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Everything Is Not What It Seems

There are things that we do every year, month, and day. You get so accustomed to the familiar of a routine that the slightest change can cause you to be out of your element. However, everything can change in a matter of minutes or with one wrong turn. A simple family vacation road trip or a speech to local leaders can turn into a situation never plausible. Everything was planned out to the tee, yet somehow the outcome was not what was expected. There are many different takeaways one can receive from unexpected situations. Some lessons learned are better than others. Some may be the very reason you lose your life. Also, we sometimes stay too focused on the big picture to notice the slight details that allow you to appreciate the bigger picture once being aware of all the small details that come together to produce a wonderful story. If you don't pay attention, you could miss the entire point. Although many people believe that everything usually goes according to plan, in "Battle Royal" and "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" by Ralph Ellison and Flannery O'Connor, they use foreshadowing, symbolism, and irony to show the deeper complexities behind a plan gone awry.

A common theme shared between these two stories is the use of foreshadowing. They use specific wording to suggest a future outcome. Both uses of foreshadowing have to do with a character that is attempting to get away from something. In "Battle Royal" the grandfather plays a key role in depicting foreshadowing. On his deathbed he says, "I want you to overcome 'em

with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Ellison 177). This directly relates to how the main character stands up for himself to the "leading white citizens" as Ellison calls them at a hotel. He no longer allows his grandfather's words to hold him back. This shows how you never know how the impact of your words will affect someone, for better or for worse.

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the use of foreshadowing is directly related to the plot of the story. A family is planning their vacation and the grandmother warns the mother about a prisoner, the Misfit, who escaped from a jail in Florida. The grandmother says to her son, "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a primal like that a loose in it" (O'Connor 242). Her son, Bailey, didn't pay her any mind and neither did his wife. However, as the story progresses due to the grandmother's forgetfulness, they make a wrong turn looking for a plantation that was in Tennessee, not Georgia. This leads them onto the same road as the escaped prisoner. Both authors do a great job of revealing the unexpected through the usage of this literary device. O'Connor and Ellison utilize it well by integrating into the main plot, in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" with the grandmother and the Misfit, and with the narrator and his grandfather in "Battle Royal". Throughout stories, the use of foreshadowing allows you a peek behind the curtain as to what is coming next.

The authors also both utilize another literary tool, symbolism, to aid in showing us the deeper meaning behind different characters and scenes within their stories. In "Battle Royal", there are many scenes and characters that allow us a deeper look into the way black people, specifically black men, were viewed by society and also how women were seen as well. The main scene in which this story is based off of is the fight called Battle Royal. At first read this

may seem like an odd turning point within the story. But at a second place you can see the deeper meaning of what the fight represents. In a journal article by Yonka Kravesta, he dives into the deeper meanings within this story. He says the Battle Royal “foregrounds the practices of white society of channeling the Negroes’ anger and frustration against each other, inflicting violence and self-destruction, thus driving them away from their common goal” (Kravesta). Kravesta discusses the many different moments throughout the story that symbolize the ways black men and women are treated by society. From when the narrator is not allowed to touch the woman to the woman herself and how she is viewed, portrayed and treated. Also, Micheal Cooke notes the comparison that, “his life, and black life, is hell” (Cooke). The horror the narrator goes through during the story is reflective of all the hardships black people have to go through to reach a point of thriving, instead of barely surviving. The narrator goes through the battle royal and the electric rug, just to read his speech. Even then, he is mocked by the town leaders for his eloquence. However, there is a moment when this mockery turns into an intense discontent. The narrator misspeaks during a part of his speech. This moment causes an air of judgement and mild fury to fill the room. One man asks the narrator, ““You weren’t being smart, were you, boy?” he said, unkindly” (Ellison 186). Replacing the word ‘responsibility’ with ‘equality’ caused such a quiet yet screaming discomfort between both parties. The reaction to the narrator’s fumble shows how a word can change the entire mood of a situation from the moment it escapes your breath.

During “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” the symbolism is very subtle. If read too fast, one can miss the point entirely. Matthew Fike refers to *The Habit of Being* by Sally Fitzgerald when referring to the daughter, June Star, who begins to dance when the family stops at the diner.

Fitzgerald calls this scene a pop culture reference that, “parodies the American film icon Shirley Temple”(Fike). When reading about the children in the story, who, for a majority of the story when they speak are arguing, you may miss the small moments and references that O’Connor weaves into the short story.

There is a large portion of both story lines that are riddled with irony. In “Battle Royal” when, after the fight, the men go to collect their money, the entire situation is ironic. They had just been beaten so badly and blindly; now the earnings are given to them on an electric rug. These men are fighting each other to gather as many coins as possible. Just when they think they’ve made some money, the coins turn out to be fake. They were advertisement chips for a car dealership. This moment shows the fact that just when things were starting to look up they came crashing back down again. Another example of irony is the narrator’s speech. But throughout his speech the men heckle him about his use of larger words. The narrator says, “Whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables group of voices would yell for me to repeat it” (Ellison 185-186). The fact that his speech was so good that they invited him, but mocked him for the very reason he came is ironic.

The entire plot of “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” is situational irony at its core. The family goes out of their way to avoid their typical vacation destination because the grandmother was worried about a criminal, The Misfit, who had just escaped from a prison in Florida. Through the grandmother’s best intentions, her forgetfulness leads them onto the same road as the escaped convict. This aspect of the story in and of itself is irony. The person who is so adamant about avoiding The Misfit, is the same one who led the family to him. She is also the reason the family dies. If she had never pointed out that she recognized him, they might have

just been stranded on the side of the road but at least alive. Also, when the family finally meets the Misfit towards the end of the story, the father, who throughout a majority of the story was very passive with all the other characters is the one who stands up and tries to defend his family, which leads him to being the first member of the family to be killed. A line from a poem by Robert Burns, relates very well to this short story. The line “The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men/ Gang aft agley” (Burns). This line from *To a Mouse* was the inspiration for the book *Of Mice and Men* and is very fitting to describe “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”. The line in the poem is translated to mean plans of mice and men often go awry which is the very basis for “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”. It is the perfect summary of the overall ironic tone of the story. These two stories both show the entertaining yet upsetting sides of irony that can guide a storyline.

The use of all these different literary devices adds another layer to all the stories and allows the reader to gain more than just the plot of the story. With “Battle Royal” you are getting a deeper look into the way minorities were and are treated by society. In “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” we discover the ironies of the situation, but also the small scenes throughout and their meaning. Flannery O’Connor and Ralph Ellison both clearly show the reader the deeper meanings and subtleties in their stories with the aid of literary devices. These authors utilize the perfect combination of literary devices and their own sense of writing style. They also incorporate scenes and characters that with careful examination, add dimension to the story. With irony and symbolism they are able to add another element, in some cases sad and in others insightful. These literary devices tell a complex narrative that brings the reader into a space they have never encountered. Through the anticipation within the foreshadowing, the shock in the

irony and the surprise and intriguing nature of symbolism we are able to see that everything is not what it seems.

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