
Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square": A Spectacle of Primitive Form of Human Cruelty in Modern Time

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Publication Info

Article history :

Received : 10-11-2024

Accepted : 17-11-2024

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v20i2.15

Key words:

Lynching, White Supremacy,
Racism, Negro, Storm,
Crowd, Party.

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ABSTRACT

Ellison's short stories present the evils of white supremacy prevalent in the United States of America. "A Party Down at the Square" is the opening story in the collection titled "Flying Home and Other Stories" (1996), set in the South and told by a young white narrator from the North. It presents a horrible incident of lynching of a black man by the white residents of a small town on Saturday afternoon as seen through the eyes of a young white narrator. The white people from the town are attending this spectacle of lynching as if it were a celebration and the black people are conspicuous by their absence on the otherwise crowded square on the weekends. It is not an ordinary beating to death or just a hanging form of lynching; here the victim is being burnt alive. A lot goes down during party at the town's square: a lynching, a fire, a near-crash of a plane, and the electrocution of a white woman. The paper seeks to study the elements of racism against the African-American blacks in the society having white supremacy as depicted in the story which presents a glimpse into the psychotic side of racism steeped in historical dehumanizing of the African-American blacks.

INTRODUCTION

"A Party Down at the Square" is a very graphic lynching story which seeks to expose the truth of white America's schizophrenic identity as freedom loving. It is a chilling story told in the first person by a young white boy from Cincinnati in the North visiting his uncle in Alabama in the South, who witnesses the burning of an African-American man on a stormy night of chilling cold as the rain drops were freezing after falling. The title of this story is both literal and ironically metaphorical at once. The event which causes a crowd to gather in the town square in a celebratory mood is not strictly a party in the sense most people define the word. The party is the lynching of a black man and it is a whites-only, Christians-only affair. The lynching takes place right in front of the courthouse at noon time on a Saturday. On Saturdays, there used to be as many niggers on the square as white folks but on that very Saturday, all the niggers except a Bacote nigger, are conspicuous by their absence. There are 35 women in the crowd, talking endlessly. The Bacote nigger has dragged there, tied to the back of Jed Wilson's truck, and put on burning logs of wood to die. Simultaneously, a near plane crash is averted but a white woman comes in contact with live loose electrical wires snapped by the airplane and gets electrocuted. Later another nigger, trying to run out of the country, is also killed as if it were a binding ritual to kill the niggers trying to escape their lives as slaves. Susan L. Blake notices it as a trend in Ellison's short stories as he observes: "Some of Ellison's short stories illustrate the process of adapting black folk experience to the forms of ritual and the meanings of myth" (1986:81).

The narrator notices that everybody at the square was mad and quiet and standing around

looking at the nigger who was bleeding from his nose and ears. A man with a gun kept goosing at the nigger in his pants with the barrel of a shotgun, saying he ought to pull the trigger, but he never did. The nigger kept wrapping his arms around himself trying to stop the shivers. But one of the boys from the crowds snatched off the nigger's shirt that left his black skin exposed. The nigger felt scared and put his hands in his pants' pockets. Somebody yelled at him and asked him to take his hands out of his pockets but the nigger did not hear him and kept his hands in pockets to brave the freezing cold. Everybody was yelling crazy as they were about to set fire to the nigger. They had the nigger on a platform and lit a small fire putting some logs around the platform and it was raised by throwing on some gasoline. As they push a ring of fire close to his feet touching his big black toes, he kept lifting his first one foot and then the other, like a chicken on a hot stove. They asked him to say his prayers but he only moaned with his eyes shut and kept moaning up and down on his feet, first one foot and then the other. As the rain stopped the wind rose making the flames flare higher.

The story reaches its climax when near-crash by a plane results in the electrocution of a white woman spectator at the site of the lynching of a black man. In fact, confused by the cyclone which moved through the town, an airplane pilot mistook the fire of the lynching for an airport flare and confused the light of the scene with a nearby landing field. As the pilot was flying too low through the town and preparing for landing, he prematurely cut his engines and began to descend. Everyone except the nigger looked up into the air to see what was happening, and saw through the clouds and fogs an airplane with a red and green light on her wings. The plane came so close that they started yelling, 'He's going to land' or 'He's going to fall'. But the landing gear of the plane made contact with the power lines which caused the lines to make contact with the puddles of rainwater in which the white woman was standing. The plane, after hitting the power lines and knocking loose five or six wires which were dangling and sparking, was air-born again and it sailed smoothly out of the square and disappeared into the clouds. The white female spectator was instantly electrocuted and burned to a crisp. Her body was charred almost as black as the black man being lynched. The narrator says, "Her white dress was torn, and I saw one of her tits hanging out in the water and her thighs. Some woman screamed and fainted and almost fell on a wire, but a man caught her. . . . The shock had turned the woman almost as black as the nigger" (6-7). A near crash by a plane resulting in the electrocution of a white spectator at the lynching of a black man not only marks its climax but also remains the most memorable event in the story.

The plane incident implicates the setting of the story as a primitive form of human cruelty is seen happening in modern time i.e. 20th century, when men are flying in the sky in airplanes. According to Timothy Sexton, "Some readers might be confused by the whole deal with the plane which suddenly if temporarily shifts the focus entirely away from the lynching. While the arrival and near-crashing of the plane does take the dramatics to another level, it does seem strangely out of place and perhaps even superfluous. Narratively, perhaps, but symbolically it becomes seamlessly integrated as the plane introduces a level of modernism in the setting of the story sometime between 1800s and the early 20th century" (WEB). To Timothy Sexton, this lynching appears to be an outdated ritual, quite irrelevant and totally out of context as per its time and place: "Much of white society labored under the delusion that the lynching of blacks was a relic from the past, attributing it as a consequence of racial intolerance toward the idea of freed slaves that had, in the generations since, faded away" (WEB).

It has also been mentioned in the story that, despite the accident being averted, the airline will be conducting an investigation to find out who was responsible for setting the fire. The pilot

being alive will provide an eyewitness account what had happened. It is worthy to note that there is instant retribution for the lynching. The criminal act of lynching has directly harmed more than just one intended victim; the collateral damage could potentially extend to those who perpetrated the violence in the first place.

The airplane incident not only diverted the attention of those who had assembled to witness the lynching but also prolonged the lynching and the pain and trauma of the nigger who was being lynched. Meanwhile, undaunted by the tragic incidents, the crowd continues with the lynching. The narrator ran back and saw that the nigger was then standing in the middle of the flames. The fire had caught his pants. The watchers stood at a safe distance from the fire and somebody hollered, "Well, nigger, it ain't so cold now, is it? You don't need to put your hands in your pockets now, And the nigger looked up with his great white eyes looking like they was 'bout to pop out of his head" (7). The tone is increasing disgust amid a story of intensifying horror. The racism is demonstrated through the white narrator's response to the lynching of a black man. Although not delighted by the scene like the objectors around him, the boy, as he watches the nigger look up with his great white eyes looking like they were 'bout to pop out of his head' says, "...I had enough. I didn't want to see any more. I wanted to run somewhere and puke, but I stayed" (7).

The narrator as an outside observer finds himself in a fix. He felt horrified and did not want to see anymore but he stayed there in front of the crowd and looked. The nigger in utter distress said to the watching crowd, "Will one a you gentleman please cut my throat?..." Will someone cut my throat like a Christian?" (7). But Jed Wilson told him, "Sorry, but ain't no Christian around tonight. Ain't no Jew-boys neither. We're just one hundred percent Americans" (7). The nigger was silent. Jed Wilson reached down and brought up a can of gasoline and threw it in the fire on the nigger. The flames caught the gas in a puff and spread all over his chest. As the narrator sees the nigger motionless, burning like a house on fire and smelling his skin burning, he thinks that either the nigger was really very tough or he was dead. But the next moment, the nigger started moving out of fire as the fire had burned the ropes he was tied with, and started jumping and kicking as if he were blind. He kicked so hard that the platform, which was burning too, fell in and he rolled out of the fire at the narrator's feet. The narrator recounts, "I jumped back so he wouldn't get on me. I'll never forget it. Every time I eat barbeque I'll remember that nigger. His back was just like a barbequed hog. I could see the print of his ribs where they start around from his backbone and curve down and around. It was the sight to see, that nigger's back." (8).

It is strange that visual display of lynching does not appear to be outrageous to the crowd of white people. The anonymous narrator also watches an anonymous black man being burnt, marveling at the victim's resiliency and showing no moral awareness of the crime. The nigger was still burning and the perpetrators tried their best to maximize his pain and misery. So, Jed and somebody else pushed him back into the burning planks and logs and poured on more gas. When the nigger rolled out of the fire again, they got some tree limbs and held him there this time and he stayed there till he was ashes. Later on, Jed showed the narrator some white finger bones still held together with little pieces of the nigger's skin. As the narrator left the square, his heart was pounding like he had been running a long ways, and then he vomited everything inside his stomach on the ground. He was sick, and tired, and weak, and cold. The next day, his uncle told him that he would get used to it in time. But nature was taking avenging the lynching of the nigger. "There had been a cyclone all right. It swept a pat right through the country, and we were lucky we didn't get the full force of it...it blew for three days steadily and put the town

in a hell of a shape.”(9) The narrator sums up the story in the last paragraph of the story: “First it was the nigger and the storm, then the plane, then the woman and the wires, and now I hear the airplane line is investigating to find who set the fire that almost wrecked their plane. All that in one night, and all of it but the storm over one nigger. It was some night all right. It was some party too....It was my first and my last” (10).

But the white lynchers remain unrepentant. “They had to kill another nigger who tried to run out of the country after they burned this Bacote nigger. My Uncle Ed said they always have to kill niggers in pairs to keep the other niggers in place” (9). But the other day, when the narrator visited Brinkley's store, a white cropper told him, “...it didn't do no good to kill the niggers 'cause things get no better” (9). The narrator's last comments in the story, “It was my first party and my last. God, but the nigger was tough” (10), hint that the helplessness of the black men will end and such lynching will stop in coming future.

The main characters in this story are the unidentified two black victims of lynching and one white woman being the victim of electrocution and the unnamed young white narrator through whose eyes this abomination is seen. Among the perpetrators, it is Jed Wilson who is really the important figure, however, simply by virtue of earning the dignity of a name. It is to the back of Jed's truck that the victim was tied; it is the words of Jed that the mass blindly follows; and most importantly, it is Jed who is expected to be elected Sheriff in the next election.

There is parallelism in the story. It creates a parallel between the perpetrators and the man they lynch as both are being victimized by the irrationality of racism. The white townsman who has come to watch the lynching as evening entertainment winds up being electrocuted to death as a result of the near crash of the plane. As a result she ends up being “almost as black as the nigger” (7). The narrator sees her body still burning and perceives the foul smell: “I could smell the flesh burning. The first time I'd ever smelled it” (6) as he has seen the nigger being lynched: “He had started to burn like a house afire and was making the smoke smell like burning hide” (8). The fire which burnt the nigger also burnt the ropes he was tied in and set him free from the bondage.

As per Janelle Askew College paper, both Ralph Ellison's “A Party Down at the Square” and Ursula Le Guin's “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” “...depict desensitized scenes in which communities show an extreme lack of empathy to human beings receiving unjustified abuse. Such bleak characterization is paired with a lack of acknowledgement of the matter by doing nothing to stop such injustices. With this both authors critique society's role in the “Bystander Effect” and in the human rights abuses that pervades the lives of many people today” (WEB).

The narrator, a young white boy from the North, who recounts his response to the lynching of a Nigger is also very important. Unlike the white people assembled at the Square to watch the lynching, he is not delighted by the scene of lynching that he witnesses as he says, “I had enough. I don't want to see any more. I want to run somewhere and puke” (7). The metaphors available to such an inexperienced observer are limited but the impact made upon his psyche by this outpouring organized malevolence is tremendous: “I'll never forget it. Every time I eat barbecue I'll remember that nigger. His back was just like a barbecued hog” (8). The vivid depiction of lynching and burning from the perspective of this visiting white boy is quite remarkable because his body rejects the horrific episode and his mind works hard to accept it but his mind finally comes to rest in a kind of hapless admiration: “God, but that Nigger was tough. That Bacote nigger was some nigger” (10)! Moreover, Ellison puts in the boy's mouth

few didactic asides in a futile attempt to explain or understand the explicable, but this story is an important work in its own right because it commands a forbidden ringside view of barbarism at play.

The incident of lynching happens in the South. Religion and South are so inexorably combined to the point that on any given day spent in any town's oldest and most successful restaurant one is sure to hear the phrase "god-fearing Christian" spoken out aloud at least once and probably multiple times. Though religion holds such a place of prominence in this region, yet the hypocrisy of religion can be seen in white people's such a diehard determination of maintaining the slavery in the region that the emancipation of slaves can never become the subject of sermons on Sunday in churches where the congregation is predominantly black. In this story Ellison confronts this hypocrisy directly when Jed taunts the victim of lynching: "Sorry, but ain't no Christians around tonight. Ain't no Jew-boys neither. We're just one hundred per cent Americans." (7). Jed's expression suggests that religion among white Southerner is not mere hypocrisy but something much darker; a total fraud.

While the beginning of the story foreshadows Ellison's first novel and his masterpiece *Invisible Man* (1952) which marks the black people as 'invisible' and suggests that the racist white oppressors do not see their black victims' human identity as they proceed with their cruelty; otherwise they would not act the way they do. The seemingly optimistic end of the story reminds us of Ellison's last novel *Juneteenth* (1999) which marks the commemoration of the anniversary date of the June 19, 1865 on which proclamation of freedom for slaves in Texas which was the last state of the confederacy with institutional slavery. It is worthy to note that Juneteenth was recognized as a Federal Holiday on June 17, 2021 when President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law.

CONCLUSION: "A Party Down at the Square" expresses the helplessness of the black men in the face of all powerful white men armed with their 'white laws'. It hints at an ever present threat of lynching which black people faced throughout America, though most infamously in the South. This lynching which is a part of the construction of the African-American identity is described by a young boy from the community of the white men who commit the violence. The victims only suffer and keep mum like dumb creatures. The other black men's utter helplessness is evident in their conspicuous absence from the scene of crime. But the attitude of the white narrator and the views of the white cropper indicate that lynching of black did no good and someday this evil practice of lynching the black will come to an end. Hence the end of the story may be considered to be optimistic. Obviously, lynching as a regular spectacle has certainly come to an end but its occasional occurrences make a matter of concern for the civil society.

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