

Who Am I? The Search for Identity in African American Literature

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Abstract

*This paper focuses on the search for identity throughout African American Literature studied in African American Literature class. The paper focuses on two authors and their work: James Weldon Johnson who wrote *Autobiography of an EX-Colored Man*. The second story focuses on Harriet Jacobs' autobiography entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I will discuss each character's life and the obstacles they endured throughout their journey of self-discovery. I will then discuss my personal self-published book entitled *Soul Searching* as I explain the meaning of searching for oneself through my poem *Soul Searching*.*

The search for identity can be hard growing up in a society that won't accept you for the race you are, the religion you practice, or the lifestyle you choose to live. Imagine being in a society after slavery that does any and everything to keep you shunned from being a part of the community. The hardships you must endure in order to achieve the goal, freedom, and acceptance. Harriet Jacobs and James Weldon Johnson both had difficulties discovering who they were. Jacobs was able to find herself in her narrative, while Johnson struggled and ultimately ended up not being able to come to terms, resulting in him being unhappy. The search for identity in African American Literature can be found in these two narratives that take different approaches to the search for identity.

James Weldon Johnson's story seemed to be the story that raised a lot of questions while reading. The story *Autobiography of an EX-Colored Man* was a fictional work written by Johnson that explored a nameless character, who is a mixed child growing up after slavery. The story explores the challenges this nameless character faces as he goes through life trying to find his own identity. The narrator didn't have an understanding of who he was from the beginning of the story. His father, who was white, barely came to see him. That only could've started the beginning of the narrator not fully coming to terms of his identity. He had this emotional connection to his mother's heritage, making him unable to fully embrace that world. When the narrator was a little boy, he was perceived as white by his classmates, while he was a combination of both.

Kathleen Pfeiffer stated in her article on the autobiography: “The Ex-Colored Man experiences both the power of whiteness and the oppression of blackness, continually traversing the barriers designed to confine him. As a child, ignorant of his own racial status, but not ignorant about race, he helps to create the very hostile and unforgiving world which he will soon experience firsthand” (1996, p. 407). As a result of the narrator being raised on the perception of being a white male, that lifestyle was all he knew. The narrator uses the privilege of whiteness, which is taking full advantage of the opportunities that are presented before you due to your race. The privilege of whiteness gave the narrator a sense of ease, knowing that passing as white was his chance to live the American dream. Pfeiffer stated: “When we look at the Ex-Colored Man as a person who values individualism, who is idiosyncratic, undisciplined, and inclined towards improvisation, we invite a much richer and more complex reading. When we recognize that the Ex-Colored Man demonstrates ambivalence about whiteness as well as blackness, we avail ourselves of the novel's more complicated nuances” (1996, p. 403). The narrator in the story wasn't educated enough about his race, being black and white. Everything he basically learned on his own. The thought comes to mind whether his mother wanted him to believe he was white to live a better life? This causes confusion for children, especially at a young age, which tells the child in order to live a good life and be successful you must be white.

My final impressions of the narrative of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: the narrator struggled hard with his identity since the beginning of his childhood. His parents didn't teach him about both his races and as a result, he

became confused and didn't understand his background. As I said before: In the end, the narrator does come to some understanding about who he is but, which is individualism. From the beginning, the narrator acted very independently. Yet, in the narrator's mind he believed he could only achieve independence, individualism by living as half his race. He did not forget his black side, but he did turn away from it when he had to.

Next, I discuss Harriet Jacobs and her search for identity, which was the most interesting narrative to read this semester. Jacobs hid her identity, and her real name was Linda Brent when she published her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The narrative told the story of what Jacobs went through as a slave, which made her stronger throughout the story. The reason she hid her identity when publishing the book was that she was a runaway slave and using her real name would've got her in trouble. The reason this narrative pulls more interest is that we can see the growth as readers with Jacobs. The masking techniques used in the story helps to find an underlying message Jacobs used throughout her story.

In the first chapter of the narrative, Jacobs talked about the strong females in her life which included her mother, her mistress, and her grandmother. From the beginning, she knew who she was and where she came from. Even in the earliest part of Jacobs' life, the whole idea of slavery was foreign to her. Like all little girls, she was born with a mind that only told her place in the world was that of a little girl. She explains how her, “heart was as free from care as that of any free-born white child” (2016, p. 420). She explains this with no understanding of any kind of hardship she would endure, but she knew about who she was.

It's not until later we see she may get lost a little throughout her years with Dr. Flint as her master. He was abusive, aggressive, and even though it wasn't clearly stated, she was sexually assaulted by Dr. Flint. At the age of fifteen, Flint started to make advances. She mentioned "my master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import" (2016, p. 436). At such a young age, an age where you don't know much and still have so much growing to do, Jacobs had to learn fast. Which is why after her children are born, she starts to realize she has to protect her kids. That's when her search for identity began. Jacobs knew what she had to do, and she was very smart the way she used deception and manipulation to escape Flint. That's when she meets Sands, the person that gives her the power she needs and the realization of who she is. Jacobs gains the power to take back her life and body away from Flint and get herself and her children to freedom. She stated: "I was determined that the master, whom I so hated and loathed, who had blighted the prospects of my youth, and made my life a desert, should not, after my long struggle with him, succeed at last in trampling his victim under his feet. I would do anything, everything, for the sake of defeating him" (2016, p. 551). Here in the narrative we see Jacobs start the process of taking back her life from Flint.

If Johnson had someone to teach him about both sides of his race, maybe this character wouldn't be so confused. Even though Jacobs grew up in slavery and Johnson didn't, she still had guidance from

her grandmother to help her. Johnson was brought up to think he was white and that caused confusion. Johnson decided to pass as white because he felt as though he could have a better life when, in all honesty, he didn't.

The search for identity can be a challenge for many people, especially teens and young adults trying to find an understanding of life and who they are. Many, myself included, had to go through the process searching for who I am as a person and continue to do it today. My poetry book entitled *Soul Searching* is a book I wrote during the process and what I've seen others go through as well. The poem you will read below explains the ups and downs, but overall the satisfaction that comes when you finally come to terms with who you're supposed to be and your life purpose:

*The hardest thing I had to do was find
myself.
Trying to find a place for my soul to accept,
Tired of picking myself up from my lowest to
get to my highest.
The hardest thing I had to do was find
myself,
But I wouldn't be the person I am today if I
didn't complete the challenge.
Every day becomes a little less hard and a
lot more accepting,
Once I realized soul-searching is more
about having a free soul,
And stop searching for a place for your soul
to be caged.
Let your soul be free.*

References

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- Pfeiffer, K. (1996). Individualism, success, and American identity in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.” *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 403–419. Retrieved from JSTOR www.jstor.org/stable/3042533.

Recommended Citation

Myers, M. (2019). Who am I? The search for identity in African American literature. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>