

FLYING HOME: A JOURNEY TOWARDS FREEDOM

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Abstract:

"Flying Home" is one of the most successful short stories by Ralph Ellison. It is the story that calls attention of all concerned with the essence of human freedom. "Flying Home" is a story about the effects of racism with Todd as a lead character. Todd, a young pilot, is found injured on the white man's land while flying a plane. The narrative soon unfolds through the flashbacks about Todd's ultimate desire to prove himself by his exultation in flight before the whites. He is rescued by an old black farmer, Jefferson who finally helps him win his inner combat by way of self-elevation instead of seeing through whites' eyes. Ellison has based the story on several of his themes, images, and techniques: themes of racial strife, initiation, and search for identity; bird, wing, and flying imagery, judgmental men and framing, myth, folklore, and distorted, surreal-or magical realism passages. In this story Ellison successfully maneuvers the delicate subject of racism and offers solution to resolve the inner conflict.

Keywords: *identity, racism, flying home, straitjacket.*

The present article offers an insight into an ambivalent character who measures himself through the white's eyes and to find the solution to the agony that passes when he confronts racism problems and inner conflicts. It is newsworthy that Ellison has taken the content for his story from an historical event during World War II when Judge William H. Hastie who served as a civilian aide to Henry L. Stimson, the Secretary of War, resigned in 1943 in protest over what he called "the reactionary policies and discriminatory 'practices'" of the army Air Forces. Judge Hastie commented, "The simple fact is that the air command does not want Negro pilots flying in and out of various fields, eating, sleeping and mingling with other personnel, as a service pilot must do in carrying out his missions"

In the present story, Todd, a black pilot, a northerner, trained at Tuskegee, is attempting to correct a dangerous maneuver when he hits a buzzard, crash lands in a field, and breaks his ankle. He falls to earth on rural Alabama, a white man's land; a southern soil, that is associated with the long history of his ancestors who had toiled under slavery in the plantations for the whites. Seeing Todd lying on ground, an old black sharecropper, Jefferson, comes to his rescue. He sends away his son, Teddy for help and then tells the pilot two folktales. The first is a story about seeing two buzzards arising from a horse's corpse, and the second, cataloged by folklorists as early as 1919 as the "Colored Man in Heaven" tale, which is about a black angel who was expelled from heaven because of his pride. The second story offends Todd, who thinks Jefferson is mocking him and "making a screen between them upon which his humiliation glowed like fire." (160). During this time Todd recalls his childhood fascination with flying.

When Dabney Graves, the white man who owns the farm arrives, he has Todd straitjacketed because "you all know you caint let the nigguh git up that high without his going crazy. The nigguh brain ain't built for high altitudes..." (170). When he is being taken away, he suddenly realizes that his own pride has estranged him from his roots. And it was as though he had been lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of men

Although Todd is from "up north," the title refers to his perceived return to his racial history. Earlier he had thought condescendingly how different he was from all that Jefferson represents: "He felt cut off

from them by age, by understanding, by sensibility, by technology and by his need to measure himself against the mirror of other men's appreciation" (152). He mistakenly identifies himself with the machines of airplane, "I'm naked without it. Not a machine, a suit of clothes you wear. And with a sudden embarrassment and wonder, he whispered, "It's the only dignity I have..." (151). He is in the illusion that he can prove his worth by flying high in the sky around the white world. Looking glass theory, a concept developed by Charles Horton Cooley, aptly applies here. The idea is that a person looks himself through the notion of the people who surround him. In other sense the surrounding people act as a mirror. For Todd wings are the certificate to prove him before the eyes of the whites, "Now for him, any real appreciation lay with his white officers" (152). He believes if he flies the plane successfully, he would be elevated in the whites' world. He does not want to be a part of the black community and wrongly tries to escape blackness. He feels humiliated that he is identified racially with Jefferson: "Humiliation was when you could never be simply yourself, when you were always a part of this old black ignorant man" (150).

Jefferson's stories make him one of Ellison's wise fools, like Jim Trueblood, Peter Wheatstraw, and the narrator's grandfather in *Invisible Man*. Todd mistakenly thinks that Jefferson tells his stories naively, just to pass the time (195), but the old sharecropper understands the political consequences of Todd's position. When Jefferson asks Todd why he wants to fly, Todd replies to himself, "Because it makes me less like you," and aloud, "It's as good a way to fight and die as I know" (153). Todd feels inferior in being a part of the community where they are treated akin to prehistoric man. Jefferson responds knowingly, "But how long you think before they gonna let you all fight?" Then Jefferson subtly communicates to Todd that he sees him as a "Jim Crow" black man, by telling him that his son calls buzzards 'Jim Crows'. Like the Jim Crow laws that institutionalized segregation and forced black people to accept separate and unequal treatment, Todd is a 'Jim Crow' pilot, allowed only to fly an "advanced trainer" in a separate and unequal air force. He is a buzzard feeding on the dead horse of bigotry by "allowing himself to be a symbol."

Susan L. Blake, in an article critical of Ellison's use of African American folklore, points to implications of the buzzard imagery:

The buzzard is a common figure in black folklore, representing sometimes the black person scrounging for survival, sometimes his predators, and always the precariousness of life in a predatory society. . . . Representing not only the black man, Todd, but the Jim Crow society, they symbolize the destructiveness of both. Todd thinks of himself as a buzzard. . . . But there is also a clear analogy between him and the horse's carcass. . . . He is being devoured by both the Jim Crow society and his own shame at blackness. Todd {*Tod* "death") is, in trying to destroy old Jefferson, also feeding on his own dead self (124).

Jefferson's second folktale is more critical. He tells how he once went to heaven and flew so well that he was given a "parachute and a map of the state of Alabama" and expelled because he violated the rule, but while he was there, "I was the fly-inset sonofabitch what ever hit heaven!" (262). It is a story of pride, and Todd recognizes its import, feeling "such an intense humiliation that only great violence would wash it away" (262).

Todd's alienation from Jefferson disappears after Graves, who represents "all the unnamed horror and obscenities that he had ever imagined, "kicks him in the chest and straitjackets him. At that moment, a "hot, hysterical laughter rose from his chest" (269). Sensing that Graves, who "done killed enough of us," (267) might kill Todd, Jefferson and his son side track the white man into concern for the plane and take Todd away.

As they leave, the story ends with a powerfully affirmative image of transformation, one that consolidates the story's themes and images from myth and folklore. Todd looks up at a flying buzzard and "like a song within his head he heard the boy's soft humming and saw the dark bird glide into the sun and glow like a bird of flaming gold" (270). Joseph Trimmer alludes the characters to Greek mythology such as

buzzards transforming into “bird of flaming gold”, Todd to Icarus, a symbol of human folly who flies symbol of human folly. The fate of Icarus-flying too close to the Sun-proliferated into Western culture as a warning against excessive ambition and a tale of its consequences. And Jefferson is compared to Daedalus who teaches Todd the political and racial consequences of his flying too high.

The mythic comparisons-Todd /Icarus, Jefferson/Daedalus, Buzzard/ Phoenix - combined with African American folklore presented in the style of magical realism all mark the mature Ralph Ellison. Laughter by Jefferson which Todd took earlier as being humiliated was substituted by his deep understanding within. Todd could get his real identity and he finally comes 'home'. He finds his inner conflict being resolved and achieves a sense of freedom.

“Flying Home” also demonstrates a sophisticated attitude toward black characters who have had to live with racism. With Todd and Jefferson, however, Ellison achieves the balance between affirmation and denial. Jefferson, like Louis Armstrong and Jim Trueblood in *Invisible Man*, has learned to use his creative powers to assert self in the face of forces that deny it. Thus Jefferson brings 'home' Todd, who reinforced himself on false belief based on supremacy of whites' world and materialistic achievement. Ralph Ellison beautifully conveys the importance of folklore and brings out a new definition of Negro culture to survive in the harsh and uncontrolled society.

In this sense, the title "Flying Home" resonates with meaning for both author and character.

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