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Essay #1

Falling Short of Expectations

We are who we are today because of the people that came before us. From generation to generation, parents pass down to their children their knowledge, morals, and sometimes their hopes and dreams for their offspring to become truly great human beings. Throughout James Weldon Johnson’s book, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, we are given a look at life through the eyes of a nameless narrator, a half black, half white male, who is raised by his gentle and loving colored mother. The mother teaches the Narrator how to be a proper gentleman, makes sure he gets the best education possible, and even awakens and nurtures in him his talent for music. Though the narrator lovingly describes his mother throughout the story as the most influential person in his life, it becomes hard to believe him when by the end of the book he rejects the heritage and wastes the talent that was received from her. Even with as large of a role that the mother plays in the narrator’s life by raising him to be highly intelligent and harbor great potential, he ultimately dishonors the hopes she placed on him by choosing to abandon his African American roots.

Starting from an early point in the narrator’s life, his mother instills in him a very strong foundation for knowledge and education; something that greatly influences him in his adult life. Even when she herself is burdened with her occupation as a seamstress, the Mother is still able to find the time to put aside so that she can teach her son how to read and write (Johnson 3). While not being content with just what she is able to teach him, she also puts the narrator under the tutelage of a music instructor to learn the piano, as well as the instruction of the music teacher’s daughter to study books, and by the time he turns nine, the mother enrolls him in public school (4). A strong childhood education in both language and arts proves to be of great use to the narrator throughout his entire life, for not only does his skill as a pianist find him work almost everywhere he goes, but he is also bright enough to be able to learn different languages, even going so far as to devise his own approach to more easily learn them (61). It is clear that the narrator is able to navigate his way through life guided by his intellect and talent, both of which he has his Mother to thank for.

A clever mind is not the only aspect of raising her son that the Mother focuses on, though. She also breeds into the narrator a very proper and charismatic nature, which, along with the light tone of his skin, affords him a great deal of mobility in society. The Mother not only dresses her son well, instilling in him a “pride that well-dressed boys generally have”, but also only allows him to associate with respectable people, turning the narrator, in his words, into “a perfect little aristocrat” (3). It is this well-mannered upbringing that truly opens up the world to the narrator and grants his future a large amount of potential, because now it is not only intelligence he has, but also the ability to mingle within what would be considered a higher society; a very advantageous combination for anyone try to make something of themselves. He is even able to use this mobility to his great advantage by the end of the book, having a job that “pays very well”, as well as being part of a “grade of society of no small degree of culture” (92). Without a doubt, it is the teachings of his mother that gives him the opportunity to enjoy such culture.

Unfortunately, at the end of the book, the narrator fails to truly fulfill the hopes for greatness his mother had for him. Though he appears to be taking action that would make his mother proud when he decides to “go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people” so that he could use his musical talent as a colored composer (66), he ultimately decides against this course of action after witnessing the immolation of a black man at the hands of an angry white mob (88). After this, he not only wastes the advantages she has given him by selfishly passing as white for the rest of his days, but he adds insult to injury by going so far as to refuse to embrace the black half of himself, saying he would “neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race” (90). Though he acknowledges with regret that he has wasted his talent, as well as his dreams and ambitions (100), his mind is set, and he has not only abandoned the better half of himself, but in a sense, he has abandoned his own mother.

In the end, the narrator was right. His mother proved to be the greatest single influence in his life, imparting to him a strong foundation for education, a brilliant talent for the piano, and the etiquette to socialize with even the most cultured individuals. Sadly, by losing his ambition to do great things with the gifts he was given and refusing his African American heritage, he is rejecting the very person he so idolizes and loves. A mournful thought, but perhaps a valuable lesson to others to embrace who you are and every aspect of where you came from, because we would not be who we are today without those who came before us.

Work Cited

Johnson, James W. The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. New York: Dover, 1995. Print