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AP Language

Period 1

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December 14, 2011

The Journey within the Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

In the highly acclaimed, yet controversial novel, *The* *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, author James Weldon Johnson explores the “Race Question” and the separation of classes in the communal ladder which penetrates the social, political, and economical dynamics of society and is the dominating themes within the work. Johnson’s narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the whole novel, is cast between two different realms – the “white world” and the “black world”- that are colliding against each other while he is trying to determine who he is. The narrator is forced to make a life-altering decision of whether he wants to be regarded as a white man who can experience the benefits of a less pigmented skin color or be recognized as a Negro who will be discriminated and subjugated against. Unlike African-American literatures that focused on the movement from personal gain of discovery and identification to one for the public, such as Malcolm X’s *Learning to Read* andFredrick Douglass’s *Learning to Read and Write*, Johnson’s character begins with the determination of wanting to contribute to the public interest of the African Americans oppressed in the nation by embracing the Negro side of himself, but then attaches to the idea of discovery for oneself in order to enhance his own existence. Johnson utilizes the semblances of the autobiography in order to illustrate this personal journey to the egocentric philosophy he endorses as he travels from the ignorance of childhood, to the discovery of adulthood, and then finally concluding with rejection by “passing” as a white man. In doing so, the narrator’s life becomes a one-dimensional shell of the wealth and fame he is desperately in pursuit of by the means of the “ivory whiteness of [his] skin” in order to become the man he once pictured he would become in his youth. (Johnson 8)

In the first few pages of *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, Johnson creates a fictional character to embark on a lifelong journey through the trials and tribulations from a “bird’s-eyed view” of the movement from one stage of life to the next while dealing with the confusion of racism and the social order within the white and black communities. (vii) Johnson begins the novel with what little recollection the anonymous narrator of the illusory tale has of his childhood in the South. The narrator offers no evidence of having experiencing or witnessing the prejudice of being black, but instead faintly illustrates a decent upbringing. The young narrator does not distinguish the difference in color of skin in his mother or father nor paid much attention to the color of the “several people who moved in and about [the] little house” proving that the veil between whites and blacks did not exist at this early stage of life. (2) The narrator had an innocent mind and was sheltered by his mother and father- though he did not know who his father was at the time- in the slim chance that he would never know of the Negro side of himself and would mature into an educated white man. The narrator shows admiration towards the “tall man with a small, dark mustache”- later known as his father- with the gold chain and watch and recalls the memories of the moments spent with the man. (2) The encounter however offers the first evidence of the “sharp similarity between the position of the patron and the position of slave master” in a modern day situation within the novel by the approach of the narrator having to place the man’s “shiny shoes” in a particular corner and bringing him slippers when the man would visit his house. (Barnhart) (2) Later on in the novel the slave and master relationship is examined again in New York and Europe when the “millionaire” hires the narrator to play the piano for his guest and himself. The “millionaire” loans the narrator to friends for their own parties and calls on the narrator at anytime of the day to entertain him. The man in return loops a gold coin around the narrator’s neck signifying him as a type of property of the man. The pure-minded narrator is oblivious of the inferior and superior relationship between his father and himself. Moving from the naïve state of mind set of a youthful child, the young narrator and his mother move from Georgia to Connecticut, which becomes his hometown for boyhood. The mother is careful of the individuals the narrator associates with in order to ensure that he remains “white.” This sets up the ignorant theories and actions of the narrator and how he perceives the black community. She dresses him neatly and teaches him letters and figures to obtain the aspiration of seeing the narrator as a successful white man. As the boy develops in the North with his studies and musical talent on the piano, the readers begins to register that the narrator regards himself as a white boy on his own. The act of seeing himself as white is apparent “on one such afternoon” the whites taunted the black children of the class. The narrator joins in with the white children in chasing after the blacks and even uses the word “nigger” to describe the story to his mother. From the context, it appears that the narrator is following the crowd rather than understanding the situation. The narrator is able distinguish the difference in peoples’ color of skin as he has aged, and though he recognizes himself to being “white,” the narrator sets in motion the unique position of separating himself from both the “white” social classes and “black” social classes and creating his personal category on the race matter.

In the critical analysis essay *The Consequence of the Faded Color* by author Greg Armistead, examines the development of the Ex-Colored man as more of a man on the sidelines in society rather than taking actions. Armistead takes note that the narrator discusses and analyzes and criticizes, but in the end puts forth no real plans for what he states he wants to achieve. “Rather than growing as an active, acculturated member of society,” comments Armistead, “the Ex-Colored Man seems to develop more as a presumptuous commentator.” This overall idea Armistead presents to readers, is the real personality of the narrator; “action-talker not action-taker” due highly to the strong educated foundations the narrator embraces and the numerous opportunities opened up for him from placing as a top student in his mixed raced school to performing on the piano for audiences. This lack of action is revealed during several different periods throughout the narrator’s life. The most noticeable example in the piece is the narrator’s ambition to become a composer. For the duration of the young boy’s childhood, music had been his passion and “took up the greater part of [his] time,” but as years go on music begins to take a back seat in the narrator’s daily necessities. (4) The young boy transitions into the realms of adulthood and encounters world experiences in Europe along with his new found friend the “millionaire” in such places as Paris and London. Although the narrator enjoys the gaining knowledge of the world through travels, during the course of the “millionaire’s” decision to move onto Tokyo after Berlin, the narrator becomes disinterested in furthering the trip and acknowledges within the course of the relationship with the “millionaire” and the travels which he set a upon, he believes he is “wasting [his] time and abusing [his] talent” entertaining the “millionaire” so he is able to escape time. (Johnson 66) The need the work “put [him] into a fever,” but the goals the narrator sets during his last days in Europe and the rest of his life in America never were accomplished and were barely discussed after the move back to the United States. (66) The education creates an enclosed circle around the narrator to not only separate himself from fully labeling himself as “white” or “black,” but by an intellectual level such as seeing too which he perceives as a sort of “wealth” that crafts him into being a superior young boy from the individuals around himself such as Red,” a childhood classmate whom the narrator places under himself, but sees as useful “tool.” The outcome of acquiring a civilized education in the novel is such that the audience does not witness often in other African-American literature. Though the skills and crafts the Ex-Colored Man receives enlighten the child and mold him into a citizen in America rather than a mere person in a country, the schooling builds onto the uninformed boy. But unlike the naïve narrator of the South, the older narrator has lifted the veil high enough to see the different skin colors and difference in treatments between white and blacks, and yet acts wiser than his years.

While *The Autobiography* turns education into a tool to further separate social statues and establishing the blanket of ignorance the narrator clinches onto, Malcolm X’s essay *Learning to Read* on the other hand, utilizes education for the public interest instead. In his stay in prison, Malcolm X sees an opportunity to move away from being unconscious man off the street to a civilized man of the world. Malcolm X “had been the most articulated hustler [on the streets],” but had become “increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that [he] wrote.” (281) Malcolm had been isolated from the world and the issues within caused by the “homemade education” he acquired off the streets. (281) In his attempt to become a dignified man, Malcolm X starts to educate himself through books and the dictionary. He, contrasting from the Ex-Colored Man, sees the education as a way to better the African-American race for the purpose not just himself, but for the community. Malcolm believed “if the American black man will start thinking about his *human* rights, and then start thinking of himself as part of one of the world’s great peoples,” the black man may begin to amerce himself into the causes for the greater good. (289) Though both individuals employ their educational fundamentals differently, Malcolm X and the narrator understand for a flourishing existence in a judgmental and flawed world, knowledge is the overall solution.

When the days of childhood near its end as the narrator’s grammar school graduation approaches and the discovery of the young adult’s African-American race from his mother’ side comes into the spotlight, the narrator searches for a path of innovation through the perplexity of the labeling of classes and racial discrimination. At the discovery of the narrator “becoming a nigger” earlier in his school career, he showed no want to into pressing to understand and acknowledging himself as such. But in a change of events, during the narrator’s graduation ceremony, a Negro boy nicknamed “Shiny,” who was one of the few individuals the narrator became friendly with or as he quotes “created a sort of bond with” throughout the period of his high school years began the narrator’s search for answers to becoming an inspiration to the black community. The fierce confidence “Shiny” presented to the mixed audience of black and white parents as he gave an unforgettable speech appealing to the narrator’s emotional side. The narrator experienced a “leap within [him] pride that [he] was colored” and developed “wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race” (Johnson 21). This one speech leads to the young narrator to changing his perspective in life by studying numerous African-American literatures such as Alexander Dumas’s *Monte Cristo* and *The Three Guardsmen*. Along with reading Negro works, the Ex-Colored Man places black figures as his heroes including Fredrick Douglass, King David, and Robert the Bruce. The want to be a significant black person was yet another superficial action of the character to cross the lines in an alternative way to befall the riches, fame and to be remembered in history where being such was a rare occurrence.

On the road to discovery, the main character experiences his first true misfortune when is mother became sick and dies after his graduation out of high school. Giving up his baby piano from his father and his boyhood home, the narrator decides to set out with four hundred to attend Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia to explore the black South. The embankment into the South triggers a new-fangled life as these times are the first in which the narrator uncovers new skills in different fields, highs and lows in everyday life, and numerous diverse acquaints along his journey. The lows began on the way to Atlanta starting with “the farther [he] got below Washington the more disappointed [he] became in the appearance of the country” (Johnson 24).

On the narrator’s stay in a boarding house for a Negro landlord, the four hundred dollars he earned in the North was stolen from his luggage left in the room. This negative moment derailed the Ex-Colored Man’s want to attend the University believing his schooling would be unsuccessful because he knew no one nor had any money to support himself with. Again the feat promotes the personality trait of being an “action-talker” instead of “action-taker.” The narrator discusses attending the University in which his mother desired for him to enroll in, but with the minor calamity he decides life would be too hard in the South for him and hitches a ride to Jacksonville, Florida to instead, “paused undecided, for a moment; then turned and slowly retracted my steps” (Johnson 29). Evidence proves the narrator does not understand how to coop with tough situation that does not go in which he anticipates and reacts by abandoning any life he develops to resolve the hardships he comes across.

Shifting over into Jacksonville, the narrator experiences the same hardships that were shown in Atlanta. Yet in the mist of the disasters, the narrator opens up to the different cultures including the Cuban families that offer him shelter during his stay. Jacksonville supports more to the high standards of living than the poorer region of Atlanta’s Negro community does for the Ex-Colored Man. The narrator builds a career and new skills and “through [his] music teaching an [his] not absolutely irregular attendance at church.” (Johnson 34) He becomes acquainted with the best class of colored people in Jacksonville. These trials are the first in which the narrator experiences not just an elite circle, but also interacting with the Negro community and begin accepted without questions. The Ex-Colored Man believes his new Negro acquaintances were “truly great people” and viewed the history and work black individuals provided to America as “lamentable as it is violent” (Johnson 35). The character stands up for the lost voice of the black people describing the Southern whites as “narrow minded” and giving the Northern whites limited credit in their reactions to the “ race question” (Johnson 35). The circumstance in Jacksonville however, leads to the narrator to discover more freedom and exposure than in his hometown. With the advancement in his job and high-end status received by being associated with the upper-class blacks, the narrator becomes irresponsible man wasting away what money he earns at the factoring which he exploit to the reason for not attempting to reenter Atlanta University. The cause for the exile of furthering schooling could be placed a upon that the narrator had an civilized education, a good paying job, and an elevated status and had no motivation to move back to the poor, uncivilized country of Georgia which obstructs his expectations of a “luxuriant semi-tropical scenery which [he] had pictured in [his] mind” (Johnson 24). After the cigar factory shut down in Jacksonville, the narrator again decided there was nonentity left for him in Florida and follows the crowd of men looking for work to New York City, New York for a new beginning.

New York City offers the adventure of being a Negro which the narrator was unable to understand in Georgia or Jacksonville. However, the narrator pays more attention to the busy, glamorous city rather than the black community within. The Ex-Colored Man views New York as “a place where there was lots of money and not much difficulty in getting it” (Johnson 51). Johnson focuses the character on the quick schemes of fame and success and though examines and discusses the few Negros pointed out to the narrator; he does not acknowledge anyone on a personal level and only mentions that the narrator “during [his] entire stay in this city [he] did not become acquainted with a single respectable family” (Johnson 53). The main concern of the character is to make a name for him with connections to high people in high places. And not only does the narrator focus on the wealth he possibly could earn in New York, he yet again, does not follow through the plans he set forth in Jacksonville. The reason for the journey to New York was due to the cigar factory shutting down and New York gave him the Ex-Colored Man opportunity to find a new job, but instead gambling addiction overturns the search for jobs in the city. Between the gambling and the “Club” which acts as a hangout spot, the “true colors” of the narrator’s artificial goals of becoming an “inspiration” for the black people are underline. At this point in the novel, the travel to New York acts as a type of milestone for the character through music. During the childhood years the narrator focal point was on the classical genre and composers. Performances angled over the “white” music in which he was taught to play. The classical music represented structure and a cultivated life in Connecticut when the boy believed he was pure white and saw the world in black and white not needing to ask any questions on race and class order. In New York, the center of attention changes to a new exposure of music called ragtime which had “barbaric harmonies” and “abrupt jump from ones key to another” the narrator had never witnessed before. (Johnson 46). Ragtime symbolized a freer time was a young man on a search of life discovery trying to blend into the “black world.” The nights in New York allows the narrator to gamble and drink, hold down no jobs or ties, and mingle around the “Club” at the narrator’s choosing. The music is less constructed and allows for improvising according to the feelings of the player and the mood of the environment. Johnson’s use of the two different types of music “meditate on the political valence of two different forms of time” to represent the different stages and perspectives the narrator experiences from a white boy from Connecticut to whom the readers distinguish now as the black man traveling around seeking to identify himself. (Barnhart)

Throughout the narrator’s travels it is safe to say he never understands the full realms of the black community. The narrator on no accounts was discriminated against on the color of his skin. He was never questioned when surrounded around Negros about the “ivory whiteness of [his] skin” or about his upbringing. (8) No whites question the narrator due to his skin and educational level. “The Ex-Colored Man receives only a fleeting taste of both worlds; he is never fully assimilated into either realm,” criticizes Armistead. The narrator may peer and have a glimpse of being white or being black, but in the end has no real ties to any of the races.

In the course of the European trips the narrator accepts with the “millionaire” after his stay in New York, the narrator realizes accompanying the “millionaire” to service him his musical talents in order for the “millionaire” to escape time was a “waste” of the musical works the narrator could accomplish. By over viewing the goals the Ex-Colored Man desired to accomplish, “[he] made up [his] mind to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in [his] inspiration first-hand” (Johnson 66). On the return to the United States, the narrator sees himself as a “true” black man now because of the travels and experiences he encounters through the years of discovery. Initially, the Ex-Colored Man is still fascinated by the black race, more importantly, the respectable and wealthy families such as the black physician he congregated on the boat back over to the States. But even in the course of convening and unearthing the black community during his young adulthood and aspiring to become a motivating Negro, throughout the novel the narrator does not place himself into any social class. He uses phrases such as “the Negros” or “the white people” and always using word choices including “they” or “them;” to disassociate the character from identifying himself. The narrator views himself as a superior being, not even willing to place himself into the third social class he personally labels as the elite group, yet is determined to convey connections to the black people within the class for own self gain.

These feelings of belonging however, do not last long. Nearing the conclusion of the novel the narrator finally expresses the want to being classed as a “white man.” The narrator is willing to “pass as white” in order to avoid the harsh actions towards having Negro blood, whether just a drop or a full lineage. The now much older Ex-Colored Man observes being black not as a race, but a type of “brand” which he does not want to place on his children. During his marriage to a white woman, the narrator is afraid to discuss his race to his wife, fearing that she would discover he was not a pure white man. After the death Ex-Colored Man’s wife the narrator “no longer has the same fear for [himself] of [his]” about being a Negro “being found out.” (Johnson 99). The narrator “gradually dropped out of social life” and immediately switches to recognizing himself as a “white man” again. Ironically the narrator states “[he] was an ordinarily successful white man” who had made very little money or a true social life as a white man. (Johnson 99). The man gives up everything remotely relating to tying him into the black community such as abandoning the piano in order to cross color lines into the “white” world were paradoxically enough was how the narrator was introduced to his future wife. He channels the reasoning for leaving behind the “black world” for the “white world” to protect his children. Johnson is not the only author to inscribe about discovering their race and rejecting black and white perspectives the world gives to people. In *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, author Zora Neale Hurston “remembers the very day that [she] became colored” (207). Like the Ex-Colored Man, Zora is sent to “discover” the colored side of herself as a little girl when the” race question” was answered on the surface. Both characters are declined to identifying with a race because “at certain times I have no race, I am *me*” (209). But the narrator and Zora realize they are part of a race to please the expectations of the world. And though each character employs music as a means of escape and a way to connect with other people not based on race, both characters react differently to learning about their races. Zora is more calm and sees herself as “not tragically colored” and “[does] not weep at the world- [she] is too busy sharpening my oyster knife” while the Ex-Colored Man ultimately rejects the African-American race. (208) The narrator nevertheless, has an outlook of the situation as have “[choosing] the lesser part, that [he] had sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage” (Johnson 100). And thus, the narrator is able to lead a superficial livelihood in order to infuse himself into the wealth and acceptable fame that the world of the elite white circle which the narrator believes could not be achieved by taking the degrading title as a “nigger.”

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is not just a fictional novel of a confused man, but also the tale of the journey and stages many individuals experience in their life. The Ex-Colored Man searches for answers to the white and black race and where he belongs in the “big picture.” While the narrator’s original intentions to be an inspirational figure for the oppressed African Americans may have been true, throughout the years it becomes impossible to develop a strong black self because he himself devalues their existence, going so far as to brand them "creatures." (Armistead 477) The narrator is unable to “bond at its purest level” within the African-American culture and thus turns to the only social experience he has any familiar ties to- the white race “to improve his own situation.” The voyage of “the boy seeking this visible evidence of his identity - a sign or mark which might brand him indisputably as either black or white” ends as the narrator “is left out of the racial equation” and brands himself as the man without a race, the Ex-Colored Man. (Sheehy) (Armistead)

Work Citied

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