

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man Study Guide

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man by James Weldon Johnson

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Summary

The *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was first published anonymously in 1912, which made it appear an authentic autobiography. It is, in fact, a fictitious work by James Weldon Johnson, a writer, musician, and activist. The novel was published again in 1927 under the author's own name. While the unnamed narrator, the ex-colored man, shares some characteristics with Johnson, it is not representative of the author's life. The novel remains one of Johnson's most influential works.

The narrator starts his story during his childhood with his mom and occasional visits by a White gentleman in Georgia. For reasons unknown to him until years later, his mom moves them to Connecticut where he lives a comfortable existence, attending school and reading and playing music in his spare time. At school the boy excels in his studies but doesn't have many friends other than his best friend "Red," nicknamed for his red hair. One fateful day in school, the principal comes in to his classroom and asks the White students to stand. When the narrator stands, the principal tells him to sit down and stand when the Black students are asked to. The narrator is shocked by the realization he is part Black, even though other students said they already knew. This makes it more difficult for him to make friends because now he is unsure with whom he should associate. "Red" stays his best friend, unconcerned about race.

Even though his mother confirms the narrator's mixed race, she doesn't mention who his father is until his father visits them in Connecticut a few years later. He is the same gentleman visitor from the boy's childhood in Georgia. The boy learns that while his father loved his mother, he chose to marry a White woman, feeling constrained by social pressures of the time. The boy sees his father only once more in his lifetime.

While the boy is in high school, his mother gets sick and dies. Because his college fund is used to pay for her medical bills, he decides to go to affordable Atlanta University. He also hopes to learn about Southern Black culture there. The day after he arrives, his college savings are stolen and, out of shame, the young man leaves for Jacksonville, Florida, where he can make his last few dollars stretch and find a job. He stays in Jacksonville for three years as a cigar roller and enjoys his time there. He is about to settle down and get married when the factory closes and he follows some co-workers to New York instead to find work.

The narrator is introduced to gambling houses and music clubs upon arriving and immediately becomes addicted to both. He nearly loses all of his money through gambling when he gives it up and gets a job as a piano player at the club he frequents. It was at that club he first heard ragtime and subsequently decides to devote himself to playing this original Black music.

When a murder occurs at the club at which he works and the young man fears he may be murdered too, he runs away and is saved by one of the club's wealthy White patrons when he asks the narrator to accompany him to Europe where he can play piano at the patron's parties. They leave immediately for Europe and stay there several years,



becoming good friends. When, at a party full of musicians, the narrator becomes inspired again to play and popularize ragtime, thereby bringing pride to the Black race, he tells his wealthy friend he needs to live this life of comfort to fulfill his dreams.

When the man arrives in the South, he listens to many sermons and spirituals in the church, developing material for his future song compositions. As soon as he is about to start writing, he witnesses the public burning of a Black man. At that point, he immediately relinquishes his dreams to bring glory to his race by writing and playing Black music. He moves to New York where he changes his name and his appearance and spends the rest of his life as a well-to-do White man, with a wife and two children. At the end of the novel, the narrator acknowledges the tough decision he made. While he doesn't regret his choice, he also admits he gave up his life's ambitions and a large part of his heritage to become "a successful white man who has made a little money."



Chapter 1

Summary

The narrator introduces himself explaining he's about to reveal a secret even though it could prove harmful. He recounts his early years, beginning with his earliest memories in Georgia shortly after the Civil War ended. He recalls the many details of his childhood home but only remembers two people: his mom and a friendly, well-dressed gentleman visitor. He and his mom moved to Connecticut, away from the gentleman. He remembers seeing his mother cry the last time they see the man.

In Connecticut, the young boy displays talents for music and reading. He is enrolled in public school at age nine. At school, the boy quickly befriends a boy nicknamed "Red Head" and another named "Shiny" because his black face looks polished.

One day, the principal walks into class and asks all the White students to stand. The narrator stands, but is told to sit down and stand with the Black students. Shocked, he remains seated, thinking for the first time about the color of his skin. He goes home and asks his mother what color he is. She confirms his suspicion that he is not "White" and neither is she.

Analysis

The narrator spends most of Chapter 1 recounting fond memories of a generally stable, loving childhood. He recalls some unpleasant times, but nothing remarkable. In fact, it is his ordinary-seeming childhood that is so extraordinary considering he doesn't think to ask about either his father or his skin color until he's nine years old. The importance of his skin color is somewhat lessened by his move from the South to New England, but his utter lack of knowledge about his racial ancestry suggests a purposeful avoidance of the topic by his mother.

Vocabulary

denouement, tact, staunch, promiscuously, doggedly, snicker, scholar, punctuality, misconduct, stupor, chasm, divulging, diabolical, indelibly, rank, laboriously, steamer, aristocrat, tempo, irrepressible, crooning, clef, invariably, savages, maneuvering



Chapter 2

Summary

The narrator comments on the long-lasting effect that fateful day in school had on his life. From then on, he had to choose his actions and words carefully, knowing he'd be judged differently as a Black person. Because he no longer feels any connection to either the White or Black students, he keeps to himself mostly. As a result he reads and plays music even more than he did before and becomes an expert musician.

He even begins to play a duet— something he normally avoids — with a violinist who becomes his first crush. One day, as he is hurrying to practice with her, he stops at home to eat and is stunned to discover the same well-dressed gentleman from his past in his house. His mother introduces the man as the boy's father.

Unaware of how to react, the narrator stands mute, staring at the gentleman. To break the tension, the mother suggests he play piano for his father. When he finishes, he reminds his mother he needs to go to practice. When he leaves, his father promises he'll see him again.

Analysis

Chapter 2 spans about two to three years of the boy's life, approximately between ages nine and twelve. As a result of the distinction of his color made at school, he feels an outsider to both the White and Black students. However, "Red" and he remain good friends. His friend's name is ironic because it, like the narrator, is neither White nor Black.

In this chapter the narrator experiences two significant encounters, which could transition him from adolescent to young man: a brief reunion with his father and the development of his first crush.

Vocabulary

minstrel, subjective, objective, swelling, inexhaustible, tribulations, prodigy, cadences, mannerisms, affectations, hysteria, conspired, compunction, fib, impetuous, reverie, incarnation, rhapsody, obliterated, melodramatic, climax, tableau, trite, vanity, ramified.



Chapter 3

Summary

A few weeks after his father's visit, a new, upright piano is delivered to the house. His mother tells him it is a present from his father.

As he gets older, he becomes more interested in what he refers to as his and his mother's "position" in, and relation to, the world. He starts reading books on U.S. history and newspapers, but nothing helps answer his questions except for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His increasing interest in his cultural legacy spurs honest and telling conversations with his mother about the South, her background, and his father's. He learns his father was about to be married to a young rich Southern woman when his mother and he moved to Connecticut. Even though the boy's father kept his interracial affair with his mother and the birth of their son a secret, the boy's mother refuses to believe his father was anything less than a pure gentleman who was constrained by society.

The narrator graduates from grammar school and the ceremonies, particularly his friend "Shiny's" graduation speech, move him deeply. As he watches the puny "Shiny" recite Wendell Phillips's "Toussaint L'Ouverture," the young speaker reminds the narrator of a gladiator, tossed into an arena to prove his worth and, to a greater extent, the worth of his race. This event marks the first time the narrator feels proud to be Black. He becomes very enthusiastic about becoming a famous "colored" man and bringing pride to his race as "Shiny" did for him.

The narrator progresses through high school, continuing his music and reading, especially literature about Black men. During this time, the boy's mother falls ill, depleting his college fund to treat her illness. He teaches piano to earn his own college funds. The narrator contemplates going to Harvard, Yale, or Atlanta University.

As the boy's mother's health rapidly declines, she tries repeatedly to reach his father, but never gets a response. Bedridden, she is completely reliant on her son and her caretakers. One night, when a neighbor is watching over his mother while the boy rests, the neighbor calls the boy to hurry to his mom's room. Kneeling at her bedside, the boy watches his mother die. He describes this as one of "two sacred sorrows of my life." The chapter ends with his boarding a train for the South.

Analysis

Chapter 3 spans the boy's life from approximately ages 12 to 17 or 18. As he matures, he seeks to understand what it means to be Black. Of all the books and newspapers he reads, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in its portrayals of various types of Black and White people, is most helpful to him. His attraction to this story, along with those of King David, Robert the Bruce, and Frederick Douglass, suggests an interest in heroic, underdog figures. His friend "Shiny" could fit this description as he summons all of the power in his slight



body to deliver a mighty speech about the leader of the Haitian revolution. As the narrator learns more about Black history and the accomplishments of Blacks, he begins to identify for the first time as a Black person. Through identifying himself as a Black person, he sees the possibility of becoming a very famous, accomplished Black person, perhaps more famous and accomplished than he could be if he identified with Whites. The narrator decides to attend college in the state he was born to reconnect with his Black heritage.

Vocabulary

sinews, impetuous, unsanctioned, aspiration, gladiator, orator, rhetorical, bombastic, phenomenon, gallantly, imparted, feasible, remedies, prominent, sundry, diminish, countenance, rake, exploited, patronize, avenged, capital, yielded, affectation, elocutionary



Chapter 4

Summary

The narrator, now 17, takes the train to Georgia and is disheartened by the less refined, more primitive and dirty look of the South as compared to Connecticut. On the train, he meets a young porter who refers him to a boarding house where he can stay a few nights before school begins. Both the house and the proprietor are similarly dingy which the narrator finds distasteful.

The porter leads them to get dinner that evening. As they walk through the streets of Atlanta, the narrator sees for the first time Black people in large numbers. The porter informs him these groups are of the lower classes. Disgusted by nearly every characteristic of this group, the narrator finds only their dialect interesting. He is impressed by their unrestrained laughter and voices, believing their humor is what saved them from going “the way of the Indian.”

The next morning, the young man and the porter get breakfast together. The meal is delicious traditional Southern cooking, giving the narrator his first enjoyable experience of Southern life. Through talking with the other patrons, he discovers the school term begins that day.

After saying goodbye to the porter, he hurries to Atlanta University, which feels more like home to him than the rest of the city. He meets with the President who welcomes him warmly, saying he could have stayed at the University as soon as he arrived and urges him to bring his trunk to the school. In fact, everyone he meets at the school is very hospitable. Soon after, a general assembly is held. The narrator doesn't pay as much attention to the principal's welcoming speech as he does to the make-up of the all-Black student population. There are many different shades of “Black” and quite a few stand out as intelligent and good-looking, both men and women.

When the assembly ends, he heads back to the boarding house to retrieve his trunk. When he gets to his room, he discovers his locked trunk has been broken into and his money has been stolen. The boy's first instinct is to return to the University where he thinks the affable president will help him. As he hurries to the school for the second time that day, he begins to worry he'll come across as an impostor or beggar and that he has no right to bother the school staff with problems caused by his own carelessness. Out of shame and embarrassment, the boy turns around and heads back to the boarding house. There, he meets a different porter who shared the room with him and lends him a sympathetic ear. He suggests the boy leave Atlanta for another town where he can stretch his last few dollars. He decides to travel to Jacksonville, Florida.



Analysis

With a few exceptions, the narrator is disappointed by his first encounter with the South. He is unaccustomed to both poverty and large numbers of Blacks. However, he has a completely different experience on the grounds of Atlanta University. For someone who is trying to reconcile his identity as a “Negro” with his strong sense of propriety, the student population at Atlanta University provides the narrator a much-needed feeling of belonging, especially after his mother’s death. This is an even more welcome relief when compared to the rest of the city’s Black population, which nearly repulses the young man. However, his sense of propriety may have hurt him when he cannot bring himself to ask for help from the university staff after his money is stolen. His sense of shame is so great he would rather abandon his college plans altogether than risk disapproval from the admirable staff and students.

Vocabulary

luxuriant, thoroughfares, lay-over, Adonis, reared, thronged, unkempt, gait, dialect, exclamatory, droll, salvation, notion, minced, greenbacks, scrupulously, capacious, hominy, cordial, profane, lurch, retraced, impostor, patriarchal.

Chapter 5

Summary

The narrator arrives in Jacksonville and finds a clean, tidy home run by a husband and wife. Walking through Jacksonville, he quickly discovers how much more he likes it than Atlanta. He asks his landlady about getting work in the area. Her husband, a Cuban who works at the nearby cigar factory, suggests he get a job at the factory stripping the stems from tobacco leaves. The next morning he starts work at the factory. Having the deft fingers of a musician, he excels at his work and is quickly promoted to cigar-roller. Surrounded by Spanish speakers, the narrator also picks up the language with the same ease he learned music and reading. Through his studies he becomes so well-versed in the language he gets selected to be “reader,” the person who reads the news and any other printed material to the rest of the factory workers. With these promotions at work, he makes enough money he no longer has to bother finding music students. He does, however, keep practicing piano and performs occasionally.

After becoming acquainted with what he considers “the best class of colored people in Jacksonville,” he feels he has finally become Black. Through this experience and many observations, he comprehends the struggle between the races in the South more fully. He notes the struggle itself is different in different periods. The first part of the struggle was for Black men to be recognized as humans with souls. The second part was to be recognized as capable of intellect. The part during the narrator’s time is to be recognized as a member of society.

The narrator spends the next three years, approximately age 17 to 20, in Jacksonville, working at the cigar factory, participating in a literary society, attending church, and dating a young woman. While he enjoys these years, he picks up his co-workers’ habits of freely spending money so much he saves no money and gives up on returning to Atlanta University. Two of the ways he spends his money are by drinking and going to dances.

The narrator describes one ball in which he first saw a cake-walk, a dancing competition in which couples are gradually eliminated until one is left and wins a cake. This is the original cake-walk and is what later inspired the theatrical dances of colored performers. The narrator believes the cake-walk, along with the Uncle Remus stories, the Jubilee songs, or spirituals, and ragtime music are the four things Blacks have done to disprove their supposed inferiority and demonstrate their artistic ability to create original, universally appealing works.

Before the narrator can get married and settle down in Jacksonville, the cigar factory closes and he decides to follow some of his co-workers to New York, eager to be in the North again.



Analysis

The time spent in Jacksonville turns out to be a positive experience for the narrator, even though he was driven there by unfortunate circumstances. Having found kindred spirits in both Cuban and Black populations, the narrator not only finally fits in with people, but feels, for the first time, part of the Black race. It's possible he may not ever have felt part of the Black race had he not met Blacks with similar intelligence, interests, and values as he, which speaks to the importance of upbringing in determining identity with a group.

He grows disappointed by the wasted efforts of both Blacks and Whites in the race struggle; no one knows what great accomplishments were sacrificed in order to debate the worth of one race. That said, the narrator lists four accomplishments of the Black race that did occur during this time that he feels elevates the race. Note that all four – spirituals, stories, music, and dance – are artistic achievements in line with his own interests. He may have picked four different accomplishments if he had not been interested in music and literature.

Vocabulary

freemasonry, peripatetic, monotonous, eloquent, exile, acme, regalia, tangible, badinage, cake-walk, clatter, gesticulations, volley, boarder, evaded, benefactor, listlessly, endeavor, rudiments, lamentable, sullen, degeneracy, deterring, Jim Crow, cognizance



Chapter 6-7

Summary

As soon as he and his four colleagues arrive in New York, they check-in at a boarding house, then rush to explore the town. They first visit a converted residence housing a bar and various game rooms. He sees, for the first time, a game of craps. A combination of peer pressure and his fascination with the game convinces him to bet a large sum against one of the players. When it's his turn to throw the dice, he is incredibly lucky and wins more than two hundred dollars.

High off of his winnings, he asks his friends if there's anywhere else they can go besides back to the boarding house. They take him to the "Club" which he describes in great detail in chapter 7. The "Club" is a converted house with a Chinese restaurant in the basement. It is an extremely popular establishment for both Whites and Blacks. In the back room is a singer and piano player entertaining an audience. The narrator hears the pianist playing a style of music he has never heard before. It is technically complex, but joyful and lively. It is ragtime, invented by Black piano players. As the hours pass, the "Club" empties and he and his friends finally go home.

Analysis

On his first night in New York City, the narrator is introduced to, and quickly becomes fascinated with, two new forms of diversion: "craps" and ragtime music. While the night ends innocently enough for the narrator, he foreshadows his addiction to gambling and hints at a turning point brought on by a wealthy woman who frequents the "Club." Given these foreshadowed events, the reader can better interpret the narrator's earlier chilling description of New York as a witch who both attracts and destroys visitors, turning them into "addicts" of her city.

The author, a classically trained musician, speaks to the universal appeal of ragtime music, developed by untrained Black musicians. The ability to create something universally appealing is what the narrator believes will elevate the status of Blacks and that is why he believes ragtime music is one of the top four achievements of the Black race.

Vocabulary

caprice, mulatto, inquisitive, proprietor, antics, deluged, epithets, aristocrats, modulated, strenuous, incantations, efficacious, dusters, vestibule, giddy, rousing, intricate, chromatics, ragtime, adulterators, alembic, lavish, endowment, habitu  , lithograph



Chapter 8

Summary

The narrator quickly finds work as a cigar roller but within a few weeks he is too bored – and too tired from late night gambling – to continue so he quits to become a full-time gambler. He visits the “Club” as often as he gambles, staying up until four or six in the morning. He loses a lot of money through gambling, but is fortunate enough to find additional income through playing piano at the “Club.” He becomes so adept at playing ragtime that he eventually becomes known as the best ragtime-player in New York. His unique style of ragtime is influenced by his classical training. He catches the attention of a young millionaire who asks him to perform at an exclusive engagement at his home. At the engagement, he plays classical music to a well-to-do group of men and women. But once dinner is served, he changes to ragtime which enralls the group so much they barely eat their dinners. The host decides to hire him to play regularly for him at parties and privately. They form a friendship.

The narrator continues to play at the “Club.” He becomes a sort of celebrity there and attracts a woman called the “widow.” The “widow” is a rich White woman engaged in several romantic relationships with Black men she supports financially. One night, the widow asks him to sit with her at her table. Unable to say “no,” the narrator has a drink with her. Soon, however, her boyfriend comes looking for her. The young man starts to leave the table but before he can, the boyfriend approaches the table and shoots his girlfriend dead. The young man escapes, running through the streets of New York until, by luck, he runs into the young millionaire who lets him into the safety of his cab. He further saves the young man’s life by offering him a job as his valet during his trip to Europe beginning with his departure the next day. The young man accepts the job.

Analysis

The narrator spends over a year in New York, giving up employment for his vices, but still managing not to go broke or turn to violence or drugs. Once again, music plays a pivotal role in his life, earning him income and celebrity. Like most other things he learns, he quickly masters ragtime. However, he still lacks solid friendships; he no longer mentions his co-workers from the Jacksonville factory. It seems the closest person to a friend he has is the young millionaire who, in the narrator’s eyes, is “all a man could wish to be.” Besides being rich, he is debonair, moves within elite social circles and, obviously, appreciates good music. He embodies characteristics the narrator aspires to attain.



Vocabulary

reform, ventures, novel, irksome, congenial, sedentary, enervated, censure, slough, herculean, perseverance, alluded, languidly, garish, bade, cynical, respite, stipulation, gallantry, despot, valet, indelible, blasé, tyrant, grizzled.



Chapter 9

Summary

Upon arriving in France, Jackson quickly falls in love with the country. As the millionaire's valet, the narrator is very well paid for doing very little. One of the things he does is play piano for the man, sometimes for hours on end, like he did back in New York. He is also given an entirely new wardrobe at the millionaire's expense. Other than short excursions to neighboring countries, the two men stay in Paris for nearly a year and a half.

One night, while at the Opera, he sits next to a girl he finds incredibly beautiful. During intermission, he observes her and listens to her talk to her parents. When he gets a chance to look at her parents, he discovers her father is also his father. The young woman he is so attracted to is his half-sister. Despite his strong desire to say something to her, he leaves during the performance, full of loneliness.

Shortly afterward, his benefactor tells him they are going to leave Paris for London. After eight weeks in London, they visit Holland, then Germany. At a party in Germany, the narrator discovers everyone present is a musician and he becomes inspired again with music. When the millionaire asks the man to play ragtime, they both expect it will astound the German musicians. Instead, the German musicians immediately grasp it and begin playing their own variations of it. Watching this, the young man is inspired to go back to the South, where ragtime originated, and fulfill his life's ambition as an artist by popularizing Black music. It takes him weeks to tell the millionaire he is going to leave. When he does, the two have their deepest conversation up to that point. The millionaire advises him to live his life as a White man, instead of a Black man because more people will listen to his music. He and the millionaire leave on good terms with the millionaire giving him money and telling him to call if he's ever in need.

Analysis

During his travels through Europe, not only is the young man saved from the fallout of the murder of the widow, but he is also exposed to different cultures. He continues to pick up different languages and play music. Over the course of time, the millionaire becomes the young man's closest friend and the most influential person of his life aside from his mother. Given that he has not had many close relationships so far, it is not surprising when he discovers he is sitting next to his half-sister in the theater, he says, "I would have given a part of my life to touch her hand with mine and call her 'sister.'" Instead of trying to connect with her and his father again, he leaves without saying anything, too overcome with grief possibly because he knows it's too late or not possible to be a part of that family. The millionaire is a surrogate parent to the young man, protecting him and exposing him to better things.



As he did back home, he continues to make observations on different cultures. Perhaps his skills of observation stem from his never having felt he was a full participant of any one group. As an outsider, he is often looking in, trying to find his calling. This need, coupled with his love of music, convinces him to give up sharing a wealthy, although purposeless, life with the millionaire and eventually to return to the States to focus on music.

Vocabulary

sentiment, proximity, mammoth, facets, supererogatory, follies, vigor, nooks, laudable, reminiscent, desolate, aught, phlegmatic, bespectacled, remorseful, annihilate, chicanery, peonage, philanthropy, taciturn, recollections, striking, loath, prolongs



Chapter 10

Summary

On the ship back to the United States, the young man befriends a physician whom he describes as “the broadest-minded colored man I have ever talked with on the Negro question.” They quickly develop a friendship and the physician invites the man to accompany him on his visit to Boston, then to his home in Washington.

After leaving the physician, the narrator travels to Atlanta by train and quickly joins a passionate discussion about “the Negro question” with a diverse group of people. The discussion narrows down to two people, a Texan and a Union soldier, who argue whether the Black race is an inferior race and whether that makes a difference on how they should be treated. Once the train arrives, the narrator continues on to Macon where he catches his first glimpse of rural Black life. The conditions of the food and housing he had were of the poorest he’d ever had.

The narrator arrives at something called “big meeting,” a week-long series of meetings by the local churches. After hearing the congregations sing spirituals, he calls the experience “one of the most thrilling emotions which the human heart may experience” and something Blacks should not be ashamed of.

At the end of the “big meeting,” the narrator is ready to start writing his own music. As he is about to leave, he meets up with a teacher who was at the service and offers to give him a ride to a train station on his way home. The young man decides to stay the night to see the school where the teacher works, the same school where his childhood friend “Shiny” teaches. That night, after everyone has gone to bed, the narrator hears a commotion outside. He wakes up the teacher and the two watch as a crowd gathers outside. The narrator goes outside despite the teacher’s protestations and eventually sees some townsmen drag a black man to the crowd where he is tied up and burned alive. At that point he decides he will not align himself with either the White or Black race, but will begin a new life under an assumed name and let people decide for themselves what race he is. He leaves that morning and instead of staying in the South as he had planned, he catches a train to New York. He does not deny the shame he feels of belonging to a race that could be treated worse than animals.

Analysis

This chapter begins with the narrator determined to embrace his Black heritage and advance the race through popularizing its music. It ends with his rejecting his Black ancestry and leaving the South after witnessing first-hand the types of atrocities committed against Blacks. Certainly this option would not be possible for him had his skin not been as light as it was, but his decision to dissociate from the Black race is also indicative of his having never truly felt a part of it to begin with. And knowing no matter



how socially advanced he became he would always encounter hatred and bigotry, it is possible he felt too hopeless to carry the burden of being Black during that era. With the ability to escape his race and nothing strong enough to keep him a part of it, the narrator makes an understandable decision to reinvent himself.

Vocabulary

pugilist, caricature, hackneyed, subsidiary, sophism, subterfuge, moribund, arraigned, Reconstruction, eloquent, allegiance, sanction, frigid, prosperous, tacit, enunciation, lucrative, disheartened, eloquence, detractors, emancipation, incontrovertible, ragged, evinced, steward



Chapter 11

Summary

The narrator reaches New York, lonely and unsure of what to do. As a White man now, he focuses on finding employment opportunities available only to White men. With his intention set on having money, he finds work and quickly climbs the corporate ladder. Upon a friend's recommendation, he invests his savings in real estate, which pays off handsomely. He begins socializing in elite social circles, laughing to himself at having pulled the wool over people's eyes about his identity. But what starts off as a joke becomes a real problem when he meets and falls in love with a White woman. When he decides to ask her to marry him, he thinks he may need to tell her of his ancestry.

One day, he runs into the woman on the street and he suggests they go to the Eden Musée together. At the museum, the narrator recognizes "Shiny" from his schoolboy years. The narrator doesn't know what to do, fearing if he and "Shiny" talk, "Shiny" will let it slip that the narrator is part Black. However, before he can decide what to do, "Shiny" sees him and approaches him. No mention of the narrator's background is made and they have such a pleasant conversation that afterward the woman asks about "Shiny," apparently impressed by how refined a Black man he is. Her interest spurs the narrator to admit both his love for her and his ancestry. One day at her house when they are rehearsing, he tells her he loves her, which makes her cry. When he tells her he's Black, she cries out of despair, pulling away from him. Not knowing what to do, he leaves her at home. He describes that moment as the only time he completely regretted being Black.

She soon leaves for New Hampshire for the summer, without once writing the narrator. When she returns, he avoids her, but occasionally sees her in public. One night, they see each other at the same party. They are polite, but don't say much until she starts playing at the piano. When he joins her at the piano, she confesses her love for him. They soon marry and have two children. She dies in childbirth with the second child, however. For the short time they are married, he is incredibly happy. When his wife dies, he decides never to marry again and to devote his life to his children. He ends the story reflecting on his decision to deny his past. While he believes his life is better this way, especially for his children's sake, he doesn't deny the possibility he gave up his birthright and his dreams in the process.

Analysis

Now an ex-colored man, the narrator is determined to take advantage of the opportunities a White man has. He gets a good-paying job, invests his money well, and circulates within elite social circles. By focusing so much on wealth and status, he may have not just given up his Black heritage, but his artistic inclinations. However, he seems not to miss either of these attributes, enjoying the luxuries of a White man's life



instead. When he sees his friend “Shiny” at the museum, he does not recall the great pride he felt to be Black as he did when he saw “Shiny” give his graduation speech years ago. In fact, he feels ashamed of his race once again when he fears his future wife won’t accept his proposal. The benefits of not being Black, especially now that he has children, are too great to give up for the sake of claiming his heritage. When he attends a meeting at which Booker T. Washington is present however, he is reminded of the righteous fight and noble people he left behind. “Beside them I feel small and selfish,” he writes. But even though he thinks he may have wasted his dreams for a secure, comfortable lifestyle, he doesn’t regret his decision. He simply admits he paid a high price for his decision.

Vocabulary

meager, nigh, plight, epoch, anomaly, gaiety, preoccupation, sedative, nonchalance, timidity, divulge, exultation, trepidation, conviction, buoyancy, intimated, trifle, haggardness, haughtiness, lavished, mar, irreparable, gallant, victors, manuscripts



Important People

Ex-Colored Man

The ex-colored man is the nameless fictitious narrator of the novel. He was born in Georgia to a woman of Black descent. His father is a well-to-do White man who hides his affair and son in order to marry a well-to-do White Southern woman. He grows up in Connecticut, but travels to Georgia, Florida, New York, and Europe. Despite not going to college, he is an articulate, artistic man who has difficulty fitting in with people, even though he spends a great deal of time observing them and knows he is most comfortable around urban, educated people, Black or White. After spending several years trying to find his identity, he decides to live as a Black musician who will bring Southern Black music to the masses. Shortly after spending some time in the South and witnessing first-hand the conditions Blacks are subjected to, he abruptly abandons his goals and identity to live the safer, if less glorious, life as a fairly wealthy White man.

The Millionaire

The millionaire is a reserved White man who meets the narrator at the “Club” when he is playing ragtime. He impresses the narrator so strongly the millionaire asks him to play for him at parties and privately. The millionaire saves the narrator from likely murder by a jealous boyfriend who had seen him with his girlfriend and takes him to Europe before the boyfriend can react. The millionaire doesn’t seem to enjoy his life of leisure very much because, without needing to work, it has become just a way to pass the abundance of time he has. The last time the narrator sees the millionaire is when he leaves him in Paris.

The Mother

The narrator’s mother is a woman of Black ancestry who remains in love with the narrator’s father even though he marries someone else. When she moves with her son to Connecticut, she makes a living as a seamstress, but also receives money from the boy’s father. When she becomes ill, she requires constant care and has to pay for it with the boy’s college savings. Because she is one of the closest people to the narrator, he calls her death one of the sacred sorrows of his life. His decision to go to Atlanta University is, in part, influenced by her wishes for him to go there and by his desire to feel close to his mother’s past.

The Father

The boy’s father is a well-to-do Southern White man who maintains a close relationship with the boy and his mother until he marries someone more in his class. He visits the boy once in Connecticut and when he sees what a good pianist he is, has a new piano



delivered to the house. He wants his son to attend Harvard or Yale and sends money to his mom to help save for college. However, he breaks his promise to visit the boy more often and never responds to his mother's letters asking for help when she is sick. The boy runs into his father in Paris when he coincidentally sits near him at an opera. There he sees the woman he married instead of his mother and a girl who turns out to be his half-sister. His father is never seen again.

“Red Head” or “Red”

“Red,” named for his red hair, is the narrator's closest friend through grade school who treats him the same after he is “outed” as a Black student by the principal. Because he cherishes his friend “Red” so much, the narrator helps the mediocre student pass his exams so they can remain classmates. Upon graduation from high school, “Red” plans to work in a bank, disinterested in pursuing higher education.

Shiny

“Shiny” is a young, slight Black student at the narrator's school. Even though he and the narrator aren't close friends, “Shiny” is his closest Black friend. “Shiny's” moving graduation speech is the first time the narrator sees an example of the pride and glory that could be part of the Black race and likely is the seed from which the narrator's ambition to bring glory to the Black race grows.

The Wife

The narrator's wife meets him after he's changed his name and denied his Black heritage. They share a love of music and he falls in love with her beauty and innocence. She is the only person to whom he admits his ancestry and he almost loses her because of this. Her near-rejection of his love makes him completely regret he's part Black. Her death is the second sacred sorrow of his life.



Objects/Places

Piano

The narrator plays the piano from a very early age throughout his life. His ability to play earns him income and admiration and is the means through which he discovers his ambition in life.

Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta is first Southern city the narrator spends any significant time in in his adult years. While the numbers of poor Blacks he sees in town disgust him, he is equally impressed by the Black student population in Atlanta University. In Atlanta, the narrator is robbed and loses his college tuition.

Jacksonville, Florida

The narrator moves to Jacksonville to make money after his is stolen in Atlanta. There he finds friends among his Cuban co-workers at the cigar factory.

The “Club”

The “Club” is a popular entertainment venue for both well-to-do Blacks and Whites. This is where the narrator first hears ragtime music, a life-changing moment for him. He begins to play ragtime there and it is there where he meets two people who change his life: a millionaire and the “widow.”

Paris

Paris is where the narrator escapes to with the millionaire after leaving New York in a hurry. He loves Paris. It is also where he sees his father for the last time, unintentionally, and discovers he has a sister.

Berlin

Berlin is where the narrator plays at a party hosted by the millionaire, which is attended by many musicians. Instead of being amazed by ragtime, they play variations of it immediately after hearing it for the first time. It is there he decides he must return to the Southern states to do what the Berliners did on a much larger scale.



Themes

Black American History

The fictitious events of this book take place shortly after the end of the Civil War, with tensions high between Whites and Blacks and between Southerners and Northerners. The narrator several times describes conversations he joined discussing “the Negro question”: how Blacks should be treated post-Civil War and what rights they are entitled to. All of the conversations he was in and all of the observations he made were in context of the relationships between Whites and Blacks in different parts of the country and among different social strata. The narrator likely made such observations throughout his life to help determine what class and what race he wanted to belong to, a choice available to him only because of his good upbringing and his light skin color. He easily could fit in with educated Whites or Blacks, but something would always keep drawing him to the rural South. Whether it was his desire to connect with his lineage or his interest in music that pulled him to the South, the undeniably atrocious treatment of Blacks forced him to run away. While his skin color gave him the luxury of avoiding treatment other Blacks could not escape, the price he pays is inauthenticity and never feeling like he belonged anywhere.

Self-Identity

Through his adventures, the narrator tries to determine his identity, which proves hard considering how easy it is for him to be a chameleon. He seems to feel a certain obligation to identify with Blacks, at least politically, as a means of bolstering support for their fight for civil rights. However, on a personal level, he is lured to live the much easier, much less constrained life of a White man. The narrator is not only partly Black, of course. He is also literate and cultured. He seems to identify with those characteristics more than with his race based on the types of people he likes to associate with and how he likes to spend his free time. And even though he meets many educated, cultured Blacks, he learns they, too, have to bear the burden of racism. Having weighed all of his options, the narrator chooses an identity that most easily grants him access to the type of life he likes best.

Ambition

At odds with the narrator’s desire for a comfortable, cultured life is his desire for acclaim. From his early days when he sees the praise bestowed upon his friend “Shiny’s” graduation speech to when he overhears people talking about how well he plays piano, he freely admits to loving the attention he gets for his accomplishments. This includes his father admiring his piano playing, his promotion to “reader” at the cigar factory, his initial good luck playing “craps,” and his original ragtime arrangements at the “Club.” His ambition to be famous for something great influences the decisions he

makes, particularly the major decision to return to the United States to become a famous Black musician (He believes he will be more famous as a Black musician than a White one.)

Styles

Structure

The novel centers almost exclusively on one person and one plot. While there are other characters in the novel, because they are given so little dialogue, they appear to exist mainly as inspiration for the narrator's musings. Because the book is filled with the narrator's thoughts and reflections, it resembles a personal diary more than a novel, making it all the more convincing as an actual account of a person's life.

Perspective

The book's point of view is first-person. The narrator is a fictitious character, not based on the author. No one, including the narrator, is given a name to give the impression that the characters are real people whose identities need to be protected. The narrator tells the story of his life from birth through approximately middle-aged when he is a father. It ends with his finally finding an identity and coming to terms with the price he paid to take on that identity.

Tone

The language employed in this book is eloquent and thoughtful; it is the representative speech of an educated, cultured person, which the narrator is. The sentence structures are relatively complex and long.



Quotes

A few of the white boys jeered me, saying: 'Oh, you're a nigger too.' I heard some black children say: 'We knew he was colored. (Chapter 1)

I looked up into her face and repeated: 'Tell me, mother, am I a nigger? (Chapter 1)

I felt leap within me pride that I was colored; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race. (Chapter 3)

I thought: 'Here I am a man, no longer a boy, and what am I going but wasting my time and abusing my talent? What use am I making of my gifts? What future have I before me following my present course? (Chapter 9)

A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive. (Chapter 10)

I do not see how a people that can find in its conscience any excuse whatever for slowly burning to death a human being, or for tolerating such an act, can be entrusted with the salvation of a race. (Chapter 10)

I argued that to forsake one's race to better one's condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one's country for the same purpose. (Chapter 11)

This was the only time in my life that I ever felt absolute regret at being colored, that I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins and wished that I were really white. (Chapter 11)

Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people. (Chapter 11)

Even those who oppose them know that these men have the eternal principles of right on their side, and they will be victors even though they should go down in defeat. (Chapter 11)

I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. (Chapter 11)

I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (Chapter 11)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

How much does the narrator care about elevating the status of Blacks and how much does he care about personal glory? Are the two mutually exclusive? If he were to help advance the Black cause solely for personal gain, does that lessen the good he would have done?

Topic 2

What are your thoughts about the narrator's decision to disown his Black heritage? What would you have done if you were in his shoes? What do you make of his feeling shame of his race after seeing a Black man burned? How much does shame influence his decisions?

Topic 3

What do you think the narrator's biggest passion was? To play music? To make the Black race proud? To be admired by many? Why do you think so?

Topic 4

The narrator's friend "Shiny" is referenced in three integral parts of the narrator's life? Why do you think the author placed this character in the moments he did? What does "Shiny" represent in this story?

Topic 5

In what places and times did the narrator feel like he most belonged? When was he happiest? What types of people did he feel most comfortable around?

Topic 6

Who are the most significant people in the narrator's life? What kind of relationships does he have with them?



Topic 7

What would life have been like for a Black person in the South or in the North twenty years after the Civil War? How would they have been treated? How would that affect their daily lives?

Topic 8

Who were some prominent Black civil rights activists at the time? What were their platforms?