison suggests, forces young Black people to accept injustice at an early age. It also creates a tragic dilemma for all Black parents. Namely, they must give their children the freedom to be children while also trying to prepare them children for the harsh realities of Black life in the U.S.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TRAINS

"Boy on a Train" and "Hymie's Bull" are both set primarily on moving trains, which represent a core but elusive American ideal: the promise that migration can bring freedom and a better life. Both stories' protagonists use trains to try and escape difficult life situations—albeit in very different ways. In "Boy on a Train," Mama, James, and Lewis leave Oklahoma City after Daddy's death, because Mama has been promised work in the rural town of McAlester. Even though they are forced to ride in the back of the train with the luggage, the family knows that the trip is their best shot at staying afloat economically. Mama also remembers migrating by train from the South 14 years prior with Daddy, and she is distraught to have to do the same once again, now that the life they built in Oklahoma City has fallen apart. In "Hymie's Bull," the narrator explains how he and his brother left home to spend their days hopping freight trains around the U.S. and looking for work. They didn't find work, so they ended up simply drifting around the country, but at least they are making an effort to improve their lives. Notably, the sensory experience of riding a train elevates the protagonists' feeling of freedom and progress. In "Boy on a Train," James and Lewis are fascinated by the rolling hills and farms that they pass, while in "Hymie's Bull," the narrator climbs on top of the train to watch the beautiful

sunset, which is all the more thrilling because he is barreling precariously towards it at high speed. Like a train chasing the sunset, Ellison's protagonists don't necessarily find what they are looking for on their journeys, but these train journeys still represent their fundamental drive to seek a better life through migration.

THE WHITE AND BLACK BALLS

In "The Black Ball," John and his son's conversation about the white and black balls represents the constant risk that bias, suspicion, and misinterpretation pose for Black people under Jim Crow. After a white boy throws John's son's ball into the building manager Mr. Berry's office, Berry threatens that John will end up "behind the black ball" if his son plays in the front yard again. This phrase has multiple layers of meaning. Berry is referencing *blackballing*—banning or firing someone, often for prejudiced reasons. This phrase is also an earlier version of the saying "*behind the eight-ball*," which means to be in a difficult position. Lastly, "eight-ball" and "black ball" were also common racial slurs in the early 20th century.

John's son doesn't understand Berry's threat. He naïvely points out that his ball is white, not black, and asks if he will get to play with the black ball in the future. John cynically thinks that his son is already playing with the black ball (facing racial exclusion and injustice) but will only later learn the game's rules (how racism works). Clearly, this misunderstanding represents how young Black people must learn to safely navigate interactions with white people under Jim Crow. But readers can interpret the precise meaning of the white and black balls in different ways. One version is that, while John's son *knows* that the ball is white (that the white boy threw the ball into Berry's window), Berry ends up talking about the black ball instead (or blaming John's son). Another is that John's son thinks in terms of the white ball—the rules that apply to white people—because he doesn't yet understand racism, but he will soon learn to fear the black ball—the different rules that apply to Black people.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Random House edition of *The Black Ball* published in 2018.

Boy on a Train Quotes

"See, Lewis, Jack Frost made the pretty leaves. Jack Frost paints the leaves all the pretty colors. See, Lewis: brown, and purple, and orange, and yellow."

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), James, Lewis, Daddy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The first story in *The Black Ball*, "Boy on a Train," opens with young James and baby Lewis looking out the windows of a moving train. Their father (Daddy) has recently died, and they are taking the train from Oklahoma City, their home, to a rural town where their mother (Mama) has found work. But much of the story depends on the way that the three main characters understand their trip in completely different ways. While Mama struggles to bear the emotional weight of losing her partner and having to care for her two young sons on her own, James is only starting to understand why white people are so hostile to Black people and process what it will mean for him to be the man of his family. And as this passage a few paragraphs into the story shows, baby Lewis can do little more than observe the passing landscape: he is still immersed in innocent childhood curiosity and fascinated by the world around him, and he doesn't even know that his family is living through a period of serious trauma. His innocence makes him something of a tragic figure, because the reader comes to recognize how difficult his upbringing is likely to be.

The butcher had tried to touch her breasts when she and the boys first came into the car, and she had spat in his face and told him to keep his dirty hands where they belonged. The butcher had turned red and gone hurriedly out of the car, his baskets swinging violently on his arms. She hated him. Why couldn't a Negro woman travel with her two boys without being molested?

Related Characters: James, Lewis, Mama, Daddy, The White Butcher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

A white butcher sexually harasses Mama as soon as she boards the train leaving Oklahoma City. She defends herself, and thankfully, James and Lewis don't notice what has

happened, but she's still frustrated and appalled. This episode underlines how difficult life was for Black women under Jim Crow: on top of all the discrimination that they already faced in public life just for being Black, they also had to deal with the constant threat of sexual violence from white men who knew the law would always take their side. This adds to the great burden she is already carrying as she grieves her husband's death, migrates for a new job, and determines how to support her children on her salary alone. Like so much of Ellison's work, Mama's story highlights how Jim Crow didn't just hold Black people back and limit their opportunities—it also took a deep emotional toll on them. In other words, Ellison shows that Jim Crow inflicted a trauma on Black Americans.

> The countryside was bright gold with Indian summer. Way across a field, a boy was leading a cow by a rope and a dog was barking at the cow's feet. It was a nice dog, the boy on the train thought, a collie.

Related Characters: James

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3-4

Explanation and Analysis

As he looks out at the passing countryside, James hones in on this idyllic image of a young boy about his age walking a dog and cow through a field. While it never says so explicitly, the story implies that the boy is white, and it sets up a stark contrast between the white boy (as he freely roams the fields) and James (who sits locked in the dark, sweltering baggage car). This contrast highlights the way that young James is already suffering under Jim Crow—and recognizing what he is missing. Indeed, when James sees the other boy, he is also seeing an alternate version of his own life: he sees what it would be like to be free, if only the color line didn't prevent him from having the same comforts and opportunities as white boys.

> He closed his eyes tight, trying to see the picture of Daddy. He must never forget how Daddy looked. He would look like that himself when he grew up: tall and kind and always joking and reading books. … *Well, just wait; when he got big and carried Mama and Lewis back to Oklahoma City everybody would see how well he took care of Mama, and she would say, "See, these are my two boys," and would be very proud. And everybody would say, "See, aren't Mrs. Weaver's boys two fine men?" That was the way it would be.*

Related Characters: James, Lewis, Mama, Daddy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

James does his best to preserve his memories of his father so that he can bring them forward into the uncertain next phase of his life. He is too young to truly grieve—instead, he feels a vague, confusing sense of anger and purposelessness. He remembers his father as a role model for the kind of man that he can become when he grows up and wants to take care of his family and make Mama feel safe and secure, just as Daddy did in the past. (Perhaps it is a silver lining that Daddy died before James grew old enough to see his flaws.)

James's thoughts about his father show how he struggles to understand and cope with the sudden change in his own role in his family. Moving forward, he will have to take on responsibilities far beyond his age. In a way, Ellison uses this as a metaphor for the Black American experience more broadly: the discrimination, hardship, and outright violence that Black Americans experience forces young Black people to act like adults, whether because they must help their families through hardship or because white people treat them as criminals and threats, not innocent children who deserve the same ordinary, carefree upbringing that most white children get.

> "You understand, son. I *want* you to remember. You *must*, you've *got* to understand."

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), James, Daddy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Mama once again tells James the story of how she and Daddy moved from the South to Oklahoma City to seek a better life. He loves hearing the story, as always. Once she finishes, she tells him that he has to remember the trip they are making now. After all, this trip is another version of the same story: migrating from a place with few opportunities to a place with many, where their family may be able to achieve the safety, freedom, and stability that they have lacked in the past. She wants her children to remember the sacrifices that she and Daddy have made for them, not because she wants their admiration, but because she doesn't want them to waste whatever chances they do get in life. Accordingly, Ellison offers this story as an ode to the Great Migration: he wants his readers to remember how millions of Black Americans traded everything they knew for an uncertain future, fleeing racism and migrating across the country in search of opportunities that they couldn't even be sure existed.

> "Go with us and keep us, Lord. Then it was me and him, Lord; now it's me and his children. And I'm thankful, Lord. You saw fit to take him, Lord, and it's well with my soul in Thy name. I was happy, Lord; life was like a mockingbird a-singing. And all I ask now is to stay with these children, to raise them and protect them, Lord, till they're old enough to go their way. Make them strong and unafraid, Lord. Give them strength to meet this world. Make them brave to go where things is better for our people, Lord...."

Related Characters: Mama (speaker), Daddy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

After telling James about how she and Daddy went to Oklahoma in search of a better life, Mama starts to grieve Daddy's death. She then says this emotional prayer. She admits that she is struggling and needs to draw strength from somewhere else in order to keep going. Most of all, she admits that she worries her children may not learn the skills they need to survive as Black men in segregated America.

Through Mama's prayer, Ellison gives his readers a direct window into the emotional toll that Jim Crow took on Black Americans. It was far too easy for Black people—and particularly Black women like Mama—to just give up. They faced constant discrimination, injustice, and violence, and they had distressingly few opportunities to get ahead. Because of these hardships, they needed to learn reparative emotional skills: they needed to cultivate hope, faith, and even forgiveness if they wanted to hold themselves and their families together.

> James wanted to cry, but, vaguely, he felt *something* should be punished for making Mama cry. Something cruel had made her cry. He felt the tightness in his throat becoming anger. If he only knew what it was, he would fix it; he would kill this mean thing that made Mama feel so bad. It must have been awful because Mama was strong and brave and even killed mice when the white woman she used to work for only raised her dress and squealed like a girl, afraid of them. If he only knew what it was ... Was it God?

Related Characters: James, Mama, Daddy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

James finds his mother's tearful prayer jarring. Like any young boy, he wants to see his parents as infallible protectors who are strong enough to overcome any challenge and guarantee that he will always be safe. But now, his father is gone, and his mother is admitting that she is not strong enough to confront the challenges her family will face. Put differently, she admits that she cannot protect her children all on her own. James reacts with a mix of anxiety, grief, and rage: he decides that the only alternative is for *him* to become his family's protector and to destroy whatever is hurting Mama. Since Mama is praying to God, whom she says took Daddy away, James even thinks that God might be the problem. Of course, readers will probably see the problem as racism—and specifically the system of segregation and discrimination that made it next to impossible for single Black women like Mama to give their kids a dignified childhood. Regardless, James hopes that he can step in to give his Mama and baby brother the protection that Daddy no longer can.

Unfortunately, the reality is far darker: James will never be able to fully protect his family. He will not grow strong enough to kill God, racism, or whatever else is hurting Mama. Instead, he will have to learn to bear the emotional toll of American racism, just as Mama has. Unlike white children, he will not get to feel safe and free in American society—rather, he will have to learn to live with the danger, uncertainty, and discrimination that are just basic facts of

life for Black Americans in the 20th century.

> Yes, I'll kill it. I'll make it cry. Even if it's God, I'll make God cry, he thought. I'll kill Him; I'll kill God and not be sorry!

Related Characters: James (speaker), Mama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

James concludes that he will take care of Mama by doing whatever he can to destroy whatever it is that is plaguing her—even if it's God. Of course, Mama is crying because she is facing the sum of several different crises: her husband has just died, she has two young children to raise alone, and all the while, she has to deal with discrimination, suspicion, and sexual harassment from white people. In other words, Jim Crow multiplies the challenges she already faces as a widowed single mother.

Meanwhile, James's anger shows how young Black people struggle to cope with the grim reality that they live in a society designed to repress and exploit them. Too young to fully understand the situation, James merely recognizes that *something* is hurting Mama, and so he concludes that he must protect her by hurting that thing back. Racism is hard to identify, understand, and fight because it never appears in one single place, all at once. Rather, it exists as a structuring principle for American society as a whole. This is why taking it on it feels like an enormous task to James—one nearly as insurmountable as killing God.

> There were many advertising signs in the fields they were rolling past. All the signs told about the same things for sale. One sign showed a big red bull and read BULL DURHAM.
>
> "Moo-oo," the baby said.

Related Characters: Lewis (speaker), James

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this first story, the train passes a cow grazing in a field, and then this billboard for Bull Durham tobacco. James takes the opportunity to teach baby Lewis what sound a cow makes, and then Lewis repeats it when he sees the billboard. Once again the story shows how things mean far more than the children recognize. James can tell that the bull isn't the point of the ad at all—it's just the tobacco company's mascot. But he doesn't realize that the reference to tobacco actually speaks to the underlying meaning of his journey.

James's parents moved to Oklahoma more than a decade before, as part of the Great Migration of free Black people leaving the South in search of better lives elsewhere. These migrants were largely fleeing the sharecropping system that came to replace plantation slavery; in reality, the sharecropping system was primarily designed to produce massive amounts of cheap tobacco and cotton through exploiting Black labor and was not much different from slavery. Thus, tobacco owes its prominence in American life largely to slavery—and the Bull Durham billboard is a grim reminder of how the remnants of that system still oppressed Black Americans in the 1920s. Curiously, Bull Durham tobacco, which was famous for its memorable advertising, also appears in "The Black Ball," when the union organizer offers it to John.

Hymie's Bull Quotes

> We were just drifting; going no place in particular, having long ago given up hopes of finding jobs. We were just knocking around the country. Just drifting, ten black boys on an L & N freight.

Related Characters: The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of "Hymie's Bull," the nameless narrator explains how he became a "bum" (freight-hopper) during the Great Depression and ended up witnessing the violent encounter that he describes in this story. Desperate for work, he left home, but he didn't find any. Like so many other young men of all races, religions, and backgrounds during the Depression, he ended up "just drifting," because he had no money and no opportunities. As a young Black man, he

knew that he would be employers' last pick; society all but sealed his fate without bothering to ask what he wanted or was capable of. Through this man's story, Ellison not only captures the racial and power dynamics of life on the road, but he also shows how broad historical events (the Depression and World War II) sealed the fate of a generation of Americans. Oddly enough, these shared experiences united Americans of all races in a way previous events never had. Arguably, this enabled a true, unified American identity to emerge for the first time.

Bulls are pretty bad people to meet if you're a bum. They have head-whipping down to a science and they're always ready to go into action. They know all the places to hit to change a bone into jelly, and they seem to feel just the place to kick you to make your backbone feel like it's going to fold up like the old collapsible drinking cups we used when we were kids. Once a bull hit me across the bridge of my nose and I felt like I was coming apart like a cigarette floating in a urinal. They can hit you on your head and bust your shoes.

Related Characters: The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" (speaker), Hymie, Hymie's Bull

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes how railroad bulls (security guards) use extreme violence to kick bums off trains. In theory, this may be intended as way to deter people from riding trains in the first place. In reality, though, it doesn't change anyone's minds—and the bulls know it. But they keep employing violence anyway because—according to the narrator—they are sadists and enjoy it. This passage also foreshadows the anecdote at the heart of this story (Hymie's fight with the bull) and shows off the narrator's working-class Black vernacular.

In a way, the railroad bulls' actions are a metaphor for American society, in which violence and competition have often been the surest route to wealth and power. In particular, ever since the nation's founding, white people have used violence against Black people as a pressure valve for their anger, a tool for social control, and a tool for generating profit. Indeed, the railroad bulls' violence is nothing new to young Black people living under Jim Crow, like the narrator. Rather, it's just a new version of an old pattern that they have been experiencing for generations.

Now when you hear that we're the only bums that carry knives you can just put that down as bull talk because what I'm fixing to tell you about was done by an ofay bum named Hymie from Brooklyn.

Related Characters: The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" (speaker), Hymie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator of "Hymie's Bull" frames his story as a corrective to the bulls' racist stereotypes about bums—in particular, their idea that only Black bums carry weapons. Hymie was "ofay" (white), and he had a knife, which should be evidence enough to disprove the stereotype.

As the narrator will soon explain, this "bull talk" serves to justify the bulls' pattern of targeting Black bums. In other words, the bulls accuse Black bums of carrying weapons in order to portray attacking and even lynching them as a form of self-defense. But the narrator's firsthand knowledge disproves the legend and reveals that, like so many ideas about race in American life, this "bull talk" was just a self-serving myth all along. Indeed, this myth shows how racism makes circumstances worse for Black Americans even in situations beyond the reach of Jim Crow laws: many white people simply treat Black people worse in every conceivable situation because they believe in maintaining a racial hierarchy.

I stood there on top listening, bent slightly forward to keep my balance like a guy skiing, and thought of my mother, I had left her two months before, not even knowing that I would ever hop freights. Poor Mama, she had tried hard to keep my brother and me at home, but she fed us too long alone, and we were getting much too grown-up to let her do it any longer, so we left home looking for jobs.

Related Characters: The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" (speaker), Hymie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator remembers how he climbed on top of the freight train to watch the sunset, waved to Hymie, and then just listened to the sound of the train barreling down the tracks and took in the scenery. As he explains here, his thoughts inevitably turned to his mother, whom he and his brother left behind when they departed home in search of work. (They couldn't find work, so they ended up riding the rails instead.) They have no way of contacting her, and she doesn't know about the trouble and danger that they've encountered on the rails. Indeed, if the bulls get to them, they may simply disappear without a trace, and she may never hear from them again.

The narrator's tender, wistful attitude toward his family here contrasts sharply with his casual attitude toward the violence he witnesses in his travels. His internal monologue reaffirms how broad political systems and historical events, like segregation and the Depression, have tremendous personal and human costs. (While the Depression was what pushed the narrator to leave home, racism and segregation help explain why he couldn't find any work—and why he faces such dangers on the rails.) In a way, the narrator is grieving the life that he should have had—but which history stole from him. In turn, he is grieving the family and future that his mother has lost.

> Hymie pulled the knife around from ear to ear in the bull's throat; then he stabbed him and pushed him off the top of the car. The bull paused a second in the air like a kid diving off a trestle into a river, then hit the cinders below. Something was warm on my face, and I found that some of the bull's blood had blown back like spray when a freight stops to take on water from a tank.

Related Characters: The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" (speaker), Hymie, Hymie's Bull

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator gives this gruesome description of Hymie killing the railroad bull. He explains it dispassionately, with a kind of matter-of-fact detail that suggests that he sees this kind of violence all the time. Indeed, the way Hymie kills the bull indicates the same about him: even though it's in self-defense, it's also completely cold-blooded. Hymie takes his knife directly to the bull's throat, and he acts completely nonchalant and remorseless about it. Clearly, senseless death and violence are simply the norm on the rails—as they were in American society as a whole during the Depression and under Jim Crow. Of course, that's the real point of this story: Ellison saw his society as so power-hungry and corrupt that its members were periodically murdering and lynching one other just because they could. Indeed, it seems that the only available job was to become a railroad bull and beat up people who weren't able to find one.

> The next day about dusk we were pulling into the yards at Montgomery, Alabama, miles down the line, and got the scare of our lives. […] All at once we heard someone hollering, and when we ran up to the front of the freight, there were two bulls, a long one and a short one, fanning heads with their gun barrels. They were making everybody line up so they could see us better. The sky was cloudy and very black. We knew Hymie's bull had been found and some black boy had to go. But luck must've been with us this time […] we broke and ran between some cars on around to try to catch the freight pulling out at the other end of the yards. We made it.

Related Characters: The Narrator of "Hymie's Bull" (speaker), Hymie, Hymie's Bull

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of "Hymie's Bull," the narrator has this close run-in with the other railroad bulls, who want to avenge their colleague's death by lynching a Black bum. They nearly catch the narrator (or one of the other nine Black men in his crew), but miraculously, a train is departing at just that moment, so the narrator and his crew manage to narrowly escape and live another day. Still, there's little doubt that they will face the same dangers every time they pull into a rail yard, until the bulls get their kill. As the narrator explains at the beginning of this chapter, the bulls justify their violence by spreading the racist myth that only Black bums carry knives and kill bulls. This means that, whenever anything happens to a bull on the rails, Black bums get punished. Thus, the brutal cycle of violence and retaliation continues. Because of the nation's racial hierarchy, Hymie's near-death experience has a ripple effect: his Black friends take the blame. Of course, this reflects a deeper, insidious

truth about 20th century America: Black people were the universal scapegoats, and they faced a constant threat of white terrorist violence. They had to learn to live with this threat—to defend themselves, keep a low profile, and avoid confrontation with white people. Failing to do so, the story suggests, could be deadly.

The Black Ball Quotes

"What's the matter son?"

"Daddy, am I black?"

"Of course not, you're brown. You know you're not black."

[...]

"Brown's much nicer than white, isn't it, Daddy?"

[...]

"Some people think so. But American is better than both, son."

Related Characters: John, John's Son (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the title story, John's four-year-old son asks if he's Black. The gardener's son was making fun of him, and he doesn't know what to believe. Much like James in "Boy on a Train," John's son is only starting to understand race and how it influences the society he lives in. His father assuages his son by saying that he's brown, not Black. Curiously, rather than talking about Blackness as a racial group designation, John literally describes his son's skin color. On one level, perhaps he wants to shield his son from the knowledge that he belongs to a racially subjugated group. But on another hand, he also seems to believe that the best way to deal with racism is by ignoring it.

John isn't naïve enough to think that white people will ever treat him or his son as equals, but he clearly views himself as their equal because of their shared Americanness, and he thinks they will treat him best if he draws as little attention to race as possible. But the story ultimately revolves around John challenging this assumption. Like the other protagonists in Ellison's stories, John and his son are alone, surrounded by white people, with no community or social network to support him. John thinks of himself as an individual, not as a member of a larger group, and this limits his ability to change his situation. But when the organizer invites him to join a multiracial labor union, this gives him the opportunity to change.

There must be no flaws this morning. Two fellows who worked at the building across the street had already been dismissed because whites had demanded their jobs, and with the boy at that age needing special foods and me planning to enter school again next term, I couldn't afford to allow something like that out on the sidewalk to spoil my chances.

Related Characters: John (speaker), Mr. Berry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

John works tirelessly at his janitorial job to try and please his tyrannical boss, Mr. Berry. He knows that Berry is an avowed racist who is looking for any excuse to give his job to a white man. But he doesn't have time to condemn this racism or think about ways to fix it. After all, he has no power to do anything about it. He's focused on survival, which means doing whatever is necessary to keep his job. If he works harder than any white man ever would, he figures, then perhaps Mr. Berry will recognize that it's worth keeping him on staff. This mindset reflects the way that Black people simply had to accommodate themselves to injustice in 20th-century America: without any support from the state, anti-discrimination laws, or mass political movement advocating for their interests, Black people had no option but to simply accept a subordinate position in social and economic life. In short, they had so few chances of advancing collectively that the most they could hope for was to achieve some modicum of stability as individuals.

Why, I thought, doesn't he go on in and ask for the job? Why bother me? Why tempt me to choke him? Doesn't he know we aren't afraid to fight his kind out this way?

Related Characters: John (speaker), The White Union Organizer, Mr. Berry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

While John is polishing the brass doors of the apartment

building where he works, a white stranger approaches him and asks about his job. John immediately assumes the worst: this man is looking for work, and he probably thinks his best chance of getting it is by convincing a sympathetic white manager to give him a Black man's job. This is John's internal monologue after the man comes over: John would be willing to fight the man to keep his job if it came to that.

Of course, in the context of Jim Crow, John's cautious hostility makes sense. Mr. Berry, John's manager, *is* eager to replace his Black employees with white ones. But John also can't outright say what he knows to be happening, since any conflict with the white man would invite violence or, worse yet, the involvement of the police. Of course, because Jim Crow creates such a deep gulf between white and Black Americans, it never crosses John's mind that the man who has approached him is trying to *help* him.

"Not used to anything like that, are you?"

"Not used to what?"

A little more from this guy and I would see red.

"Fellow like me offering a fellow like you something besides a rope."

Related Characters: John, The White Union Organizer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

The white union organizer approaches John and offers him some Bull Durham tobacco. John is confused and remains suspicious of the man's intentions. (He assumes that the man is trying to sweet-talk him into giving away details about his job so that he can replace John.) The organizer then tries to emphasize that he's not hostile by making this gruesome joke about white men "offering" Black men "a rope"—or lynching them. While modern readers might see this joke as in bad taste, it probably wouldn't have shocked John, for whom the threat of lynching was just an ordinary part of everyday life (just as the danger of police violence remains part of everyday life for many Black Americans today). Arguably, the organizer is actually trying to win John's trust by breaking a taboo: he explicitly acknowledges how white terrorist violence held together the exploitative racial hierarchy of 20th-century American society.

"You see, I come from the union and we intend to organize all the building-service help in this district. Maybe you been reading 'bout it in the papers?"

"I saw something about it, but what's it to do with me?"

Related Characters: John, The White Union Organizer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

The union organizer explains his job and intentions to John, who is initially confused and suspicious. While contemporary readers may understand what the organizer is trying to do, John understandably found it bizarre and improbable that a white man would try to help him win better working conditions. As a Black man in the early 1900s, he likely only had hostile interactions with white people, and his justified skepticism toward them would have been difficult to shake. Indeed, he might even think that the white man's labor union is a plot to ensure that all the service jobs in the area go to white people only. The union organizer clearly understands John's suspicion: he isn't expecting a warm reception and makes a point of giving clear evidence that he's actually trying to help (his offer of tobacco, the newspaper articles about the union, and his "fried hands"). And he hopes that, over time, John will come to understand what he is really offering: a chance at having some control over his working conditions and financial future.

"Listen, fellow. You're wasting your time and mine. Your damn unions are like everything else in the country – for whites only. What ever caused you to give a damn about a Negro anyway? Why should you try to organize Negroes?"

Related Characters: John (speaker), The White Union Organizer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

John finds it very hard to believe that the union organizer seriously wants to help him—or that his attempts would ever succeed. Even if the organizer is serious, John wagers, no club full of white people will want him. He's stuck in a

zero-sum mindset: he assumes that anything that helps white people must harm him. But this was quite understandable, as this was how most of the U.S.'s political and economic system worked at the time. Even outside the South, almost everything was informally segregated. And when white people organized themselves, it was often to take away Black people's already limited power, wealth, and freedom. After all, many American labor unions have been racist and exclusionary throughout history, and even today, many people of color assume that unions are uninterested in helping them.

Yet Ellison viewed labor union organizing as a powerful force for racial justice. Even if it was often flawed, it was also one of the only areas in which white and Black people's interests aligned: regardless of race, all workers wanted higher wages and better working conditions. Paradoxically, unions were also uniquely well poised to help Black people because they were integrated. In short, powerful white people were simply more likely to take fellow white people's demands for better treatment more seriously than Black people's demands. This made white allies invaluable to Black activists, and labor unions offered one of their only chances to find them.

"Daddy," the boy called softly; it's softly when I'm busy.

"Yes, son."

"When I grow up I think I'll drive a truck."

"You do?"

"Yes, and then I can wear a lot of buttons on my cap like the men that bring the meat to the grocery. I saw a colored man with some today, Daddy. I looked out the window, and a colored man drove the truck today, and, Daddy, he had two buttons on his cap. I could see 'em plain."

Related Characters: John, John's Son (speaker), The White Union Organizer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

On his lunch break, John goes back upstairs to his quarters. His son is busy playing with his toy truck. Because he's Black, he can't safely play with the white kids outside, so he is stuck inside and plays alone. He tells his father that he wants to be a truck driver when he grows up—like the Black deliveryman with buttons on his hat.

Ellison doesn't make this connection explicitly for the reader, but this conversation clearly leads John to seriously reconsider the union organizer's offer. Truck driving has long been one of the most heavily unionized professions in the U.S., and Ellison heavily implies that this is why Black men can join it. Indeed, the buttons on his hat are probably for his union, which means that the union is central to John's son's dreams for the future. This suggests that truck driving is a relatively stable career, and it shows that, contrary to John's assumptions, unions *aren't* just for white people. As John considers what he can do to make life better for his son, he starts to realize that collectives—like a union or political party—can achieve far more than he can as an individual.

"All right now," I told him. "You stay in the back out of everybody's way, and you mustn't ask anyone a lot of questions."

Related Characters: John (speaker), Mama, John's Son, Jackie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

John's son spends most of the day playing alone, inside. When he asks to go out in the afternoon, John finally agrees, but on one condition: he must play alone in the back alley, and not in the front with the white kids. Of course, John isn't setting this condition out of malice—he's trying to protect his son. He knows that, in a society that divides everything along the color line, it's dangerous for a Black boy to mix with white kids. If something goes wrong, people will inevitably blame John and his son. And even if John's son doesn't face physical danger, the white children might mock, insult, or exclude him. After all, the gardener's son, Jackie, has already started making fun of John's son for being Black. This isn't the way that John wants his son to learn about the color line.

Like Mama in "Boy on a Train," John has to find a delicate balance between protection and permissiveness as a Black parent living under Jim Crow. He wants to give his son the opportunity to play with his peers and enjoy himself—something every child deserves—but he doesn't want racism to get in the way. And he has to protect his son from racism while also preparing him to deal with it: he doesn't society to mistreat his son because of his race, but

he also doesn't want his son to be completely surprised and unprepared to respond when such mistreatment inevitably happens. In this situation, John decides that the safest option is for his son to play outside alone.

"Well, if I ever see him around here again, you're going to find yourself behind the black ball. Now get him on round to the back and then come up here and clean up this mess he's made."

Related Characters: Mr. Berry (speaker), John, John's Son

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

When John's son ignores his father's warning and goes to play in the front yard with the white boys, one of the boys steals his ball and throws it through Mr. Berry's window. Unsurprisingly, Berry blames John's son, and then he threatens John with "the black ball." The meaning of this phrase would have been relatively clear to readers in Ellison's time, but it may seem obscure to contemporary audiences. In fact, it combines a few different meanings. Literally, Mr. Berry is saying that John is going to face problems, or he'll be "behind the eight ball" (which was often just called "the black ball" in the early 20th century). But he is also threatening to *blackball* John, or fire him. (*Blackballing* usually means an organization rejecting someone for prejudiced reasons unrelated to their performance—often due to a trait like race, religion, or gender.) And finally, in the early-20th century, "black ball" was also a racial slur for Black people, similar to the N-word today.

It's unclear whether Mr. Berry *intends* to say all three of these things, but Ellison certainly put them all there to make a point about how racism and discrimination work. Specifically, they take advantage of ambiguity: it's often difficult to prove that they are happening, even when they are obviously present. For instance, Berry won't fire John for *no* reason whatsoever—rather, he's looking for *any* reason he can possibly find to fire him. Things he would tolerate from his white employees are unacceptable coming from John; where white workers merely need to maintain an acceptable record, John needs a perfect one. This is part of why, even today, racial discrimination can be so hard to fight through the law: people who discriminate can easily come up with other, race-neutral justifications for their actions.

"Will I play with the black ball, Daddy?"

"In time son," I said. "In time."

He had already played with the ball; that he would discover later. He was learning the rules of the game already, but he didn't know it. Yes, he would play with the ball. Indeed, poor little rascal, he would play until he grew sick of playing. My, yes, the old ball game. But I'd begin telling him the rules later.

Related Characters: John, John's Son (speaker), Hymie, Hymie's Bull, Mr. Berry, Mr. Parker, Mr. Catti

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38-39

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Berry threatens John with "the black ball" (losing his job), John's son is confused. He doesn't understand the metaphor, and he protests that the ball he was playing with is *white*. Once again, John weighs how much of the situation to explain to his son. In his internal monologue, "the ball" takes on a third, entirely different meaning: it becomes a metaphor for racism. When he says that his son will learn the rules of the game, he means that he will have to learn to navigate racism and discrimination. Indeed, even today, young Black people face the burden of learning to deal with white people's prejudice, suspicion, and mistreatment, all on top of the ordinary conflicts and stresses of growing up. John wishes that he could save his son from this fate but knows that he can't. He also knows that helping his son come to terms with it will be one of the greatest parenting challenges he will face.

This passage also illustrates one of the central techniques that Ellison uses over and over in these stories: he creates multiple layers of meaning, then he gives different characters access to different layers of meaning. In effect, different characters appear to be living in slightly different versions of the same reality. This is clearest of all in "Boy on a Train," and this story, in which the children do not understand the full significance of the racism they are experiencing, but the adult characters (and the reader) can. But it also occurs in "Hymie's Bull," in which Hymie does not understand how him killing the bull will put his Black friends

in harm's way, and "In a Strange Country," in which Mr. Parker is pleasantly surprised by Mr. Catti's completely unfamiliar way of thinking about race and nationality.

My hand was still burning from the scratch as I dragged the hose out to water the lawn, and looking down at the iodine stain, I thought of the fellow's fried hands, and felt in my pocket to make sure I still had the card he had given me. Maybe there was a color other than white on the old ball.

Related Characters: John (speaker), John's Son, The White Union Organizer, Mr. Berry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of "The Black Ball," John reconsiders the union organizer's offer. The incident with his son's ball has shown him that no amount of hard work will ever make his job secure: Mr. Berry will simply never see beyond race. If he wants to give his son an education and stable life, he has to negotiate with Mr. Berry, not just acquiesce to his demands. And the union clearly provides his best chance of doing so. The union organizer's "fried hands" attest to how much he has sacrificed for the cause of racial and economic justice. Of course, there's a clear parallel between the union organizer's "fried hands" (which he got while defending a Black man against a white lynch mob) and John's hand injury (which he got from a more minor incident of racial injustice). Perhaps this injury reminds John of the organizer and leads him to identify with the man.

The story's conclusion strongly implies that John will go to the union meeting and, eventually, join a campaign for better working conditions in his city. In a nutshell, then, "The Black Ball" is really a story about John developing class consciousness—or recognizing that his problems stem from broader social conditions that he can help change through political reform. Ellison's message is not merely that Black people should join labor movements, but also that they have to think about their struggle in collective terms if they want to overcome racism.

In a Strange Country Quotes

Moving along the road in the dark he had planned to stay ashore all night, and in the morning he would see the country with fresh eyes, like those with which the Pilgrims had seen the New World. That hadn't seemed so silly then—not until the soldiers bunched at the curb had seemed to spring out of the darkness. Someone had cried, "Jesus H. Christ," and he had thought, He's from home, and grinned and apologized into the light they flashed in his eyes. He had felt the blow coming when they yelled, "It's a goddamn nigger," but it struck him anyway.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker, Mr. Catti

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

The Black soldier Mr. Parker is stationed in Wales during World War II. But as soon as he arrives, he receives an unfriendly welcome from a group of his countrymen: they call him the N-word and punch him in the face, giving him a black eye and temporarily blinding him. Clearly, their racism didn't stay on American soil: they carried it in their hearts and minds across the Atlantic.

But Mr. Parker's first experience in Wales sets the stage for the rest of this story, in which a group of Welsh men led by Mr. Catti take him out drinking, help him with his wounds, and welcome him to Wales with remarkable grace and hospitality. While the Welsh people are aware of the U.S.'s racial tensions, they do not fully understand why the white American soldiers attacked Parker, and they certainly don't share those soldiers' animosity toward him. In fact, beyond setting up the story's plot, Parker's punch in the face serves primarily to highlight the contrast between how he's usually treated at home and what he experiences in Wales.

At first he had included them in his blind rage. But they had seemed so genuinely and uncondescendingly polite that he was disarmed. Now the anger and resentment had slowly ebbed, and he felt only a smoldering sense of self-hate and ineffectiveness. Why should he blame them when they had only helped him? He had been the one so glad to hear an American voice. You can't take it out on them, they're a different breed; even from the English. That's what he's been telling you, he thought, seeing Mr. Catti returning, his head held to one side to avoid the smoke from his cigarette, the foam-headed glasses caged in his fingers.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker, Mr. Catti

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Catti invites Mr. Parker into a pub, and Parker starts to process what happened to him and where he actually is. His first instinct is to feel angry at the white Welsh people surrounding him, but he soon realizes that this makes little sense: they weren't the ones who attacked him. In fact, Catti is being remarkably generous and accommodating, and turning against him simply because he's white would be doing precisely what the American soldiers did to him.

Put differently, Parker is starting to realize that race simply doesn't mean the same thing in the U.K. as it does in the U.S.—the Welsh people see him primarily as an American, and they have no inbuilt animosity against Black people, probably because their society isn't built around a color line. He has been suddenly thrown into an uncanny new world, which is like an alternate version of a familiar reality: everyone is speaking English and fighting the same war against the same enemy, but somehow, the color line doesn't exist. His experiences in Wales will show him that other societies are organized around other divisions besides race, that animosity between white and Black people isn't inevitable, and above all, that race relations could be radically different in the U.S.—if Americans manage to change them over the course of generations.

> "Are there many like me in Wales?"
>
> "Oh yes! Yanks all over the place. Black Yanks and white."
>
> "Black Yanks?" He wanted to smile.
>
> "Yes. And many a fine lad at that."

Related Characters: Mr. Parker, Mr. Catti (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

The comedy in this exchange comes from the way that Parker and Catti amicably talk past each other. When Parker asks about people "like me," he's referring to Black people, but when Catti hears the question, he assumes that Parker is asking about Americans. This shows that different kinds of identities are meaningful to different people in different contexts. Race is so central to life in the U.S. that it makes little sense to talk of white and Black Americans as being "like" one another, and the term "Yank" is usually coded to refer to white people. But in the UK, it seems obvious that two Americans would be alike, even if they belong to different racial groups, and so the word "Yank" just means American. Thus, ironically, while Parker initially thought of the Welsh people as hostile because they were white—he looked at race first and nationality second—the Welsh people do just the opposite. They identify Parker as an American first and a Black man second. And Parker finds this misunderstanding quite encouraging, because this is the first time his Americanness has ever overshadowed his Blackness in a white man's eyes.

> The well-blended voices caught him unprepared. He heard the music's warm richness with pleasurable surprise, and heard, beneath the strange Welsh words, echoes of plain song, like that of Russian folk songs sounding.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker, Mr. Catti

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Catti takes Mr. Parker to a small local singing club, where a men's choir performs a series of traditional Welsh folk songs. Parker doesn't understand them, but he finds them pleasant and moving. He appreciates the singers' moving voices and rich harmonies, but his reaction is really based in the way he understands the music as an expression of Welsh culture. Previously, he viewed Welsh people as just like any other group of white people—he gave no thought to their unique history, language, or customs. But now that he hears their music, he realizes that there is far more to them.

Just like Black American culture, he realizes, Welsh culture is often denigrated, ignored, and underappreciated in relation to the national culture that dominates it (English culture). He still can't pinpoint what's unique in the Welsh songs, which is why he compares it to Russian folk music, but he is curious to learn more. In fact, this sense of admiration, curiosity, and respect has been the basis of his connection with Mr. Catti from the start. They don't *understand* each other's cultures, but they do recognize the depth and value in them and therefore they respect each other.

> As the men sang in hushed tones he felt a growing poverty of spirit. He should have known more of the Welsh, of their history and art. If we only had some of what they have, he thought. They are a much smaller nation than ours would be, yet I can remember no song of ours that's of love of the soil or of country.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Parker continues exploring the similarities between Welsh and Black American culture. Here, he starts to ask what his people can learn from the Welsh. While he knows little about their history, he does know that the English have subjugated the Welsh people and tried to destroy their culture. Yet he sees that the Welsh have managed to preserve their pride and identity nonetheless, and he hopes that African Americans can do the same. Of course, there are also meaningful differences between the two groups. The Welsh have not been torn away from their homeland, like the Africans enslaved and shipped to the New World. And the Welsh have always had a common language, which has served as a foundation for their shared customs, artistic traditions, and political movements. But to Parker, all of this holds valuable lessons for Black America, which struggles to unify around shared political goals, artistic achievements, or stories about the past. In fact, it even holds lessons for the U.S. as a whole, which has long struggled to form a national identity that accounts for all of its people and their respective histories.

> Parker smiled, aware suddenly of an expansiveness that he had known before only at mixed jam sessions. When we jam, sir, we're Jamocrats! He liked these Welsh. Not even on the ship, where the common danger and a fighting union made for a degree of understanding, did he approach white men so closely.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Once he grows comfortable at the Welsh music club, Mr. Parker realizes that he *has* felt this sense of interracial camaraderie before, at musical jam sessions with white friends. He starts to think about how music connects people, and he eventually develops a whole theory that music can lead to interracial connection and harmony.

Parker's internal monologue is significant in part because it highlights a long-underappreciated dimension of Ralph Ellison's life: he was a talented musician and music critic. (In fact, many significant African American writers were either musicians or heavily influenced by music, including James Baldwin, James Weldon Johnson, August Wilson, and many more.) Contemporary audiences tend to remember him primarily for *Invisible Man*, and secondarily for his other fiction (like the stories in this book). But during his life, he dedicated just as much time to playing and writing about music, the first creative pursuit he truly loved, as he did to writing. To Ellison, Black American music (like jazz) was the deepest possible expression of Black Americans' culture and spirit, and this is why music consistently plays an important role in his fiction.

> But what do you believe in? Oh, shut—I believe in music! Well! And in what's happening here tonight. I believe … I want to believe in this people. Something was getting out of control. He became on guard. At home he could drown his humanity in a sea of concealed cynicism, and white men would never recognize it. But these men might understand. Perhaps, he felt with vague terror, all evening he had been exposed, blinded by the brilliant light of their deeper humanity, and they had seen him for what he was and for what he should have been.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker, Mr. Catti

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

As he listens to the Welsh choir, Mr. Parker starts to think about how music plays into his own values, culture, and identity. He realizes that his connection to Mr. Catti was based on the way that they mutually recognized each other's "deeper humanity." This is the opposite of racism, which depends on reducing other people to single characteristics. Parker feels a deep respect for Welsh culture, even if he doesn't completely understand it. And unlike white Americans, the Welsh feel a deep respect for Parker's culture, too. Perhaps, Parker realizes, music can be

an antidote to racism—perhaps it allows people to show one another their humanity without accepting vulnerability. Whereas associating with others across racial lines in the U.S. can lead to conflict, violence, and discrimination, perhaps music shows people as they truly are. Parker thus wonders if white Americans could start to overcome their racism by learning to appreciate Black music. Though he admits that this thought is almost too simplistic to take seriously, he also feels that it's too compelling to ignore.

> And suddenly he recognized the melody and felt that his knees would give way. It was as though he had been pushed into the horrible foreboding country of dreams and they were enticing him into some unwilled and degrading act, from which only his failure to remember the words would save him. It was all unreal, yet it seemed to have happened before. Only now the melody seemed charged with some vast new meaning which that part of him that wanted to sing could not fit with the old familiar words.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

After the Welsh choir performs a few traditional Welsh songs, they perform the Welsh national anthem, the UK's national anthem ("God Save the King"), and the Soviet anthem (the "Internationale"). Finally, they start to play—but not sing—one more song, which Ellison doesn't immediately name. As soon as Parker recognizes the song, he's struck with a confusing mix of surprise, gratitude, fear, and humiliation.

As readers may be able to guess, the song is the U.S. national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," and the men are playing it specifically in Parker's honor. (Of course, Ellison didn't expect readers to figure it out, which only makes it more powerful when Parker starts to sing the words.) The Welsh people do not understand what the anthem means to Parker: it represents the white supremacist government that has long oppressed his people. But he also doesn't know what it means to *them*: it represents the partner nation that has joined the war to help defend free Europe, including Britain, against the Axis Powers. Above all, Parker is shocked to be at the center of a story about the U.S. for the first time; the Welsh are giving him a kind of recognition that his fellow Americans have denied him forever.

> He saw the singers still staring, and as though to betray him he heard his own voice singing out like a suddenly amplified radio:
>
> "... Gave proof through the night
> That our flag was still there ..."
>
> It was like the voice of another, over whom he had no control. His eye throbbed. A wave of guilt shook him, followed by a burst of relief. For the first time in your whole life, he thought with dreamlike wonder, the words are not ironic. He stood in confusion as the song ended, staring into the men's Welsh faces, not knowing whether to curse them or to return their good-natured smiles.

Related Characters: Mr. Parker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of "In a Strange Country," Mr. Parker sings "The Star-Spangled Banner" in the Welsh music club. While he certainly wouldn't have agreed to sing if the men hadn't forced him to, when he does, he experiences a surprising emotional release. In fact, the song's meaning changes for him: "for the first time," he realizes, "the words are not ironic." He is actually fighting for his country, and he actually wants to see the flag survive through the night. For the first time, he is truly proud to be an American, and perhaps most importantly, others truly recognize him as an American. Thus, while his first instinct is to feel "a wave of guilt," as he is singing a song that has always represented his people's repression and exploitation, this soon gives way to "a burst of relief," as he realizes that the anthem can *also* represent his people's freedom—and the world's. Strangely enough, then, the Welsh enable him to truly recognize himself as an American for the first time.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOY ON A TRAIN

A moving **train** whistles and lets off steam, which blows around the colorful autumn leaves that have fallen on the hills. A little boy (James) looks out the window; his mother (Mama) says that Jack Frost painted the leaves. James, Mama, and James's baby brother (Lewis) are the only ones in the colored section. Their car carries the baggage, including a casket, and it's unbearably hot because it's next to the engine.

The family's seat in the baggage car—ominously, alongside a casket—shows how Black people faced severe discrimination under Jim Crow. James's conversation with his Mama about the leaves demonstrates that he is curious about nature and the world, just like any other young child. The story revolves around this tension between the purity and innocence of childhood, on the one hand, and the corruption and violence of racism, on the other. In it, Ellison asks how Black people can find joy in a society determined to deny them rights and freedom at every turn—and how they can both prepare their children for the dangers of racism and give them the carefree childhoods they deserve.

A fat white butcher repeatedly stops in the car to retrieve baskets of candy, magazines, and fruit, which he sells in the other cars. James hopes the butcher will give him some candy, but he doesn't. Mama reads and glances at the butcher as he returns to the car. When she first got on the **train**, the butcher groped her. She angrily realizes that white men think they're entitled to molest Black women.

Even if James sees the color line, he doesn't yet understand how it structures his society, so he hopes that the butcher will show him the same regard that he would to a white child. Meanwhile, Mama's fury at the butcher shows that she knows that Black women like her will always face sexual violence from white men under Jim Crow—but they also have no power to do anything about it.

The **train** leaves the hills and enters a large area of cornfields with wooden fences. Little James and baby Lewis watch birds flying around and a farmer boy leading his cow and dog through one of the fields. James decides that the dog must be a collie.

James, who is locked in the train's stifling baggage car, looks out longingly at the white boy, who wanders freely through a field that his family probably owns. This is a metaphor for James's gradual realization that the freedom and opportunities available to white boys will never be available to him. Yet it also represents the freedom and opportunities that James may eventually achieve through migration, as he moves from the city to the countryside.

A freight **train** passes them in the other direction. James wonders if it's going to Oklahoma City, his hometown. He misses his friends, who he imagines are working for Mr. Stewart, picking peaches. But now that James's father is gone, his family has to follow his mother's employer, Mr. Balinger, to the rural town of McAlester instead. Little James hopes to one day be like his father, who was "tall and kind and always joking and reading books," and who always took care of him, Mama, and Lewis.

Ellison finally explains why James's family is traveling on the train. Their story is a thinly fictionalized version of Ellison's own childhood experience: his father died, and then his mother took him and his brother from Oklahoma City, where they lived, to Indiana, where she thought the whole family would have better opportunities. Between migration, racism, and his father's death, James has suffered a remarkable amount of loss for such a young boy, and he is only beginning to feel the complicated, adult emotions that coping with these losses will inevitably involve.

A white boy and his father walk through the colored car, and James stands on his chair to watch them. The white boy holds a small dog and wears nice clothes, like kids in the movies; James wonders if he has a bike. A herd of horses runs by the window, and James imagines riding them, like a movie star. Lewis cheerily hits the window and yells "Giddap! Giddap!"

Like the white farmer boy, this white boy is also a foil for James: he represents the freedom, innocence, material comfort, and social inclusion that James will probably never achieve because of the color line. Meanwhile, baby Lewis's enthusiasm about the passing horses suggests that he still has the curiosity and innocence that James is starting to lose, as he deals with thorny, mature topics. James likely sees Lewis's innocence in much the same way as Mama does James's.

The **train** stops at a small country town, where a group of serious-looking white men dressed in suits boards the train. They take a box from the baggage car, load it into their wagon, and ride away. Tobacco-spitting, bandanna-clad white men wait at the station, standing below an ad for snuff tobacco. They look through the train window at James and his mother, and James wonders "why [...] white folks stare at you that way."

James's confusion about the staring white men shows that he sees the color line, but doesn't yet understand it. He knows that white people treat him as lesser for being Black, but he doesn't know how the world became this way, or what he can do about it. Of course, Ellison reminds the reader why this is the case (because of slavery and its legacy) through two cleverly placed symbols relating to tobacco.

As the **train** leaves town, James sees a tall, round metal tower. He asks his mother what it is, and she explains that it's a silo for storing corn. He sees the sun shining on her "strangely distant" eyes and notices that the silo is almost as tall as the Colcord Building that Daddy helped build in Oklahoma City.

Yet again, James is old enough to be curious and ask questions about the world around him, but not old enough to fully understand what is going on. This extends to his feelings about his mother, which will become the focus of the rest of the story. Namely, he sees that the family's difficult circumstances are seriously affecting Mama, but he doesn't quite know what she's thinking or what she fears.

Mama starts crying, then she calls James and Lewis over to her row. She says that she remembers passing the same grain silo when she and Daddy first went to Oklahoma City. James loves Mama's stories about life back in the South, but this one feels different. Mama tells James that he must remember this trip. He tries to hold back his tears. She explains that she and Daddy moved from Georgia to Oklahoma 14 years before to seek a better life for their children. But now, with Daddy gone, James is the man of the house. Life is hard for Black people, she continues, so she, James, and Lewis have to stick together.

For Mama, the grain silo represents the promise of a better future. This was her motive for coming to Oklahoma City in the first place, as part of the Great Migration. But it got snatched away from her when her husband died. Now, she is again seeking a better future by leaving the city with her children. Curiously, this is the first time in the story that the reader actually hears James's name—until this point, Ellison just refers to him as "the little boy." This reflects the way that, in all of the stories in this book, Ellison begins in medias res, *revealing crucial context gradually so that his readers only grasp the true significance of the story's setting once they are already partway through it. Finally, Mama's comments about James's newfound responsibilities underline how Daddy's death effectively cuts his childhood short—which is a metaphor for the way that racism denies Black children a true childhood.*

James embraces Mama and promises to remember her story. He didn't understand every word of it, but he gets what she means in a deeper way. Mama says a prayer, asking God to protect her children and bestow them with strength and bravery. James feels "tight and smoldering inside"—he remembers Daddy singing in the church choir, and he wishes that he could "kill this mean thing that made Mama feel so bad." He wonders if this thing is God. Mama continues praying; she tells the Lord that she is only living for her sons' sake. James is uncomfortable to see her cry, so he looks out the window. When she finishes wiping away her tears, he's glad that the white butcher won't see her cry when he comes back.

In this, the story's central scene, Mama's prayer demonstrates how Jim Crow takes an incredible emotional toll on ordinary Black people—and particularly Black women. It requires profound willpower for Mama just to survive in a system that is intent on breaking her down. Her prayer also marks James's early coming-of-age: when he sees her beg for strength, he realizes that she can no longer protect and provide for the family alone, which means that he must now take some responsibility for it, too. He doesn't fully understand the problem (racism), which is everywhere yet impossible to see with the naked eye. Again, this limited understanding clashes with his sudden adult responsibilities.

The **train** passes over a red river and past a grazing cow. Confused, Lewis says "Bow-wow?" James tells him that cows go "Moo," and Lewis gleefully repeats the sound. Meanwhile, As the train passes through an oil field, James decides that he'll kill whatever is really making Mama cry, even if it's God. The train passes several tobacco billboards, including one with a red bull on it for the Bull Durham company. When Lewis sees it, he cries out, "Moo-oo." James and Mama smile at each other, and he remembers how beautiful she is. He promises himself that "This is 1924, and I'll never forget it." And he wonders what life will be like in McAlester.

Ellison again sets up an analogy between Lewis's ignorance and James's gradual self-education about racism. James only sees the animal on the billboard, while James sees what it's really advertising. Yet he will miss the billboard's deeper meaning, which only readers are likely to grasp: the system of tobacco and cotton plantations that enslaved Black Americans is still alive and well. In turn, this represents how Black people remain subjugated and unfree in the early 20th century U.S. Finally, James's promise to "never forget" this day suggests that Ellison wrote this story because his own childhood migration was such an important turning point in his life. Likely, it opened his eyes to racism and forced him to start accepting adult responsibilities for the first time.

HYMIE'S BULL

This story's narrator, a young Black man, explains that he and his friends are spending their days as bums, jumping freight **trains** and "drifting" around the country, looking for work. But it's the Great Depression, so they can't find any. They just left Chicago, where railroad bulls (security guards) beat them up with loaded sticks (wooden sticks filled with lead). But they got off easy, with just minor head injuries. More often, the bulls bash in bums' skulls, crush their hands under steel boots, or push them off moving trains. They don't hesitate to kill Black bums in cold blood, and when they can't, they always try to inflict as much pain as possible.

This story is based on the brief period during which Ralph Ellison jumped freight trains to travel from his home in Oklahoma City to his college in Alabama. It directly portrays the racist violence that only lurked in the background of "Boy on a Train," as a vague threat. Yet its setting is the same: the railroad, which gave Americans the opportunity to migrate and pursue freedom in the first half of 20th century (just as the highway system has done since the 1960s). The narrator highlights how railroad bulls use far more violence than is necessary to just protect the trains—rather, they seem to enjoy hurting people as much as possible, especially when their victims are Black. Needless to say, this is a metaphor for American society as a whole, which Ellison views as largely built on the sadistic principle of inflicting as much pain and suffering on Black people as possible.

But sometimes, bums beat up the railroad bulls first. The bulls usually blame Black bums and retaliate against the nearest ones they can find. But white bums attack bulls, too—in fact, this story is about one: a white bum from Brooklyn named Hymie.

The narrator points out two different layers of racism in the bulls' behavior: they specifically target Black bums, and they assume that only Black bums are violent (which Hymie's story disproves).

While riding atop a **train** one day, Hymie got sick to his stomach from his lunch—a makeshift stew he cooked in an old pot—and started vomiting. The narrator, who was riding inside the train, tried to get Hymie to come down. But Hymie refused.

Hymie's unfortunate lunch foreshadows the brutality, gore, and suffering to come later in the story. At the same time, his friendship with the narrator shows how it's entirely possible for Black and white people to build equal friendships. This is doubly true at the margins of ordinary social life—like on the freight trains, where everyone who rides is technically a criminal.

A few hours later, the narrator climbed up top to watch the sunset. He stood on the car next to Hymie, feeling the wind rush past him as the **train** rode into the setting sun and a flock of birds flew all around him. He and Hymie waved at each other, but it was too loud for them to talk. The narrator felt bad for Hymie and wished he could get some water. But his thoughts soon turned to his mother, whom he and his brother left two months ago to look for work.

In this scene, like when James looks out the window in "Boy on a Train," the train's motion and the surrounding scenery represent the narrator's quest for freedom and a better future. Indeed, just like James, the narrator of this story has left home in search of economic opportunities and found himself responsible for his mother. (Readers might even speculate that this narrator is *James, a decade or more later.)*

As night fell, the ride got bumpier and bumpier. Then, the narrator noticed a railroad bull crawling toward Hymie, who was asleep on his car. The narrator tried to scream, but it was too loud. The bull got to Hymie and started beating him with his loaded stick. Hymie jolted awake. The bull tried to throw Hymie off the **train**, then he climbed on his chest and started choking him. But Hymie pulled a knife out of his pocket, slashed the bull's wrists, stabbed him in the throat, and pushed him off the train. The narrator felt warm blood spray him in the face.

The narrator becomes a spectator to senseless violence: he is powerless to stop Hymie's confrontation with the bull, even as he watches every moment of it. Yet he describes this gruesome confrontation in a matter-of-fact tone that suggests that violence and death are normal, everyday occurrences on the railroad. Rather than just protecting the rails, the bull clearly makes a point of trying to harm Hymie as much as possible—and Hymie responds by killing the bull in self-defense. This is why, even though Hymie is white, his story still speaks volumes about the Jim Crow system: it shows how brutality is built into the law in the U.S., primarily as a way to maintain social hierarchies.

Hymie calmly tied his shirt to the side of the railcar like a rope and climbed down it. He dangled from it for a while, then he jumped off the **train** at the nearest town. The narrator wondered whether he would ever see Hymie again. Someone found the bull's body by the tracks, and when the train arrived in Montgomery the next day, the narrator and his buddies "got the scare of [their] lives." When the bums jumped off the train right before the railyard, two gun-wielding bulls caught them and made them line up. The narrator realized that "some black boy had to go." But then, another train pulled out of the yard, and the bums jumped on it and rode far, far away.

Hymie's deadly confrontation with the bull contrasts with his totally casual, nonchalant escape into the night. Like the narrator's matter-of-fact tone, this contrast only demonstrates that brutal violence is totally normal to people who ride the rails. And the story's conclusion, in which the other bulls insist on lynching a Black bum to avenge Hymie's actions, once again shows how the brunt of this violence falls on Black people. This is the deeper message in "Hymie's Bull": under Jim Crow, Black people inevitably suffer the worst of society's cruelty simply because they are at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

THE BLACK BALL

From six to eight in the morning, a Black man named John cleans the lobby and takes out the trash at the apartment building where he works as a janitor. Then, he rushes back to his quarters above the garage to have breakfast with his four-year-old son. His son asks, "Daddy, am I black?" No, John responds: he's brown. John's son complains that his friend Jackie made fun of him for being Black, but he remarks that "Brown's much nicer than white." John replies that "American is better than both."

Much like Mama in "Boy on a Train," John struggles to balance work and family as a single Black parent living under Jim Crow. Between his work ethic and his comment about what it means to be American, he appears to believe that working hard to win white people's trust provides his best chances of advancement in a racist society. But in the rest of this story, Ellison will test and challenge that assumption.

After breakfast, John leaves his son to play and rushes back to the lobby, where he dutifully polishes the brass front door. A red-faced white stranger stops on the sidewalk and watches him work. John keeps the brass flawless in order to please Mr. Berry, the building manager, who cares about nothing more than the brass and his plants. John is worried because the building just replaced two Black workers when white people demanded their jobs. And John needs to pay for his son's education.

John's internal monologue shows why *he believes so deeply in hard work. It's not because he denies the reality of racism or hopes that, if he works hard enough, white people will eventually see him as their equal. Instead, it's because he has so* little *hope—he thinks that he's powerless to improve his working conditions, so hard work is his only alternative to unemployment.*

The white stranger asks how long John has been working at the building. Two months, John replies. The stranger asks if other Black people work there, too, and John says no (which is a lie). Furious, John privately wonders why the man doesn't just go ask for his job. Instead, the man offers John some tobacco; John declines. The man chuckles and smiles, then he comments that John probably isn't used to white men offering him "something besides a rope." John forces a smile back.

John's thought process shows how precarious his situation truly is. His manager is so committed to racial hierarchy that he fires his Black employees as soon as any white man asks for their job. The white man's joke about the rope, which is a reference to lynching, might appear to be in bad taste. But actually, he's trying to show that he understands the Jim Crow system and knows why John would be so distrustful of white people.

The white man explains that he works for a labor union and wants to help organize apartment building workers in the area so that they can get better pay and working conditions. But John doesn't believe a white man would help Black people, and he has heard that unions are "for whites only." The white man shows John his hands, which are covered in burn scars. He explains that he defended a Black friend against trumped-up rape charges back home in Alabama, and a white mob attacked him and lynched his friend. He has been working for the union ever since. John still isn't sure whether the man is telling the truth. The man gives John a card with an invitation to an upcoming union meeting, then he limps away.

The union organizer's proposal challenges John's assumption that Black and white people's economic interests are always opposed. Instead, it suggests that John can improve his working conditions through solidarity—or interracial cooperation in the service of shared goals. This is a promising alternative to his current plan: to work hard and hope that his boss shows him mercy. The organizer's story about Alabama underlines why John is so suspicious of white people: under Jim Crow, Black people face a constant atmosphere of racist threat and violence. But the organizer's scars indicate that some white people are willing to accept the risks involved in confronting this violence and choosing solidarity over racism.

The dapper Mr. Berry comes to the building, looks at the brass door, and greets John. He asks if the other white man wanted to talk to him, but John says no—the man was just looking to buy clothes. John's shift is over, so he heads back to his quarters.

Mr. Berry, the manager, makes the same assumption that John did: a white man would never approach a Black man like John in order to help him. Austere, controlling, and humorless, Berry represents the values of the American economy, which cares only about efficiency and profit. (Racism helps it achieve those goals by making it easy and socially permissible to exploit Black people like John.) Needless to say, Berry would not approve of his employees joining a union.

John finds his son playing with a toy truck. He makes his son lunch, then he sits in his chair and tries to study—but he's too distracted by thoughts about the union organizer. His son calls over and says that he wants to be a truck driver when he grows up so that he can wear a hat with buttons on it, like the Black man he saw delivering meat to the grocery store. John looks at his son awhile, and his son asks what's wrong. John just says that he's thinking, and then his son goes back to playing with the truck.

John's conversation with the union organizer opens new possibilities and dangers for him; it also gives a new meaning to his relationship with his son. If John chooses to join the union and fight for better working conditions, he can also shape the world his son comes of age and works in. John's son's dream of being a truck driver highlights this: truck driving has long been heavily unionized, and John's son's story about the Black deliveryman indicates that the union might accept Black people.

From his window, John can see all around the neighborhood. He watches a group of children playing on a nearby lawn, until one boy approaches them with a wagon. The nurse who is watching them sends the boy away; he runs off, stealing a flower from a bush on his way. He is Jackie, the gardener's son, and he is white. John's son asks what he's looking at, and John replies that he was "just looking out on the world." Then, John's son asks if he can go downstairs and play with his **ball**. John says yes—after all, he has to go down and water the grass soon. But John tells his son to stay in the back alley, away from the other children, and not ask any questions. His son runs out and starts bouncing his ball against the garage.

The white children are foils for John's son: they show how he is (and will be) excluded from mainstream American life due to the color line. Just like when James sees white boys in "Boy on a Train," this shows how racism deprives Black children of the innocence and playfulness that all children deserve. Indeed, John's sense of disappointment and heartbreak is obvious when he has to tell his son to play alone in the back, instead of with the other children, just for his safety. Moreover, when Jackie's son steals the flower—and faces at most minor consequences for it—this foreshadows the far more severe consequences John's son will face for a far less serious infraction at the end of this story.

John tries to read again but falls asleep instead. When he wakes up, it's time to water the lawn, so he goes downstairs. But his son is nowhere to be found. He asks a group of white boys if they have seen his son, but they say no; he goes down the alley to the grocery store, but the workers haven't seen his son either. Worried, he heads back to start watering the lawn. He realizes that his son might have gone out to the front lawn. He decides not to punish his son, even though Mr. Berry has warned him against letting the boy play in the front alone.

John's panic at his son's disappearance once again shows how Jim Crow makes everyday life dangerous and unpredictable for Black Americans, who risk violence if they cross white people in any way. When he realizes that his son is probably just playing with the white boys, John is conflicted, just like Mama in "Boy on a Train." On the one hand, he wants his son to enjoy himself and play, like any child should be able to. On the other hand, he also wants to protect his son from white people, which means teaching him to tolerate segregation and avoid confrontation.

Surely enough, when John comes to the front, he finds his son, who is crying. His son says that "a big white boy" took his **ball** and threw it into a window. Then, Mr. Berry comes over. He furiously announces that John's son ruined a plant with his ball and that he isn't allowed to play on the front lawn. He threatens that John will end up "behind the black ball" if his son plays on the front lawn again. John leads his son back to their quarters, but on the way, he bumps into an evergreen tree and scratches his hand. Inside, he bandages himself up in the bathroom.

Mr. Berry's response to the situation is obviously unfair, because he punishes John's son for something that he didn't even do. But John knows that, as a Black man in a deeply racist, unequal society, he has no option but to accept this injustice and try to avoid more confrontation in the future. When Berry says that John will be "behind the black ball," he means that he will fire John if this happens again. "Behind the black ball" is an earlier version of the phrase "behind the eight-ball," but it's also a reference to blackballing, or blocking someone's membership in a group. Ellison's early-20th century readers also would have recognized "black ball" as an anti-Black racial slur.

When John comes out of the bathroom, his son asks him what Mr. Berry meant by the "black ball." John explains that he'll end up "behind the old black ball" if his son's **ball** ends up in Mr. Berry's office. But the boy comments that his ball is white. John again looks at his son for some time and then agrees.

Like the tobacco billboards and grain silo in the first story, the "black ball" means different things to adult and children characters, and thus shows how they have different levels of understanding about American racism. While John's son is thinking about the ball he was playing with, John understands its true meaning: Mr. Berry is going to fire him. Of course, when John's son emphasizes that the ball is really white, not Black, he is also drawing attention to the fact that a white boy really threw the ball through Mr. Berry's window, and yet he is being punished for it.

John's son asks if he will eventually get to play with the black **ball**, and John says yes. Privately, he remarks that his son is already "learning the rules of the game" he will spend most of his life playing, even though he doesn't know it yet. John drags the hose outside with his cut hand to water the lawn, and he remembers the union organizer's "fried hands." He makes sure the union meeting invitation is still in his pocket, then he thinks, "maybe there was a color other than white on the old ball."

In this final scene, "the game" becomes a metaphor for the precautions, codes, and tactics that Black people must learn to use in order to survive under Jim Crow. While John recognizes that his son will inevitably have to learn these codes in order to survive, his decision to join the union also shows that he now sees politics as a way out of "the game." This is the closest thing to an explicit political message in this book: at least early in his life, Ellison believed that labor organizing offered Black Americans' best chances at improving their position and winning justice in American life. This was largely because it enabled them to work alongside white people (whom people in power take more seriously).

IN A STRANGE COUNTRY

In a pub in Wales, a Black American soldier named Mr. Parker covers one of his eyes in order to see better, then he watches his companion, Mr. Catti, finish a glass of beer. Parker comments that he missed good beer on the ship, and Mr. Catti replies that Welsh ale was better before the war. Parker watches the barmaid pour a glass of beer and a Welsh man sing the song "Treat Me Like an Irish Soldier" across the bar. He just got to Wales 45 minutes ago; Mr. Catti says that he has "much to see" and goes to refill their beers.

In this final story, which is based on his personal experience being stationed in Wales during World War II, Ellison asks whether it might be easier to understand what it really means to be a Black American from the other side of the Atlantic. Readers will immediately notice that Mr. Parker's relationship with Mr. Catti is unlike every other relationship between white and Black people in this book, simply because it's equal. Unlike white Americans, Mr. Catti doesn't look down on Mr. Parker from across the color line.

But Mr. Parker thinks that he has already "seen enough" of Wales. As soon as he arrived, a group of other American soldiers flashed a light at him, called him "a goddamn n[—]," and punched him in the eye. Fortunately, Mr. Catti and his friends arrived and brought Mr. Parker away to the pub. Mr. Parker is astonished that Mr. Catti is so "genuinely and uncondescendingly polite." He asks Mr. Catti if there are "many like me in Wales," and Mr. Catti says yes: "Yanks all over the place. Black Yanks and white." He even says that the "Black Yanks" are "fine lad[s]." Mr. Parker is pleasantly surprised.

Mr. Parker's confrontation with the soldiers explains why he's covering his eye in the bar and shows that, even though they fought together during the war, Americans didn't leave the color line at home. Of course, Ellison uses this to point out how truly absurd and counterproductive racism is: it divides Americans against each other, such that Black soldiers like Parker face more at home among foreigners than among their fellow Americans. Indeed, Parker is surprised at Catti's line about "Black Yanks and white" because, when he asked about people "like me," he meant Black people—it never crossed his mind that Black and white Americans are the same by virtue of being American. Similarly, in the U.S., he would never count as a "Yankee," as that term is generally coded to refer to white people. Thus, whereas white Americans see Black Americans as Black first and American second (or not at all), Catti sees Parker as American first and Black second.

Mr. Catti apologizes and explains that he has to leave to give a concert with his singing club. But he invites Mr. Parker to join him. Even though he loves music, Mr. Parker decides it's better not to go. But Mr. Catti promises that it's a private club, just for members and their guests. They might even sing Black American spirituals. Mr. Catti explains that Welsh people love folk music, just like Black Americans. Mr. Parker agrees to go.

Parker still struggles to see Catti's hospitality as genuine, because a white man has never treated him this way before. When Catti comments that Welsh and Black people all love folk music, he points out an important parallel between Wales and Black America: both are subjugated nations within a larger country. (England has colonized Wales since the 1400s and tried to destroy its language and culture in the process.)

Mr. Catti leads Mr. Parker down the street to the concert. On the way, they hear teenage girls singing an American song; Mr. Parker worries that he will run into more Americans, and his night will end badly. He jokes to himself that maybe the club will sing "that old 'spiritual' classic [...] *Massa's in de Old Cold Masochism!*" When he enters the bar, the light blinds his injured eye; he sees several tables with folding chairs and hears a man playing the piano. Mr. Catti orders two whiskeys from the jovial club manager, Mr. Triffit, and introduces him to Mr. Parker. They toast to their health, to Wales, and to America.

*The teenage girls' song foreshadows the story's closing scene and shows that white American culture was already spreading fast around the world and shaping global culture in the 1940s, much as it does today. Clearly, Parker struggles to understand this culture apart from the way it has oppressed him. He was always an outsider to it at home, but is now suddenly treated as an insider to it in Wales. His joke about "*de Old Cold Masochism*" is a reference to his own discomfort: while he's curious about how Welsh people perceive him and Black American culture, he's very anxious being surrounded by white people, and he worries that he is putting himself in further danger. (He would never take similar risks back in the U.S.)*

Mr. Parker and Mr. Catti sit, and then the choir starts singing folk tunes in Welsh. Mr. Parker loves the songs' "warm richness," but he also feels a sense of alienation because he can't understand them. He asks Mr. Catti if the song is about Wales, and Mr. Catti says yes; the first, he explains, was about the Welsh defeating the English in battle. Mr. Catti comments that music "reveal[s] what's in the heart," and it's possible to understand it even without the lyrics. Mr. Catti looks pleased, and Mr. Parker thinks about how he wishes Black Americans had such a strong sense of national identity and history as the Welsh. Mr. Parker hopes he can understand the "anguish and exultation" that the Welsh feel about their nation.

Indeed, Mr. Parker's feelings about the Welsh are very similar to his Welsh friends' feelings about Americans: he appreciates them so much in part because he doesn't fully understand them. This rich yet alienating cultural experience allows him to reflect more deeply on his own *culture and identity—specifically, it shows him that Black Americans can work harder to build social and cultural institutions that would unite them around their shared identity, experiences, and political goals. In fact, through Parker's internal monologue, Ellison proposes a daring idea: Black Americans are really a nation, a distinct people united by a shared history. But, he suggests, they have to start identifying as a nation if they want to eventually liberate themselves.*

Mr. Catti tells Mr. Parker that the choir members are a mine owner, a miner, a butcher, and a union organizer. When they sing, he declares, people put their differences aside and simply get along as Welshmen. Mr. Parker realizes that he has never felt so close to white men in his life—not even when fighting alongside them in the war.

The choir's composition shows that Welsh identity also connects people across class *lines. But this kind of solidarity is very uncommon in the U.S.—even among Black people, as Ellison would argue in much of his writing. Again, Ellison emphasizes that* class *politics is just as important as racial politics if Americans want to change their society for the better.*

Mr. Parker thinks about how music brings people together and how much he already loves the Welsh. He remembers the racism in *Othello* but still decides that "*I want to believe in this people.*" But this feels wrong: in America, he is so used to being cynical about his nation, and about white people. It feels like Welsh people have "exposed" him with "the brilliant light of their deeper humanity," because they see him for who he really is. But he also remembers that he has to go back to his ship and to his home in Harlem.

In the past, Parker has been suspicious of white people in general because of his specific experiences with white Americans. *This is why he now struggles to separate white Americans (who are generally racist) from the white Welsh men he has met (who are not). But he also warns himself against foolishly applying his warm feelings toward the Welsh men to white Americans back home. He remembers Shakespeare's tragedy* Othello*—whose title character is Black and which is full of racism—to remind himself that British culture also has an anti-Black streak. Yet it is simply nothing like the pervasive anti-Black politics and attitudes in the U.S.*

Mr. Catti asks about Mr. Parker's eye and calls it "a bloody shame," but Mr. Parker says that this has still been one of the best nights of his life. Mr. Catti remarks that everyone is glad Mr. Parker came to the concert, since they can see that he loves the music. He lends Mr. Parker his flashlight and explains that he doesn't need it since he "know[s] the city like [his] own palm."

Parker's suspicion and anxiety turn out to have been totally unfounded: Catti's hospitality is genuine. Indeed, his willingness to part with his flashlight shows how comfortable he is at home in Wales. This sense of safety and belonging would have been almost impossible for Black Americans to imagine in the mid-20th century, as their lives were constantly under threat anywhere they went in the U.S.

Everyone stands up for the next song, and Mr. Parker realizes that it's the Welsh national anthem. Next, they sing "God Save the King" and the "Internationale." And then, Mr. Catti nudges Mr. Parker, who notices that everyone is looking at him. He immediately recognizes the next song. At first, he feels that he's about to perform an "unwilled and degrading act" in front of everyone, but then, he starts to feel like the song has "some vast new meaning."

"God Save the King" is the U.K.'s anthem, and the "Internationale" is a famous left-wing workers' song that was also the Soviet national anthem. (The men are singing it because the Soviet Union was the U.K. and U.S.'s primary ally in World War II.) Clearly, the Welsh people's national pride does not stop them from taking pride in the whole U.K., or in their allies. On the contrary, it shows that pride in one's own nation can go hand in hand with respect for other nations.

Mr. Parker hears himself singing, almost against his will: "*…Gave proof through the night / That our flag was still there…*" He feels a rush of guilt, then relief. This is the first time he has sincerely believed in the song's meaning. After he finishes the song, Mr. Catti compliments his voice. The other men jokingly ask him to stay in Wales and join their club. Speechless, he clutches the flashlight and tries not to cry.

Parker's emotional response to singing the national anthem represents his changing feelings about what it means to be American. He doesn't believe the words for the first time simply because he has just been fighting for his flag in the war—it's also because he truly feels proud to be American for the first time. In the past, he has primarily thought of the U.S. in terms of the way it has oppressed him and his people. But now, he sees how Black people and their culture are actually central parts of the American identity. Yet this has only been possible because his Welsh acquaintances have honored and valued him as an American. Thus, the story ends on a hopeful note: Ellison shows what it would look like for Black people to eventually find a sense of identity, pride, and belonging in their Americanness—even if this is only possible in some distant, murky future.

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