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## The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man: A Critical Discussion

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### ABSTRACT

It was distinguished in many ways by a decline in the status of black people in both the South and the North. Even yet, the South's submission to racism and the Jim Crow code of discrimination, which commenced in the 1890s, perpetuated unabatedly until well into the dejection years, despite some paramount achievements gained by the Negro community, concretely in the latter part of this decennium. E. DuBois and their adherents, at least until 1915. These years roughly correspond to James Weldon Johnson's adult life. Johnson was an atypically gifted and adaptable individual; ergo his issues and solutions were indubitably not entirely average. However, in some ways, both his personal life and the type of leadership he gave show the struggles the Negro people faced as well as the astringent restrictions on the solutions that might be habituated to surmount those struggles. The *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is the work written by an African-American writer James Weldon Johnson in the early 20th century when racism was considered the norm in the New World. The novel is a vivid reflection of the idea of the struggle for equality and the attempts of the African-American population of the 20th century to achieve complete freedom and recognition in the society. The narration in the book is from the first person, and the main character is an African-American guy born in the state of Georgia after the Civil War. From the very beginning, the character tells readers that he is going to present a great mystery, saying: "I am divulging the great secret of my life" (Johnson 1).

Keywords- Realism, Harlem Renaissance, Black literature, African American, Black prosperity.

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### About the Author

Jacksonville, Florida, was the birthplace of James Weldon Johnson. In the first a moiety of the 20th century, he made a denomination for himself both as an inscriber and as a bellwether in the civil rights kineticism. With his gifted poetry and novels like *God's Trombones* (1927) and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Johnson raised the bar for artistry and realism in Black writing (1912). His groundbreaking research on Black literature, music, and theatre in the 1920s made many white Americans cognizant of the deep African American ingenious energy, which was anteriorly mostly represented through dialect poetry and minstrel show distortions. Johnson oversaw the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1920s and oversaw tenacious civil rights campaigns to dispense the gregarious, political, and licit barriers impeding Black prosperity. He is regarded as the first "modern" African American and one of the founding members of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson had the advantage of a unique upbringing. His family engendered a welcoming and astutely enlightening household. His father worked as the headwaiter at the St. James Hotel and was a native of New York. The Johnson family grew habituated with an aristocratic way of life as spectators since the St. James was a haven for affluent travellers. Stephen Dillet, the city of Nassau's postmaster, was the father of Johnson's mother.

He was appointed U.S. consul by President Theodore Roosevelt to Puerto Cabello, Venezuela, in 1906. In 1909, he peregrinated to Corinto, Nicaragua, where he accommodated as consul until 1914. Later, he lectured at Fisk University. His groundbreaking accumulation of *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and volumes of *American Negro Spirituals* (1925, 1926), both indited in partnership with his brother, came after *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917). Some of the most insightful evaluations of ebony contributions to American culture have ever been given can be found in Johnson's preludes to his anthologies. The 1933 book *Along This Way* is an autobiography.

For American Negroes, the years roughly between the 1890s and the 1930s were astronomically endeavoring. It was distinguished in many ways by a decline in the status of black people in both the South and the North. Even yet, the South's submission to racism and the Jim Crow code of discrimination, which commenced in the 1890s, perpetuated unabatedly until well into the dejection years, despite some paramount achievements gained by the Negro community, concretely in the latter part of this decennium. These circumstances imposed rigorous demands on the Negro leadership, which was split acerbically between Booker T. Washington and W. E. DuBois and their adherents, at least until 1915. These years roughly correspond to James Weldon Johnson's adult life. Johnson was born in 1871 and died in 1938. Studying his vocation provides paramount understanding of the time and how it affected a certain Negro. Johnson was an atypically gifted and adaptable individual; ergo his issues and solutions were indubitably not entirely average. However, in some ways, both his personal life and the type of leadership he gave show the struggles the Negro people faced as well as the astringent restrictions on the solutions that might be habituated to surmount those struggles.

James Weldon Johnson indited *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in the early 20th century, a time when racism was still visually perceived as the norm in the New World. Despite the denomination, the author acknowledged that this book was primarily fiction and not autobiographical.

Nevertheless, Johnson drew some details from his own experience for the book.

Maybe that's why it was indited under a pseudonym, and the author didn't come forward with his identity until long later. He did it out of concern for his safety since he mentally conceived that such a subject may negatively impact his vocation. The battle for equipollence and the African-American population's efforts to gain consummate liberation and convivial acceptance are vividly reflected in the novel. Johnson probably was inspired to engender this book after visually examining the actions of many of his peers. It was an astronomically immense prosperity and perpetuates to be in high demand among readers and upbraiders today.

James Weldon Johnson's work *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man*, which is presented as an autobiography, details the journeys of a fair-skinned African American. In search of a feeling of belonging and community, an African American treks through both the United States and later through Europe. The conflict between his occasionally expressed desire to assume the role of the gifted tenth and devote his life to serving the African American community and his more persistent and recurring desire to ensure his own comfort level and financial stability is a major factor in his indecision about the meaning of his life. He believes he has discovered his vocation when, after visiting Europe, he returns to the United States to write classical music based on negro themes. However, he loses interest in this choice quickly. When he returns to the United States, he sees a lynching, which has such a severe psychological impact on him that it causes him to run to "whiteness"; he decides to pass for white, prioritizing his own financial and psychological well-being over any wider societal goals.

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## Summary of the Novel

Johnson begins the book with what is ostensibly a Preface from the publishers. They guarantee that the subsequent effort will reveal the inner lives of Black people, particularly those who pass, for the first time.

The narrator discusses his formative years. He lives with his mother and a father who only occasionally visits in a cottage during the early part of that existence in Georgia. When the narrator's white father sends him and his mother to live in Connecticut, his life is drastically changed. At this time, his father only occasionally makes an appearance, including one final awkward visit when the narrator is a teenager.

The narrator believes he is white from an early age because of his fair skin. One day, after the principal asked the white pupils to rise, a teacher asked him to sit down, and that is when he realised his race. The narrator has challenges as a result of his new identity, particularly as he becomes aware of how his white peers and the school view Black pupils in comparison to white students.

As the narrator enters his teenage years, he grows increasingly conscious of bias. Additionally, he is recognized by the general public for his musical talent, particularly on the piano, and he decides to pursue music as a major in college. Although the passing of his mother delays these intentions, the narrator is still able to earn enough money to cover a couple years of tuition at Atlanta University in Georgia. As he makes his way to Atlanta, his ignorance causes the loss of his tuition funds, forcing him to turn around and head to Jacksonville in quest of employment that will enable him to save money for college.

Once in Jacksonville, the narrator begins work at an entry-level position in a factory that makes cigars and eventually works his way up to reader (tasked with reading out loud to his peers). As he teaches music in the community, he broadens his horizons, learns about honourable Black people, and is exposed to popular Black dance and music. His fascination with the music leads him to conclude that bringing it up to the level of classical Western music will be his life's work.

To understand more about this music, the narrator relocates to New York. He develops his proficiency in ragtime, the forerunner of jazz music, and launches his endeavour to transform classical music into ragtime. He eventually starts performing at parties for an enigmatic white millionaire after some rough days as a gambler. One night, the narrator is almost killed by the jealous lover of a woman he knows, but his wealthy patron saves him. As his servant, the wealthy takes the narrator to Europe.

The wealthy in Europe pays the narrator a large salary and provides him plenty of free time to immerse himself in European music, art, and culture. He visits and makes his homes in Berlin, London, and France. Little overt bias is experienced by the narrator. The narrator decides to return home after understanding the possibilities of ragtime in the realm of classical music and running into his father and half-sister at the opera. The composition of classical Black music, which will compel Americans to acknowledge the depth of Black American musical culture, will be his greatest gift to Black culture.

On the way home, the narrator has a chance encounter with a well-known Black physician that introduces him to middle-class and wealthy Black individuals in places like Washington, D.C., Richmond, and Nashville. The narrator decides to leave these locations and head to the Deep South to learn more about the musical traditions that first inspired him. But one night, the narrator sees a Black guy being lynched in a Georgian little town. Following this horrific incident, the narrator starts to pass first passively and then actively to advance in the economic sphere.

The narrator achieves financial success by diligently saving and investing in real estate. He has a white girlfriend. When he discloses his racial history, the two break up, but love enables them to get back together and get married. They had two kids, but his wife passes away while giving birth. In the novel's epilogue, the narrator says that he has persisted in passing because of his children, but he occasionally questions whether his pursuit of affluence has been worth sacrificing his culture and racial identity.

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## Character Curiosities in the Novel

The main character of the book, an African-American man born in the state of Georgia following the Civil War, is narrated in the first person. The protagonist states right away that he will be presenting a paramount enigma, verbalizing: "I am exposing the major secret of my life" (Johnson 1). But his zealotness to apportion his insights and experiences outweighed his solicitousness, so he made the decision to commence telling his tale at the very beginning of his life.

The boy didn't have a father and lived with his mother. The only item the boy's father had left for him was a coin with an aperture in the middle, which the character wore around his neck all of his life. The narrator only vaguely recollected his father's appearance, saying that "I still possess it." (Johnson

2). He acknowledged that he scarcely knew his father; he only met him a few times because he resided in New York, and each time he was affrighted of the peculiar man who made the narrator feel inelegant. The man recollected his mother as a diligent worker who marginally paid other local women a visit. However, he marked that "there were a great many ladies coming to our cottage" (Johnson 3).

It was a known fact that his mother was an adept seamstress, and neighbours frequently sought them out. The character recalled that his mother had dressed him orderly, taken care of his manners, and raised him in accordance with traditional gentlemanly values. The fact that this man ineluctably grew up well-bred and inculcated enough to develop his opinions congruously may have been affected by this. His mother was his first music instructor and fostered an ardency of the performing arts in him. She had an aptitude for playing the piano, and when her son aurally perceived her, he sought to emulate her. The boy's mother was the one who persuaded him that heedfully aurally perceiving music was consequential.

His mother sent him to a public school where he met many people and first became vigilant of his differences from many other pupils after studying for several years in a private school with a superb edifier. He met a different boy there that he called "Red Head." They became friends right away because they felt "a simultaneous mutual attraction," the narrator recalled (Johnson 5). The guy recounted that his class had included a couple of extra "coloured" kids, and that it was at a different school that he first discovered about the prejudice that some of the neighbourhood kids had for African-Americans.

Mother was the one who gave him the implements he needed to deal with difficulties and explicated what vigor of character and perseverance denoted. When she learned that her son was being tormented at school, she became quite doleful. The narrator never forgot his mother or the edifications she imparted to him. This mother-son bond may have influenced the development of the adolescent guy into a thoughtful and polite adult.

Throughout the entire novel, the narrator perpetually highlights the affection he had for his mother. He witnessed his mother's final moments and was by her side when she passed away. He was in excruciating discomfort and had no conception what to do. He never forgot his beloved mother, despite the fact that his anguish ultimately faded.

The coin that the protagonist's father gave him as they parted ways might not only be a mundane charm that people wear around their necks. The connection between the currency and the alleged slavish stigma, when captives wore distinguishing emblems, may have been the author's intention. The author might have connected this object with slavery because the narrator wore it his entire life.

Johnson probably wouldn't have given this much thought if it hadn't had a subtext. Because of this, the coin was thought of as a gift when it was first received, but it ineluctably caused the man to feel despondent and dispirited about his gregarious situation.

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### Characteristics of the Narrator's Life Perspective

Albeit the author intended readers to surmise that his novel was predicated on his autobiography, he merely replicated this style of inscribing by employing opportune language and inditing strategies. As a result, for instance, the character did not view himself as extraordinary from an early age; he lived in a society where he was not under pressure.

Later, when he commenced attending school, he commenced to experience inequality and was concerned as a result. The narrator assured himself that everything was going well in his life after graduating from college and his mother's passing, integrating "I am fit for the first time with mother's death" (Johnson 43).

The conclusion of inculcation and, consequently, the resolution of issues, engendered such ecstasy. The man later realised, however, that the conceptions that his mother had instilled in him had very little in prevalence with the authenticity around him.

The main character visually examined that there were classes in society, and this was veritable regardless of skin tone. He believed that there were some who loathed others and those who authentically didn't give a damn.

For instance, the narrator mentioned that one of the black classes detested "everything covered by a white skin" (Johnson 56). There were, however, individuals who did not vilipend people of other races. They were more sophisticated and edified in his ocular perceivers.

The man's decision to peregrinate to New York brought the first part of the narrative to a cessation. One of the key factors in the narrator's decision to migrate to the North was the closure of the factory where he worked. He was vigilant that it was challenging for a black adolescent man to gain trust, but he made every effort to demonstrate his parity and capacity as a contributing part of society. Black males found it arduous to advance in society, and the main character frequently witnessed instances of such discrimination.

Black males found it arduous to advance in society, and the main character frequently witnessed instances of such discrimination. Because white people did not regard him and those like him as conventional members of their society, he was vigilant that they could not be trusted. Thus, the man's cull to depart for New York did not harm him; rather, it offered him hope.

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### Comparisons Based on Race

As anon as the protagonist arrived in New York, the second a moiety of the narrative commenced. He acknowledged his interest with it and his inability to resist its allure. But the narrator didn't stop repining about his nation and its regime. He had travelled everywhere, even to Europe, but no matter where he endeavored to demonstrate his musical aptitude, he was unsuccessful. The author, an African-American who had grown up and lived his adult life in a challenging time, was vigilant of all the struggles that "coloured" people, as he termed them, faced. He realized that his race obviated him from realizing all of his potential and from establishing his citizenship in the ocular perceivers of society.

Bassam M. Al-Shraah states:

People of color were to be considered as colonized subjects because of the oppression they underwent by the same Eurocentric mentality that colonized huge parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. People of color were used and abused for the welfare of the white race. So does the peoples of the colonies and their raw materials and fortunes that built what is dubbed as the civilized Europe, or the West that was built upon the pains and traumas of non-whites. "*In The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*," both the narrator (by his millionaire patron) and his mother (by her aristocratic lover) were treated as pawns to relieve the ennui or further the designs of the white world ...,"

asserts Houston Baker. Then we see that the narrator's ambivalent identity is like the hybrid identity of the colonized people who are torn between two worlds, theirs and the world of their colonizers. This bifurcation in identity and psychology is grave enough to compel people to choose one identity over another—to escape the bitter reality. However, this flight only lands them in illusionary realm where they live in pain and trauma for the white world and its allure will never wipe out their genuine identity. (Al-Shraah, p 3)

He perceived bias even in the "Club," where there were many persons of race. The man took pleasure in watching the guests at this location observe and inquire about his piano playing (Johnson 87). However, the narrator regretted how the white guy nearby treated him and other members of his race with contempt. Even the sound of their names, he claimed, "even the sound of their names expresses a certain racial difference" (Johnson 99). Thus, the theme of racial discrimination serves as the foundation for the entire work and serves to accurately portray America in the early 20th century.

The Ex-colored guy studiously avoids all allusions to African Americans or racial prejudice in favour of exploring other white European cultures, such as the high culture of the opera or the low culture of a white British pub. To his dismay, racial references yet persistently pursue him. Did they actually burn a man alive in the United States?, one young man from Luxemburg asks abruptly "in a tone of voice which indicated that he expected an authoritative repudiation of a terrible rumour" Johnson, a former coloured man (99–100). The Ex-Colored Man is dumbfounded and unsure of how to react. He doesn't want to think about such a thing while on a white man's tour of Europe. (Bombergen)

The narrator expressed his shame at being a part of such a society and lamented the inaction of the nation with a developed democracy in ensuring the equality of all its residents (Johnson 137). This reality undoubtedly alarmed the book's author, who frequently brought up faulty beliefs and incorrect ideals in his writings. It is no secret that many American classics took this stance; still, Johnson's book is among the most striking instances of conveying a widespread notion.

### **The Idea of Happiness**

The main character went to Europe and visited several of its key cities, but he did not get the respect he desired. When he landed in the Old World, he had ambitious intentions to become a well-known American musician (Johnson 101). The narrator eventually made it back to the USA, where he encountered further challenges and inconveniences. He recalled the positive emotions and pleasurable experiences he experienced while he was in love. He reflected on that time in his life by saying, "I could never have believed that life held such happiness" (Johnson 146). Perhaps the character's true happiness would come from having the chance to be accepted by others and from being able to act and speak with others on an equal footing without encountering any moral difficulties.

The narrator, who is already an adult, stated at the book's conclusion that it was difficult for him to comprehend who he was. The character said, "It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world," (Johnson 152). He found it difficult to draw a conclusion, but when he considered his life, he saw that it had a lot of positive aspects. The narrator expressed in the book's conclusion that he could not comprehend why the character played such a significant role in his life, even though the character was no longer a young man in action.

As a result, the author's inditing style and understanding of the issue facing African-Americans in society mainly accord with those of his peers. The book turned becomes one of the most graphic depictions of the phrenic conceptions and feelings of a person with little personal liberation in society. The book contains many symbolic and very applicable conceptions, and readers will indubitably learn a lot from it.

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