

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The richness of black people's life and culture has attracted the thesis writer's interest to read and to explore more the beauty of black American literature, since authors "have passion and conviction of the place they and their race have occupied and endured in a predominantly white society (Holman, 1978, p.9). The thesis writer, therefore, chooses Ralph Waldo Ellison as one of outstanding black American writers ever known, to be her chosen author that his work will be analyzed.

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma as a southwestern boy. That's why most of his works are completely influenced by Oklahoma, which is an established place and has no tradition of slavery as the geographical background. Oklahoma city gave inspiration to Ellison to create many works in which Oklahoma becomes the background scene, especially in the three short stories that are going to be analyzed in this thesis, "Afternoon", "Mister Toussan", "That I Had the Wings".

Since geography completely influences his writing, there are three primary locations where he spent his life permeated through his works. Ellison's childhood in the Southwestern background provided him with freedom and possibility; while the South (South Carolina) offered restriction and limitation; in his manhood – North (New York) allowed a mature synthesis (Busby, 1991, p.1). "I dream constantly of Oklahoma City," he told an interviewer in 1975. "My childhood is there!" he convinced his reader (Litz, 1981, p.222). Oklahoma inspired the determination for freedom, the fighting spirit of the people, and the sense of possibility.

Encouragement made by his mother Ida Millsap Ellison, has made Ellison developed his frontier sense of a world of limitless possibility (Magill, 1979, p.894). In fact, his mother helped him to escape from the limitations that tried to impose any in-group class distinctions upon the people of his community (Hersey, 1974, p.269).

While the Great Depression years brought tremendous difficulties, Ellison said that it was “great times for literature”. At the time, the black writer’s particular duty was to overcome the handicap of living in racist, capitalist America and to teach his readers to do likewise (Litz, 1981, p.233). Therefore, Ellison is always concerned with Afro-American “responses to life”. He improved his writing with the richness of Afro-American tradition; the oral tradition of black culture and the literary tradition of both his black and white predecessor (Magill, 1979, p.895). In other words, Ellison’s stories present universal themes that anyone can relate to.

Ralph Ellison has touched many people, poor or rich, even white or black. He is a master at using an enticing story to project a complex commentary on society (Tetreault , 2001, p.1). A critic, Kimberly W. Benston (1978) has observed that Ralph Ellison is an important voice in American fiction, a “man of good hope” whose works have showed his dedication to artistic craft and to the idea that writers are among America’s most vital nation-builders (p.250).

What makes the thesis writer choose the author is particularly because Ellison is considered to be one of the best American novelists at his time. His first best novel, Invisible Man appeared in April 1952 and it was identified as the most distinguished postwar American novel in 1953, which was conferred National Book Award (Litz, 1981, p.246). Invisible Man won the National Book Award in 1953, the Russwurm Award, a Rockefeller Foundation Award, the American Medal of Freedom, the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Artes et Lettres from France, the Langston Hughes medallion for contribution in arts and letters by City College in New York and the National Medal for Arts in 1985 (Busby, 1991, p. 141).

According to a reviewer, Robert J. Butler (2003), Ellison is also known as one of the best short story writers. His two extraordinary stories, “Flying Home” and “King of the Bingo” have been ranked as the very best American short fictions published since 1945 (p.1). According to Michael Tetreault (2001), Ralph Ellison is one of the most illustrious authors of the twentieth century. He is a storyteller, an activist, and a dreamer. Some scholars have called Ellison the preeminent black author of the twentieth century. There is a small group of

critics who consider him the greatest American author ever. Even after his death, he continues to influence the current generation of writers (p.1).

The writer's amazement toward Ellison is caused by his earnest in delving things. His love towards his southwestern view was reflected upon all of his works and talents. He is a great writer, a trumpeter, a conductor and his prospect as a sculptor – since he attended Douglass High School and continued in 1933, he was accepted as a scholarship student in the music school, Tuskegee Institute.

Moreover, the thesis writer is amazed by Ellison varied experiences around town; in private clubs where he waited a table, at buildings where he ran the elevator, on downtown streets where he shined shoes and sold newspapers, and worked in J. L. Randolph's pharmacy, etc., that some of which “ignited his imagination” (Litz, 1981, p. 224). In other words, while he was job hunting as a youngster, some of those job experiences ignited his imagination. Ellison's interaction with the shadow of the past, raised the power of imagination which produced “the synthesis of art”, as Ellison emphasized that imagination is “integrative, a matter of making symbolic wholes out of parts” (Stepo, 1979, p. 458) and he released his desire to make something out of his imagination and to experiment it constantly (Hersey, 1974, p. 270). Indeed, imagination has colored Ellison's stories. The central of Ellison's imaginations always attempts to confront the reality of a world that is free only in appearance.

In The Art of Fiction, R.F. Dietrich and Roger H. Sundell (1974) noted fiction as any imaginative re-creation or reconstruction of life. In this sense, “not only are your daydream fictions, but also the myths you daily create about yourself and others to help you explain life. We need fiction almost as surely as we need air to breathe” (p.1). It means, then, every poem, play, novel, and short story contains fiction. Throughout its development from its early forms to the modern story, short fiction has been a favorite genre for discussing the value of human existence (Nagel, 1970, p.1). The thesis writer chooses as her primary analysis some short stories, because a short story is concerned with human problems and it demands insight and knowledge from its readers.

The thesis writer chooses to analyze Ralph Ellison's three short stories, "Afternoon", "Mister Toussan", "That I Had the Wings" because Ellison's childhood is reflected throughout these stories in what the main characters do, in what the characters think and talk about. These stories were published in 1940, 1941, and 1943 respectively. Through these stories, Ellison tries to reveal a lesson. He returns to his southwestern past, as he creates two young boys, Buster and Riley, whose adventures in Oklahoma City are drawn from black southwestern folklore. They deal with conflicts between generations as well as different attitudes towards the white world. Ellison presents a dual conflict between the boys and the bigotry of the white world (represented by ole Rogan) and moreover, between the boys and older black figures (Buster and Riley's parents) who attempt to impose a slave mentality towards their children (Acosta, 2002, p.3). The impact of the past slavery times, which has brought slave mentality in the black people's mind and act, and moreover the underestimating of the whites towards black people, have caused the loss of dignity and pride in the black's lives. Black elders attempt to treat their children as they were injured in the past time, in action and even in the way of thinking. Those treatments have restricted the boys' youth. The children, as main characters in the stories, are aware of social injustice in their environment, which brings restrictions towards young black generation. Restrictions in Ellison's stories are real and these come mainly from the adults who dominate the main characters. Therefore, the two main characters that are smart boys do not surrender to many restrictions surrounding them. They develop their imaginations that show pride in their nation heritage (Busby, 1991, p.22), in order to run away from reality, which is full of boundaries. Imagining things is the first step to test their boundaries in which finally the characters find success or sometimes get injured (p.23). But one thing for sure, the characters never stop to challenge the boundaries. Because of their young age, they resist the barriers only in their imagination.

The thesis writer is interested in analyzing imagination because she thinks that the topic is related to human life. Every human must experience imagination because it is the language of human soul. Experiencing imagination can encourage and motivate people to choose the goal in their life. Without

experiencing it, this life can be just ordinary and might be dull and foolish. Life can be felt empty of excitement. Throughout experiencing the development of imagination, someone can be happy, exciting, and survived in life even in a tremendous environment. The thesis writer is interested in discussing imagination in Ellison's stories because it has greatly influenced the main characters there. According to Mark Busby (1991), the main characters in the stories have sense of hope and possibility, as they build imaginatively on southwestern and African American folklore. They are ready to shape their experiences into exciting adventures (p.22).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Through the understanding of the whole stories, the thesis writer finds that the main characters, Buster and Riley, indeed experience imagination in their lives, which is why the thesis writer is curious to know what the main characters' imaginations are and the results of their imaginations.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The thesis writer wants to find out the imaginations of each main character and also the results of their imaginations.

1.4 Significance of the Study

By analyzing Ellison's short stories, the thesis writer expects that the readers will be encouraged to learn more about African-American stories and the writers. Moreover, she hopes she can encourage the students of the English Department to analyze other themes in these three stories, since the stories have other themes, which are also interesting to discuss. Since she considers that these stories are interesting stories, hopefully this thesis can also encourage the readers' appreciation, especially the students of the Faculty of Letters to study other Ellison's works.

As the characters in these stories face limitation in their environment dealing with their efforts to develop imagination, the thesis writer hopes that by reading this thesis, the readers will understand that having imagination can be a

great spirit to become optimistic and progressive about life. In the three short stories, the main characters' imaginations are really helpful in experiencing exciting adventures, because particularly human imagination has power to bring a man out of limitation.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

The scope of this thesis is on the imaginations of the major characters, Buster and Riley, since they are the most important characters that arise the problem, thus make the story moves.

The limitation is on the main characters, Buster and Riley, and also Aunt Kate, Riley's parents, Buster's mother, who as the minor characters, have a very limited role, but they give support to the imagination of the main characters.

1.6 Methodology

Ralph Ellison's three short stories "Afternoon", "Mister Toussan", and "That I Had the Wings", will be used as primary data. Furthermore, the thesis writer uses library and Internet researches to get criticisms on the stories and on the author as the secondary data. Besides, collecting data and getting reference is done as the effort of finding out the written materials in the library. Then she cites them in order to get valuable information for further analysis.

Literary theories that will be used are characterization, setting and conflict. Characterization is needed in order to figure out the two young boys as the major characters in the stories and their aunt and parents as the minor characters. Next, setting is needed as one important influence in shaping the young boys' imagination. And then, the thesis writer needs the theory of conflict, since Ellison presents dual conflicts in the stories, which are between the main characters with the elders and between the bigotry of the whites, as they are momentous events, which emerge the boys' imagination. Furthermore, the writer will need an explanation about the values and beliefs of Black Americans.

1.7 Organization of the Study

For the sake of getting a systematic order and effectiveness, the thesis will be divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the scope and limitation, the methodology and the organization of the study. Chapter two will discuss about the three major literary theories, characterization, setting, and conflict; and also an explanation about the values and beliefs of Black Americans. The thesis writer begins the analysis in the third chapter, and then gives the conclusion in the fourth chapter.