

Student Name

Professor Name

Course

Date

Mob Mentality in *A Party Down at the Square* Story

Introduction

In the short story, *A Party Down at the Square*, Ralph Ellison describes the experience of the person who, for the first time, saw the lynching process of a black man in the town square. The narrator and also the main hero from Cincinnati, Ohio, is visiting one's uncle – Uncle Ed – in the South. One day a group of people comes to say that there is a 'party' at the Square and Uncle Ed and the main character are in hurry to attend it. When they arrive at the place, it becomes clear that by the 'party', people in the town mean the execution. Although it is not clear what is the reason behind Bacote's public punishment, but as the narration proceeds, it is seen that people are quite determined to lynch him regardless of the circumstances. Indeed, despite the fact that there was a strong cyclone, the plane almost crashed on the town, and one of the local women died from electrical shock, the citizens still fulfilled their original intentions.

Ellison's story can be undoubtedly considered as a significant work that provides an accurate description of the brutal racist behavior that existed in the United States. Yet, there is also another layer that addresses human psychology in general regardless of the situation. As such, another major topic of the plot is the portrayal of how being in the crowd can affect an individual's behavior which is otherwise known as herd or mob mentality. In this regard, the current essay will firstly discuss what mob mentality is and what features are inherent to it, and secondly, analyze how being in the crowd affected the main hero's and other characters' behavior. As for the latter, it is argued that group psychology greatly affected all the group

members, causing identity delusion, inadequate emotional responses, increased sense of acceptability, and responsibility diffusion.

Mob Mentality

Psychology of the group gatherings is significantly different from individuals' reactions and behavior outside the crowd. It is not merely a sum of the parts and exhibits the new qualities that are not present on the personal level. According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the herd mentality is "the tendency of the people in a group to think and behave in ways that conform with others in the group rather than as individuals". In a similar vein, Gustave Le Bon argues that in the crowd, a person is highly susceptible to unconscious impulses and 'reasoning' (1). For this reason, the assembly of individuals can often result in behavior that can be either extraordinarily violent or unusually noble (Le Bon 210). In more detail, people in the crowds experience deindividuation and identity dilution, heightened or inadequate emotional states, increased sense of acceptability by group, and anonymity and defused sense of responsibility (Wong). The following paragraph will show that all of these psychological phenomena can be found in the story.

Herd Mentality Influence on the Characters

Identity Dilution

The first way how the mob mentality affected the crowd and the main character is by making people accept the identity of the public and abandoning personal identities. This effect is evident in the situation when Bacote asks people to be good Christians and end his sufferings by cutting his throat. However, he gets the reply, "sorry, but ain't no Christians around tonight. Ain't no Jewboys neither. We're just one hundred percent Americans" (Ellison para. 16). Indeed, being a good Christian requires personal responsibility for one's actions and promotes compassion and love. Instead, the citizens adopt another identity that allows them to treat black people as property or non-humans or what they understood as

being an American. In a similar manner, the narrator embraces the identity of the people around him who belong to Southern culture and leaves behind one's Midwest views. For this reason, the main character does not protest against the mob's behavior and remains relatively calm, at least at the beginning of the execution.

The Inadequate Emotional States

The second impact of the mob's mentality on the crowd manifests itself through the highly affected emotional state of its members. "Everybody was yelling crazy", recounts the main hero as people were anticipating the execution (Ellison para. 5). Later, when Bacote fell close to the legs of the narrator, somebody from behind pushed the latter so that the main hero almost stepped on the burning body. These two episodes showcase that people in the crowd did not only want to punish 'the criminal' but also surrendered to their instincts and let the dark sides of their personalities enjoy the suffering.

Defused Sense of Responsibility

Although people were 'lusting for blood' as the members of the collective, it is seen that when it concerns personal decisions, their behavior changes immediately. For instance, the narrator says, "one man kept goosing the nigger in his pants with the barrel of a shotgun saying he ought to pull the trigger, but he never did" (Ellison para. 1). In this case, shooting a person would require the acceptance of personal responsibility for the death of a person, even he is black. For this reason, the man never pulls the trigger and prefers to kill Bacote as a part of a group so that he will not bear the consequences of an inhumane behavior both legally and morally. Similarly, the main hero does not protest against the crowd's violence and calmly observes how Bacote burns to ashes. Therefore, these episodes colorfully portray how the mob mentality affects the sense of responsibility of each member.

Increased Sense of Acceptability by Group

Finally, the last effect of the mob mentality that is evident in the story is the increased sense of acceptability. In this regard, it is important to mention the sheriff and his deputies. Even though those people are supposed to promote the law, they still do not interfere in the process of lynching. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as the fact that they support such brutal procedures. On the other hand, it can be argued that they did not interfere as such behavior is accepted by the crowd. Nevertheless, what is important to mention is that both of these sentiments could coexist. Thus, this example yet again demonstrates the huge influence of the mob mentality on each person in the crowd.

Conclusion

In summary, the current paper analyzed how the herd mentality affected the behavior of all the people who participated in the lynching of Bacote in *A Party Down at the Square*. Firstly, it was argued that the crowd members in the story abandoned their personal identities and started identifying themselves as part of the collective. Secondly, the citizens exhibited heightened affective states, which manifested itself in increased anger and searched for violence. Moreover, the sense of responsibility was found to be diffused among the executors. For this reason, they could act in a manner that would not be affordable for each individual member. Lastly, the analysis revealed how the increased sense of responsibility in the mob could make even those eligible to protect the law desert their duty. Therefore, Ellison's story is valuable not only because it condemns racism but also because it makes the audience reflect on their own behavior as a part of the mob.

Works Cited

- Ellison, Ralph. "A Party Down at the Square." *Esquire*, 1 January 1997,
<https://classic.esquire.com/article/1997/1/1/a-party-down-at-the-square>. Accessed 5
January 2022.
- Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Edited by R. A. Nye, Routledge,
2017.
- Wong, Gayook. "The Psychology of Mob Mentality." *Psychology Today*, 24 January 2021,
[https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/facing-trauma-together/202101/the-
psychology-mob-mentality](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/facing-trauma-together/202101/the-psychology-mob-mentality). Accessed 5 January 2022.