Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

Although *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was in no way a genuine autobiography of the author's life, he did pull numerous events in the book from his personal experiences in Jacksonville and New York, the music industry, and early civil rights activism. James Weldon Johnson was born to middle-class Bahamian parents in Jacksonville, Florida, where his father was the headwaiter at the St. James Hotel. He studied English literature and classical music at Atlanta University, graduating in 1894, before returning to Jacksonville and founding the nation's first daily black newspaper, *The Daily American*, in 1895. He soon took an interest in law and became one of the first African-Americans to pass the Florida Bar Examination, but he never worked as a lawyer; instead, he became the principal of the all-black Stanton College Preparatory School, which is still widely considered one of the best high schools in the United States. With his conservatory-trained brother Rosamond, Johnson moved to New York in 1902. The brothers found immense success working with producer Bob Cole to sell their compositions to Broadway directors. He worked on Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 presidential campaign, which led to a job as the first black United States consul in Venezuela (from 1906-1908) and then Nicaragua (from 1908-1913). He wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* during this time and married activist Grace Nail Johnson in 1910. After leaving his post in Nicaragua, they moved to Harlem, where they became leading voices in the Harlem Renaissance. Still sometimes called the "elder statesman" of the movement, Johnson famously mentored some of its most prominent figures, like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, and Anne Spencer. From 1920 to 1930, Johnson was the first black head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the role for which he is probably best remembered. He oversaw dramatic growth in the organization's membership, from roughly 9,000 to 90,000 members by the end of his tenure, and particularly emphasized the fight against Southern lynching, lobbying aggressively to get the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill passed in Congress. In fact, in 1901, he was once nearly lynched himself in Jacksonville, which no doubt influenced his decision to leave for New York. He spent the last eight years of his life teaching creative writing and literature at the historically black Fisk University in Nashville, and in 1938 he died in a car accident on vacation in Maine. His wife, who was driving at the time of this accident, suffered serious injuries but survived, and ultimately outlived her husband by nearly four decades.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Johnson's narrator is born "a few years after the close of the Civil War" in the American South, and the trajectory of his life closely follows that of the United States in the half-century after emancipation. Contrary to conventional stories of steady racial progress, in fact both federal and state governments were far more committed to providing opportunity and perhaps even political equality for African-Americans in the first decade after the war, generally called Reconstruction, than in the subsequent decades. Congress and state governments rebelled against President Andrew Johnson's leniency toward the South, passing the Civil Rights Act and Fourteenth Amendment (which guarantees the "equal protection" of all citizens) against his protests. But, since President Johnson refused to provide emancipated African-Americans with the land they were promised, many were forced to continue working on plantations or become sharecroppers, working land owned by whites. From 1867-1877, numerous African-Americans rose to positions of political power, state governments took various measures to secure economic and educational opportunities for black Southerners, and the Freedmen's Bureau worked to defend freed former slaves in the legal system, helped them find work and housing, and set up institutions for their education until Congress decided to stop funding it in 1872. After the mid-1870s, when the Democratic Party swelled by taking advantage of white resentment, Southern states limited the effectiveness of many Reconstruction laws and began imposing strict racial segregation through Jim Crow laws to prevent black people from taking advantage of the opportunities they were promised. With industrialization accelerating and wages growing throughout the United States, inequality also expanded dramatically during the so-called Gilded Age, which lasted until roughly 1900 and did little to help most Southern rural blacks. However, the black elite to which the ex-colored man belongs for most of his life was largely a result of the educational opportunities available during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age's economic growth. Lynchings, or mob killings of black people and sometimes white sympathizers, were incredibly common in the years immediately following the Civil War and then the 1910s and 1920s, after the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

James Weldon Johnson's other most important works are his *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), which treated the sermon as a poetic genre, and his two *Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925, 1926). He published his own autobiography, *Along This Way*, in 1933. Important earlier

works cited in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* include W.E.B. Du Bois's landmark *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Wendell Phillips's lecture "Toussaint L'Ouverture" (1861), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and the story of Faust, which has been told in numerous versions by numerous writers but appears in the novel through Charles Gonoud's 1859 opera, an adaptation of the first of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's two parts of the story (1808). The African-American autobiography was a crucial literary genre in the 19th century United States, as well as an important contributor to the abolition movement; among the hundreds of such titles, a few exemplary slave narratives are the early text *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901). James Weldon Johnson's novel is also frequently compared to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1961), also narrated by a nameless black man living in secret from the world. Nella Larsen, a close friend of Johnson and his wife, was noted for her novels about racial passing: *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) treats the same theme from the perspective of science fiction, and white journalist John Howard Griffin flipped the conventional script of passing by temporarily darkening his skin, traveling through the South, and writing *Black Like Me* (1961). The most prominent scholarly monograph on the subject is Allyson Hobbs's *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (2014).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*
- **When Written:** 1906-12
- **Where Written:** New York City, Venezuela, Nicaragua
- **When Published:** 1912 (anonymously), 1927 (with attribution)
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Novel, African-American Autobiography
- **Setting:** The Eastern Seaboard of the United States (primarily Georgia, Connecticut, Florida, and New York) and European cities (Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Berlin) from roughly the 1870s through the 1910s.
- **Climax:** The narrator witnesses a lynching in Georgia and resolves to "change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would."
- **Antagonist:** American racism, moral cowardice, shame
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

"Passing" in Tennessee. Although James Weldon Johnson could never pass as white, his wife Grace Nail Johnson once did, on a trip to rural Tennessee with her friend Nella Larsen, who later wrote that they "walked to the best restaurant in a rather conservative town called Murfreesboro and demanded lunch and got it, plus all the service in the world and an invitation to return. Everybody here seems to think that quite a stunt."

Black National Anthem. James Weldon Johnson and his brother Rosamond wrote the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing" for a 1900 memorial service for Abraham Lincoln. The immensely popular song has since become a staple in black politics and come to be known as the "Black National Anthem."

PLOT SUMMARY

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man recounts the life of its fictional narrator from his secret birth in Georgia just after the end of slavery through his childhood in Connecticut, early working years back in the South, and musical career in New York and Europe, culminating in the adulthood he spends denying his past life in the African-American world and living as a white man instead.

After the book's Preface promises an unprecedented portrait of both black America and that subset of black Americans who choose to "pass" for white, the first chapter jumps into the racially ambiguous protagonist's curious childhood in Georgia: the small house he shared with his mother and the well-dressed man who used to visit. It then follows him and his mother to their cottage in Connecticut, where he took up the piano, entered school, and learned for the first time during class, to his dismay, that he was black. In the second chapter, he begins coming to terms with his racial exclusion from his classmates and gets more deeply involved in music, even accompanying a young violinist, with whom he falls in love, and playing for the man from the first chapter, who comes to visit and turns out to be his father. In the third chapter, the narrator begins to question his place in the world, reading Uncle Tom's Cabin and listening to his mother's stories about her youth in Georgia. But she begins to fall ill as he makes his way through high school and dies shortly after his graduation, at which his black classmate "Shiny" gives an impassioned speech to the white audience.

Next the narrator heads south, planning to attend Atlanta University. For the first time, he also encounters a distinct black community and the systematic discrimination it faces. When he returns from his first visit to the university to find all his savings stolen, he cannot bring himself to return to the university. Instead, he follows a porter's advice and heads to Jacksonville, where he moves into a boarding house run by a woman and her Cuban husband, who finds him work at a cigar factory. Over the next three years, the narrator picks up Spanish, moves up the ranks in the factory, and acquaints himself with the city's black

upper class, who live in an educated and cultured society parallel to white society but unable to mix with it. He also starts partying on the weekends, sometimes with the factory workers and sometimes with Jacksonville's black elite. At one of these parties, the narrator meets and repays the man who loaned him $15 to start a life in Jacksonville—but also realizes this same man stole his money—and marvels at the cake-walk, which he sees as an exemplar of black culture.

The cigar factory abruptly shuts down, and the narrator goes to New York with some of his fellow workers. He finds the city "fatally fascinating" and soon stumbles upon the two establishments where he becomes a perennial customer: a bar that hosts dice games, where he immediately wins $200, and the "Club," a flashy establishment frequented by black celebrities and where he becomes fascinated with ragtime music. The next three chapters recount the narrator's brief fall into gambling addiction and rise to musical fame: he learns to play ragtime for himself and becomes a fixture at the "Club." His music wins him attention from two white fans: a reclusive millionaire who hires him to play at private parties and a rich widow who begins seeing him to spite her usual companion, an extravagantly wealthy and well-dressed black man who shoots her dead when he finds out about the affair. The narrator flees the "Club" and runs into the millionaire, who decides to bring him to Europe for his lengthy upcoming trip.

The ninth chapter recounts the narrator's extravagant trip around Europe with the millionaire: they spend more than a year in Paris, sightseeing during the days and visiting theaters and cafés at night. He continues to play piano for the millionaire and rapidly learns French (and then German for fun). One day, at the Grand Opera, the narrator notices a beautiful English-speaking girl only to realize that she is his sister: his father is sitting right next to her, but he knows he cannot say anything and stumbles out of the theater in agony. Soon, they leave Paris for London, Amsterdam, and Berlin, where a musician improvises the narrator's ragtime tune in classical form and he suddenly realizes his calling: to return to the South and compile "the old slave songs" that are still the cultural backbone of rural black life. The narrator tells the millionaire he will not continue on to their next destinations, Egypt and Japan, and they have a lengthy argument about racism and whether the narrator can do anything to resolve it. After a few weeks of soul-searching, the narrator decides to go and sets out for Boston.

On the ship to Boston, the narrator meets a black physician from Washington who introduces him to various members of the Northern black elite. On his train to Macon, Georgia, the narrator listens to a group of white men debate whether black Americans deserve equality—they do not notice that he is black—and realizes that white racist attitudes are the main barrier to black achievement in the United States. He meanders around the rural South, collecting songs and eventually stumbling upon a "big meeting" at which an eloquent preacher and brilliant chorus leader steal the show. He makes a new friend and decides to spend a night in this friend's town, only to notice armed white people congregating near the rail station—the next morning, they drag a black man into the center of the town, douse him in fuel, and cheer while they burn him alive. The narrator observes in horror from a distance and suddenly finds himself overcome with shame—he realizes how unspeakable brutality underlies the United States' claim to be a "great example of democracy to the world" and realizes that he cannot trust Southern whites to pursue racial equality. He decides to return to New York and abandon his racial identity, to "change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would."

The final chapter recounts his remarkably successful and painless life as a white man in New York: he drops out of business school but still finds a well-paying job as a clerk and begins investing in real estate. He easily makes money and starts moving in elite social circles, winning recognition for his ragtime and falling in love with a "dazzlingly white" singer. Intending to propose, the narratorstarts to realize that he cannot keep his secret any longer, and after they run into "Shiny," now a respected professor, he musters the courage to tell her that he is black. The singer leaves for the summer, but they soon reunite and marry. The narrator's wife dies delivering their second child, and the "ex-colored man" ends his narrative by summarizing his continual conflicting feelings about his "present position in the world." He loves his children, but he feels he has deserted his race and, after seeing Booker T. Washington speak, realizes that he could have helped take up the fight for racial equality and shape history—looking through his manuscripts of his old songs, he proclaims, "I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" – The unnamed protagonist and narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a racially ambiguous businessman with a remarkable aptitude for music, languages, and navigating various cultural and racial communities. He is born in Georgia to a black sewing-girl and the son of the prominent white family that either employs or enslaves her, but his mother raises him in a relatively integrated town in Connecticut, where he does not even realize he is black until his schoolteacher teacher separates the students by race one day. After his mother's death, the narrator moves back to Georgia but ends up working at a cigar factory in Florida, then gambling and playing both classical and ragtime music full-time in New York City and Europe. When he realizes that he might be able to translate black folk songs into classical genres, he returns to Georgia; but his trip is again cut short when he witnesses a man get lynched.

Horrified, he becomes so ashamed of the United States' "brutality and savagery" toward blacks that he decides to save himself from racism and live as a white man in New York. In the final chapter, his barriers to success melt away, and he earns a decent living and builds a family with a white woman, the only person in his new life who knows his secret. After his wife's death, the narrator realizes in the book's closing lines that, by disavowing his blackness, he has prioritized the comforts of white privilege over his duty to fight for justice and potential to make history improving the conditions of African-American life.

The Narrator's Mother – A black sewing-girl either employed or enslaved by the prominent Georgia family that includes the narrator's father. After moving to Connecticut with the narrator to ensure that he can get a quality education, she sews around the clock to pay the family's bills and plays the narrator songs at night, sparking his interest in music. Even though the narrator's father sent her North in secret, and with little support, she nevertheless shows nothing but goodwill when she tells the narrator stories about him. Her loving, supportive relationship with the narrator is tragically cut short when she falls sick and dies shortly after he graduates high school in the third chapter.

The Narrator's Father – A seemingly powerful white man from a prominent Southern family with a taste for shiny shoes and expensive jewelry, the narrator's father only appears vaguely in his childhood memories and then twice more in the book. First, he visits during the narrator's school years and they have an awkward exchange—he is proud of the narrator's musical and academic achievements, but the narrator does not even feel enough of a connection to call him "father." Years later, the narrator realizes he is sitting next to his father and a woman who must be his sister at the Grand Opera in Paris. Realizing that he must not reveal the secret of his illegitimate birth and therefore cannot talk to his father, the narrator leaves the Opera and drinks himself "into a stupor."

"Shiny" – The narrator's schoolmate, who is by far the best student in their school and later becomes a prominent professor. The narrator immediately notices his "black as night" skin and shining features. At their primary school graduation ceremony, "Shiny" passionately delivers Wendell Phillips' lecture "Toussaint L'Ouverture" to the audience of mostly white parents, stunning them despite his tiny frame and ill-fitting clothes. Much later, he runs into the now "ex-colored" narrator and his girlfriend at the Eden Musée in New York; he seems to understand the narrator's intent to "pass" and does not reveal the truth. "Shiny" represents the class of black intellectual elites fighting for racial justice—unlike many of the other black elites in this book (like the Washington Physician), who are satisfied enough with their own upward mobility or even blame poorer blacks for their condition.

The Millionaire – A mysterious, cultured, incredibly wealthy man who becomes the narrator's "friend" or "employer" (depending on the context) after watching him play at the "Club." The millionaire asks the narrator to play for his private parties and then brings him to Europe, where they spend more than a year. When the narrator decides to return to the United States to compile black folk music, the millionaire argues that he will not be taken seriously and would be "foolish" to try to change white Americans' prejudice. Even though he is almost always emotionally distant and cannot convince the narrator to stay in Europe, the millionaire is nevertheless his closest friend.

The Narrator's Wife / The Singer – A blonde-haired, "dazzlingly white" singer who meets the narrator when he is already living as a white man but still playing ragtime. He loves her voice, she loves his piano playing, and they soon begin a relationship—but the narrator realizes he has to tell her about his original racial identity, and she leaves New York for a summer when he does so, only to return and agree to marry him anyway. In this phase of the narrator's life, his wife is the only person who knows his secret; they have a relatively happy marriage and she dies giving birth to their second child.

The Music Teacher – He teaches the narrator how to play classical piano and read sheet music (which the narrator rejects at first). Gradually, he becomes an important mentor for the narrator, fostering his interest in a music career and even briefly housing and supporting him after his mother's death. (The narrator notes that he had one music teacher as a child and then began taking lessons with his church organist, so it is unclear which teacher coordinated his duet with the violinist and took him in after his mother's death.)

The Violinist – A girl a few years older than the narrator, whom he accompanies during a concert and quickly falls in love with. After their resoundingly successful concert, she actually kisses him in excitement—but he pulls away, having apparently forgotten his feelings. She later marries and, according to the narrator, loses her musical talent.

The Second Pullman Porter – After the narrator's savings are stolen, this second porter offers him $15, advice about finding hotel work, and secret passage in the laundry basket of his train car. Years later, at a party in Jacksonville, the narrator sees this porter wearing a tie that was also stolen from his bag and realizes that he was the one who stole the savings.

The Washington Physician – An imposing and regal black man whom the narrator encounters on his ship from Liverpool to Boston. The physician was born into slavery but managed to study at Howard University and rise into the Northern black elite, into which he introduces to the narrator. His attitudes about race are remarkably conservative: he has no issue with prejudice so long as it doesn't "interfere with my personal liberty" and condemns "those lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies."

John Brown – An eloquent, bombastic preacher, John Brown captivates the crowd at the "big meeting" in Georgia by using

his voice like an instrument during his sermon. He is also the only character in the book identified by his real name, which alludes to the 19th century white abolitionist John Brown, who led an armed raid in Virginia in an attempt to lead a slave rebellion in the South.

"Singing Johnson" – The short, one-eyed chorus leader at the "big meeting," who has memorized hundreds of hymns that he begins to sing at appropriate moments in John Brown's sermon. He offers something of a foil to the narrator: while "Singing Johnson" travels around the South writing music and bringing congregations together, the narrator wants to travel around the South, record other people's music, and claim it for himself.

MINOR CHARACTERS

"Red Head" – An older, unintelligent but strong white boy in the narrator's class; they become friends because of their complementary talents. In a characteristic example of white privilege, "Red Head" decides to skip college and get a job through family connections at a bank.

The First Pullman Porter – A black railroad worker (Pullman porter) who guides the narrator around Atlanta's black neighborhoods and establishments, showing him the segregated South for the first time.

The Atlanta University President – A generous, fatherly figure who welcomes the narrator into Atlanta University and gives a speech to the whole student body. Despite his protectiveness, the narrator is afraid to reach out to him after his savings are stolen.

The Landlady's Husband – A cigar roller and Cuban émigré who actively funds the Cuban rebels, speaks excellent English, and finds the narrator work in the Jacksonville cigar factory.

The Pianist at the "Club" – A self-taught ragtime musician who plays by ear and stuns the narrator, who then insists on learning to play ragtime for himself.

The Rich Widow – A white woman of about 35 who always comes to the "Club" with her companion, but later decides to make him jealous by dating the narrator. When he finds out, her companion shoots her, and the narrator feels horrified and partially responsible for her death.

The Rich Widow's Companion – A mysterious, "well set up, very black young fellow" who wears extravagantly wealthy clothes and always goes to the "Club" with the Rich Widow. When he finds out that she has been secretly seeing the narrator on the side, he murders her.

TERMS

Chopin – A 19th century Polish-French composer famous for his solo piano works.

Uncle Tom's Cabin – The best-selling book of the 19th century, a landmark 1852 novel by the white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe that depicted the horrors of slavery but also advanced certain long-enduring stereotypes about African-Americans. The narrator reads *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during his youth and learns "who and what I was and what my country considered me."

Harriet Beecher Stowe – An influential Christian abolitionist writer best remembered for her novel Uncle Tom's Cabin.

"Toussaint L'Ouverture" (Lecture by Wendell Phillips) – An 1861 address by white abolitionist lawyer Wendell Phillips, the "Toussaint L'Ouverture" recounted the life story of the Haitian independence leader of the same name in order to demonstrate the inherent equality of white and black people and argue for the abolition of slavery. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became a popular graduation speech for black scholars like "**Shiny**."

Beethoven's "Sonata Pathétique" – Beethoven's famously tragic and haunting eighth piano sonata.

Atlanta University – Formerly the largest historically black university in the United States, founded in 1865 by a prominent abolitionist group in conjunction with the Freedmen's Bureau created to promote economic development and create educational opportunities for emancipated blacks. It was also James Weldon Johnson's alma mater, and it merged with Clark University in 1988 to form Clark Atlanta University.

Pullman Porters – Black railway employees who worked on the Pullman Car Company's sleeper trains. This was one of the first professions black Americans could access after the Civil War, and Pullman Porters are widely credited with helping develop a black middle class and advancing the Civil Rights Movement through collective bargaining in the 20th century.

Cuban rebels – Nationalist groups fighting for Cuban independence from Spain during the third and final War of Independence, from 1895-1898.

Cake-Walk – A dance developed by emancipated slaves in the South who imitated their former owners' ballroom dance styles; couples competed to show off their style and the winners would receive a cake or some other extravagant prize. It soon became an event of its own, and eventually it in turn became a target for imitation by whites, often in blackface minstrel shows.

Uncle Remus Stories – A collection of African-American folktales published by Joel Chandler Harris and presented as parables told by the fictional elder Uncle Remus.

Fisk Jubilee Songs – A repertoire of spirituals (religious songs written by enslaved black Americans) performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a touring *a capella* group active since 1871 and based at Fisk University in Nashville (where James Weldon

Johnson briefly taught).

Ragtime – An African-American musical style based on syncopation (stressing off-beats) that emerged in the Midwest in the closing years of the 19th century and rapidly gained popularity around the United States and, eventually, the world.

Minstrel – Performers in minstrel shows, a kind of performance theater popular until the mid-20th century in which performers, usually white actors in blackface, mocked black people by portraying exaggerated, stereotyped characters.

"Slumming" – Visiting people and in places of a lower socioeconomic status for the sake of entertainment—especially among affluent white people going to nonwhite areas and establishments.

"Darky" – A derogatory word for people of African descent, commonly used to push degrading stereotypes in racist representations like minstrel shows.

Havre – A port city in Normandy, on the northern coast of France.

Faust – A German folk tale that has been widely adapted to literature, theater, and film, most notably in two plays: Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (1592) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (published in two parts in 1808 and 1832). The operatic version that **the narrator** attends in chapter nine was French composer Charles Gounod's adaptation of an adaptation of Goethe's version of the tale. The story recounts an aging, brilliant but unsatisfied scholar who decides to sell his soul to the devil in return for unbridled power and knowledge.

Grand Opera – The primary French opera production company, or the internationally renowned Palais Garnier opera house where many of its most important pieces are performed.

Jim Crow – The systematic policies of racial discrimination and segregation in the South that ensured a lower quality of life and fewer access to resources for black Americans in the 100 years after the Civil War.

Howard University – A prominent, prestigious historically black university in Washington, DC.

W.E.B. Du Bois – An African-American scholar, activist, and professor at Atlanta University best remembered for his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois became the first black man to earn a doctorate at Harvard, helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (which James Weldon Johnson later headed), and campaigned for civil equality (in contrast to Booker T. Washington) not only for African-Americans, but also for colonized people throughout the world.

Zion – A term with different meanings in different religious traditions and contexts that generally refers metaphorically to a holy land of some sort (and most specifically to a hill in Jerusalem).

Lynching – Broadly, extralegal killing by a mob; specifically, the organized, public murder of black people by whites, who seldom faced punishment, as a tool to impose racial terror and white supremacy during Jim Crow in the South.

Eden Musée – An entertainment venue and wax museum in Manhattan, opened in 1884 and shut down in 1915.

Fauré's 13th Nocturne – The 19th century French composer Gabriel Fauré's final, solemn nocturne (piece of "night music") for piano.

Hampton Institute – A university created to educate free blacks after the end of slavery. Like Atlanta and Howard Universities, the Hampton Institute focused on practical training for industrial careers. Booker T. Washington was its most famous graduate, and it is now known as Hampton University.

Carnegie Hall – One of the world's most prestigious performance venues for music of all genres, located in New York and often used for lectures as well.

Booker T. Washington – A black activist, politician, and educator who was prominent and powerful from 1890 until 1915. Booker T. Washington was born into slavery less than a decade before emancipation and went on to the Hampton Institute before becoming a teacher and then the head of the Tuskegee Institute. He argued that black Americans should pursue gradual economic advancement and integration with white society through education, industrial training, and hard work rather than fighting discrimination and inequality. He famously feuded with W.E.B. DuBois, who instead argued that black activists should fight for political rights.

THEMES

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RACISM AND THE COLOR LINE

The mixed-race narrator of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* manages to move back and forth between the rigidly segregated worlds of black and white America at the turn of the twentieth century. Because he can "pass" for white, the narrator gets a firsthand look at the white Americans' violent prejudices and comes to understand that legal emancipation cannot improve the opportunities available to black Americans without a radical and sustainable change in white racist attitudes. Although this view of racism and inequality is relatively uncontroversial today, it was an

important intervention in national conversations about race when Johnson published this book more than a century ago. At the time, African-American politics centered on the question of whether blacks should work to improve their standing within a discriminatory society and win respect from whites (a view associated with Booker T. Washington) or demand political equality as human beings (a view associated with W.E.B. Du Bois). Crucially, the "ex-colored" narrator's chameleon-like ability to navigate both white and black America also shows how the sharp racial categories that continue to structure American life are fuzzy social constructs rather than biological realities.

The novel demonstrates that, unlike under slavery, when the systematic exploitation of black life and labor required white and black Americans to live in close quarters, by the turn of the twentieth century the model had shifted: the world was divided into two separate, unequal societies and racism operated through black citizens' exclusion from white institutions that offered economic opportunities, social prestige, and political power. Even in the narrator's remarkably integrated childhood town in Connecticut, race remains a crucial dividing line: he looks down on his black classmates until the teacher explicitly divides the white and black students, and he realizes he too is "colored." When he leaves Connecticut for Atlanta, the narrator marvels at how the black population seems to have developed its own, entirely separate society within the white-dominated South; he is unable to patronize white businesses and is confined to certain neighborhoods. Even in New York, the novel's black characters are mostly confined to a tiny, segregated black neighborhood in midtown Manhattan. As a result of this divided world, the narrator argues that white and black people are limited to particular, provincial viewpoints and unable to grasp the whole reality (like he is, since he can switch back and forth).

The narrator sees that this division is grounded in racism, which means that attitudinal change is a necessary component of racial justice. The narrator most distinctly realizes this when he watches a man from Texas and a former Union soldier—both of whom believe he is white—argue about whether "the Anglo-Saxon race" deserves to rule over other races, or whether instead different racial groups in America should have equal opportunities and self-determination. The Texan claims various historical achievements for "the Anglo-Saxon race" and goes so far as to say he would rather have "no country at all" than "niggers [ruling] over [him]." The narrator compares the logical gymnastics required to justify this theory to the astronomical distortions required to believe the Earth is the center of the solar system. White people's racism is bolstered by negative stereotypes about a certain class of African-Americans—the ostensibly poor, bitter victims that the narrator also looks down on—as well as stereotypes from literature (like the archetype of "happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking" rural Southern blacks) and entertainment (like those at minstrel shows). White supremacy is also internalized among black Americans, especially elites; the narrator's own cultural snobbishness and ultimate decision to give up his blackness are proof enough, but he also discusses, for instance, wealthy black people's tendency to marry people with "lighter complexions" and "whiten" the next generation.

The narrator's ability to navigate both black and white spaces merely because he is racially ambiguous undermines not only racist beliefs in white supremacy but also the more fundamental notion that race can be strictly determined and has some biological "truth." In other words, his very existence as a mixed-race man who is able to "pass" as either black or white proves how concepts of race and racism are socially constructed. The narrator's racial flexibility creates a handful of satirical moments, like when he distances himself from darker-skinned black men or gets taken for white in rural Georgia towns until he visits the black preacher's house. Indeed, in Jacksonville, he even manages to (supposedly) become a better Cuban than the Cubans: he rises up in the cigar factory and learns Spanish so quickly that he gets the job of reading newspapers and novels to the entire factory workforce. The preface takes up the fictiveness of race explicitly, arguing that the book exposes the phenomenon of passing in order to give a "bird's-eye view" of the American "race-drama." Whether the narrator appears as white or black depends on other people's expectations and the social context: when he plays ragtime at the "Club," nobody questions his blackness; when he has a cigar in the whites-only smoking car of his train to Atlanta, nobody questions his whiteness. No one ever sees him as mixed, or both white and black; instead, everyone demands a concept of racial purity, which is distinctly American and grounded in the "one-drop rule," or the assumption that anyone with any black blood automatically counts as black.

Although contemporary readers have probably been long familiar with the ideologies of racial purity and superiority that have sustained oppressive American institutions like slavery, Jim Crow, and now mass incarceration, James Weldon Johnson was exposing their mechanisms and arbitrariness at a crucial moment in American history, when the political conversation about racial equality had to grapple with what it would take to see and treat a formerly enslaved population as full human beings.

COLLECTIVE PROGRESS AND INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT

Throughout his life, the narrator maintains a tumultuous relationship with other African-Americans: he alternatingly disavows and identifies with his blackness, as well as the economic and political struggles of the more destitute and oppressed black people he encounters. Most of all, he consistently prioritizes his individual

achievement over his role in a racial community, even if he understands the necessity to fight collectively against racism. At the very end of his book, he declares that "I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage," alluding to the biblical story of Esau, who literally traded his right to authority over his family for a meal of lentil stew. In other words, the narrator realizes that, out of fear and shame, he sacrificed the African-American community's collective interests in order to live an unremarkable but comfortable life as a white man; indeed, collective progress and individual achievement were not contradictory but rather complementary goals, and his best chance to achieve something meaningful in the world was his opportunity to use his privileges to become a leader in the community. By deciding to "pass," he let himself fade into a "small and selfish" obscurity.

Virtually all of the African-Americans the narrator associates with come from the same elite, a small class able to rise socially because of its individual achievements. Compared to most of the book's other black characters, the narrator has a remarkably privileged upbringing: while he does experience some racism in his childhood, he lives in a relatively integrated town, wears **fancy clothes**, and seems like a "perfect little aristocrat" before he starts school, where he actually sides with the other white students against the black children. In Atlanta, the narrator mostly interacts with the middle-class Pullman Porters and is shocked to see poor "colored people in large numbers" and the segregated restaurants and boarding houses where they are forced to go. In Jacksonville, he joins "the best class of colored people" and resents the black "desperate class" that he thinks give the rest of his race a bad name; later, the Washington physician introduces him to the Northern black elite in Boston and Washington. And in New York, the narrator's acquaintances are limited to famous and wealthy blacks at the "Club," the walls of which are lined with "photographs or lithographs of every colored man in America who had ever 'done anything.'" None of the people he meets are politicians, activists, or community leaders with any interest in fighting racism.

This elite class is often even unwilling to confront racism, preferring to deny it (claiming they have overcome it) or lament that it happens to less fortunate people elsewhere. The Washington physician has astonishingly regressive views about race despite his education and success: he looks down on poorer African-Americans as "lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies" and insists that "I don't object to anyone's having prejudices so long as those prejudices don't interfere with my personal liberty." He has no sense of a collective black predicament; he is only concerned with his own career and "personal liberty." (Of course, prejudice *does* impact him—for instance, by preventing him from fraternizing with whites of his same economic class.) The narrator notes in Jacksonville and Georgia that this is a more general trend: affluent black people ignore the cultural achievements and daily struggles of lower-class blacks, refusing to see what they have in common and preferring to consider themselves a separate, superior class with no responsibility for the others. Of course, this is the same pattern that also leads white people to ignore civil rights struggles: for instance, the millionaire thoroughly understands American racism but still argues that people should make themselves "as happy as possible" and never "attempt to right the wrongs and ease the sufferings of the world," which "is a waste of effort."

Yet the book offers a number of character foils to the narrator who show that it is possible to find individual success precisely by advancing the struggle for justice. The author is an obvious example—he went to many of the same places and had many of the same interests as his narrator, but became one of the United States' most prominent civil rights leaders in the first half of the twentieth century. So is the narrator's childhood schoolmate "Shiny," who gives a powerful commencement speech to a white audience and later becomes a prominent professor at a black college. In the closing portion of the final chapter, the narrator sees Booker T. Washington speak, and the event is remarkably similar to Shiny's earlier oratory; this leads him to realize and regret the shortsightedness of escaping rather than fighting to liberate his race. In the South, the preacher John Brown and chorus-leader "Singing Johnson," while primarily church figures, also offer the same communal leadership as political activists like Shiny and Washington. While these figures are all relatively elite, unlike the part of the elite class that the narrator joins, these activists realize that they "carry the entire weight of the race question" and use their position to fight for equality. At the end of the book, the narrator declares that he has "sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" precisely because he realizes that it would have been possible for him to join *this* strand of the black elite.

Ultimately, the narrator justifies publishing his autobiography by arguing that it both reveals the "practical joke" he has played on society and also helps to resolve the sense of remorse he explains at the end of the book. In other words, it at once shows that he is capable of success despite his biological blackness and does something for the black community by portraying it faithfully for a wider audience. While he earlier sought to become famous in the world of white music through his compositions, the narrator ultimately realizes that it is more important for him to contribute to justice for the black community than win acceptance in the white world.

MUSIC, EMOTION, AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Throughout his life, the narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* finds solace, creative expression, and social status through music: because of its emotional power, it is perhaps the only thing in this book

(besides the protagonist himself) that crosses the otherwise rigid boundary between the white and black worlds. The narrator becomes an expert in the racialized registers of white classical music and black ragtime and slave hymns, and eventually he decides to combine them, "ragging" classical pieces and seeking to translate vernacular music into classical forms. While this might seem like a way to at least symbolically unite the conflicted halves of his identity and American society, it actually furthers the white appropriation, commodification, and distortion of black culture, which deprives its original producers of the fruits of their creative labor.

In this book, music is deeply tied to emotion, which allows it to cross the color line: it is perhaps the most important site for black creative expression and one of the few domains in which whites can take black culture seriously. At a party in Jacksonville, the narrator first observes the cake-walk and sees it as an example of black creative genius—two of his other three examples (the Jubilee songs and ragtime) are also musical. In fact, he notes that, lacking the United States' sharp division between black and white culture, Europeans simply call ragtime "American music." The narrator's success in both classical and black music comes from his ability to "play with feeling," putting his whole body into his performance. He also always finds love through music: his earliest crush is the violinist he accompanies, he woos the rich widow by playing the piano, and he both meets and reunites with his eventual wife because he was playing the piano and she was singing. The narrator's experience at the "big meeting" centers on the emotional effect of music: the preacher John Brown is effective not because of what he is saying but because of the way he modulates his voice for dramatic effect—the sermon is closer to song than speech. "Singing Johnson" organizes people around the country through collaborative call-and-response songs and manages to choose appropriate hymns to reinforce the most emotionally charged moments of John Brown's sermon. Music again becomes a way for black characters to make sense of their history of oppression and find the strength to fight against the incredible obstacles they continue to face from white supremacy.

Because he recognizes that music can translate across the color line, the narrator makes a career out of combining two genres from opposite social worlds: classical music and black vernacular music. Music is an integral part of the narrator's upbringing; from his earliest days, his mother would play the piano many evenings, and he started playing it himself in his early youth, imitating her songs by ear. In Connecticut, the narrator is trained to play classical music, but he later learns ragtime and manages to switch between the two depending on the social context and his desired effect—at the millionaire's party, he starts with a classical tune to signal the party's refinement and later impresses the guests with the "unique entertainment" of ragtime. There is also a contrast between the way classical and folk musicians learn their craft: the former undertake formal training and the latter learn by ear. Although the narrator had formal lessons from an early age, his earliest forays into music were learning to play his mother's piano songs by ear. In fact, he believed that, had the pianist at the "Club" been formally trained to play, he would be restricted by the conditions of his training and "would not have been so delightful." He would have been derivative, either copying the "masters" or trying to supersede them by rejecting harmony. But the most important musical moments in the text come when the narrator combines the two forms—he composes his own ragtime tunes by adapting classical tunes he already knows, and has his epiphany about his calling—to collect Southern folk songs—when he sees a German musician turn his ragtime back into a classical form.

The white absorption of black music into mainstream American culture also commodifies and exploits it, however. The narrator notes early on that ragtime is increasingly commodified and exploited by white musicians (who publish others' songs under their own names) and audiences (who appreciate it for its "exotic" qualities without acknowledging the performers or social contexts that created it). Indeed, the narrator also does both of these—he approaches ragtime more as a white performer than a black one. He becomes an "exotic" performer for the millionaire and the project that convinces him to leave Europe is precisely about taking credit for vernacular music that he did not create, publishing it under his own name and bringing it into the refined, documented register of white "culture" without acknowledging its actual creators. He does not combine black and classical music as equals, but rather subsumes the former to the latter.

At the "big meeting" in Georgia, the narrator emphasizes that the spirituals are an anonymous, collective, cathartic experience tied to the particular institution of the black church and its particular responses to black oppression; were he to adapt it to classical form, it would lose the historical and emotional context that actually made it revolutionary and unique. In a sense, the narrator's decision to abandon his project ultimately ends up preventing black vernacular music from going the way of ragtime and becoming decontextualized under the control of white musicians, producers, and distributors. In contrast to the narrator's attempt to subsume slave songs to "classic musical form," the author and his brother actually tried to document the same music on its own terms, creating transcriptions adequate to the songs' original contexts and methods of performance—they adapted form to the genre, not the genre to form.

SECRECY, PURITY, AND ORIGINS

Because his very existence transgresses the American racial order that demands the strict social, emotional, and sexual separation of white

and black people, the narrator's life is largely defined by the secrets he keeps from the world, from the secret of his paternity to that of his blackness. The novel itself—with its anonymous narrator and author, initially assumed to be the same person—relies on a similar secrecy about the truth of identity. Both kinds of secrecy in turn depend on a paradoxical relationship to origins: racism insists that whiteness and blackness are "pure" biological categories but sidesteps the fact that nobody has "pure" origins by refusing to acknowledge people's true ancestry; Western artistic values insist that the author must be the sole source of their work and therefore cannot acknowledge that art always depends on people's lived experiences in addition to their imagination.

Because white Americans are bound to an ideology of racial purity, in which whiteness means exclusively white ancestry, relationships between white and black characters—and, indeed, most interaction between them—is always a closely-guarded secret in this book. Throughout the book, the narrator's father remains a secret because miscegenation is a taboo. The narrator and his mother move North because of his father's impending marriage to a white woman from another prominent Southern family. His mother then refuses to talk about his father for many years, until the narrator meets him again. When the narrator encounters him for the last time, years later in Paris, he cannot say anything because he risks exposing the secret of his existence to his half-sister. In turn, when the narrator becomes a father himself, he and his wife also keep his race a secret from his children; just as he was raised black despite his white father, his children are raised white despite their black father. Given the strong taboo against miscegenation, then, it is unsurprising that his wife initially disappears for a whole summer when he tells her he is black. In fact, intermixture between blacks and whites consistently occurs behind closed doors because it poses a threat to the racial order of strict segregation imposed formally in the South and informally in the North after the Civil War. The gambling bar and "Club" are both secret establishments; the narrator can only enter them because he knows the right people, mixed-race couples like the widow and her companion can only meet there, and their most transgressive elements—the game of dice that includes both black and white players, and the pianist's ragtime performances—are in hidden back rooms. In turn, when he first performs at the millionaire's apartment, the narrator plays classical music in front of the white guests and then moves to an adjacent room, out of sight, to play ragtime.

The novel's narrative structure and public reception also depend on secrecy about its author's origins. The narrator is careful to hide his identity, and none of the characters in this book have names, except for the two who would be otherwise forgotten by the world and erased from history: the pastor John Brown and the chorus leader "Singing Johnson." The preface emphasizes that "passing" is a relatively common phenomenon, but unknown because it relies on secrecy; of course, the preface is attributed to "the publishers" but was actually written by Johnson. At the beginning of the first chapter, the narrator echoes this sentiment, explaining his fear that he will be discovered but insisting that his life has been "a practical joke on society." Fearing for his own future as a diplomat, James Weldon Johnson insisted on publishing the book in secret, which also hid the fact that it was fiction: early readers believed it was a true story and, when he admitted his authorship, insisted that it must have been an accurate picture of his life (even though he could by no means "pass" for white).

By shrouding race and authorship in secrecy, Johnson shows how Western culture's parallel demands for pure racial and authorial origins are self-undermining: because both are so central to concepts of proper social order and artistic value, people are more comfortable accepting convenient stories about both than confronting the fact that no racial order or work of art is "pure." The narrator sees ragtime and slave songs as underappreciated because their origins are not identifiable—they cannot be traced back to single composers, even though "nothing great or enduring, especially in music, has ever sprung full-fledged and unprecedented from the brain of any master." While his project collecting black music in the rural South follows from this rejection of pure genius, it is also an attempt to create a myth around authorship, which presumably could let white observers see slave hymns and ragtime as valuable cultural products—because they are works of artistic genius, and not merely because they are entertaining or musically noteworthy. When Johnson compiled his own *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, in contrast, he did not pretend to be their author but rather emphasized their anonymous and collective origins. While readers initially assumed the novel to be pure autobiography and later saw it as pure fiction, in fact it blurs the boundaries between the two: Johnson took settings and experiences from his life in order to create a character whose mindset and decisions are entirely opposite his own.

Because the racial order of twentieth-century America relied on the assumption that a person's ancestry was legible on their skin, people like the narrator could "pass" by keeping their genetic origins secret, much like Johnson's novel "passed" as genuine autobiography by insisting on its author's anonymity. But anonymity can also be a valuable strategy for people who wish to expose the futility of organizing the world around origins—it allows people like Johnson (in terms of authorship) and his narrator (in terms of race) to speak the truth that nothing is "pure" while avoiding the social consequences of declaring that they and their work are hybrid products, possible only because of the mixture between different groups, on the one hand, and imagination and experience, on the other.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CLOTHING AND JEWELRY

Most obviously, clothes signify their wearers' wealth and social status—as when the narrator's father wears shiny shoes, the narrator himself dresses like "a little aristocrat" before starting school, and the rich widow and her companion are decked out in diamonds, but also when the losing dice players are forced to sell their own clothes and wear cheap replacements until they can win them back. Since the narrator is so perpetually enamored with wealth, other characters' elegant clothes signal for him to emulate and respect them. Indeed, from his earliest days in Connecticut, the narrator felt he was distinguished because his mother dressed him well. Later, when the millionaire buys him expensive Parisian designs, the narrator sees this as an economic achievement that makes him his benefactor's equal.

More importantly, clothes and jewelry also serve as an important metaphor for race and identity. In both cases, external appearances determine how one is viewed and interpreted by others, and especially what communities (of race and class, respectively) one is assumed to belong to. However, while race is ostensibly immutable—except perhaps in the narrator's unique case—clothes are, to an extent, within people's control: they signal how people see themselves as much as how the world is to see them. When Shiny speaks at the Connecticut school's graduation ceremony, the narrator notes that his formal clothing "did not fit him any too well" and underlines the seriousness of his struggle against racism: the fact that he looks wrong in upper-class dress shows how dissonant it seems for blacks to live comfortably, and this social advancement is precisely what Shiny is fighting for. In his childhood, when his father visits him in Connecticut, the narrator cannot figure out who he is until he sees the shiny shoes and hat that remind him of the man from his childhood; these clothes stand in for what is, to everyone else, the narrator's father's most remarkable characteristic: his whiteness. More subtly, this points to the unequal relationship between the narrator's parents: his mother was his father's family's sewing-girl, so his father's beautiful clothes were in fact the product of his mother's labor, just as white intergenerational wealth in the United States largely grew out of the value expropriated from black slave labor.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W.W. Norton edition of *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* published in 2015.

Preface Quotes

It is very likely that the Negroes of the United States have a fairly correct idea of what the white people of the country think of them, for that opinion has for a long time been and is still being constantly stated; but they are themselves more or less a sphinx to the whites.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the preface, "the publishers" (actually James Weldon Johnson) argue that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* exposes unknown truths about black American life—including the experiences of various social classes of African-Americans but also people who "pass" like the narrator. They clearly address their words to a white readership, which reflects the author's understanding that improving the living conditions of and opportunities available to black Americans requires teaching white Americans to empathize with them as human beings and understand the complexity of their varied experiences rather than reducing them all to convenient stereotypes or narratives about supposedly inherent racial traits.

Indeed, "the publishers" argue that black experiences of slavery and subjugation have led African-Americans to understand themselves from an outside white perspective as a matter of survival and necessity; in fact, some of the book's characters go so far as to see other blacks through this same lens, imagining themselves as special exceptions to the rule and breaking down the notion that racial traits are inherent to everyone with black skin even as they face these same stereotypes from whites. Of course, the narrator's experience and the preface itself demonstrates that blacks understand the white perspective better than whites understand blacks', even though the latter is truly necessary to make equality possible for African-Americans. The ostensibly white "publishers" are actually just the author "passing" like his narrator.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it. I feel that I am led by the same impulse which forces the un-found-out criminal to take somebody into his confidence, although he knows that the act is likely, even almost certain, to lead to his undoing. I know that I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's short introduction to his story parallels that of "the publishers" in the preface, with one key difference: even though he has lived most of his life as white, the narrator is now writing as a black man to a black audience, the only group that could truly understand the thrilling "practical joke" of dispelling the world's racial prejudice by simply neglecting to mention one's race, without changing one's personality at all. Indeed, the narrator's "practical joke" demonstrates how race and racism are jokes of the same order: even though many whites believe African-descended people are inherently, even genetically inferior to themselves, they actually cannot tell the difference between a white man and a black man except by the color of his skin. This alone proves that different races are fundamentally equal, their differences the product of social relations and not genetics, just as the narrator's mixed-race heritage and ability to navigate both white and black communities prove that the very notion of racial difference is also a social construct.

"Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?"

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), "Shiny", "Red Head", The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator first goes to school in Connecticut, he is repulsed by the "little savages" he meets in his class and quickly aligns himself with the white students, making friends with the ungainly "Red Head" throwing stones at black students he calls "niggers" even though he also recognizes that "Shiny," whose skin is "black as night," is the smartest and most motivated student in his class. When the teacher explicitly separates the white and black students, the narrator realizes for the first time that he is "colored" and, when he gets home, he stares at himself in the mirror, studying his features for signs of his blackness.

This passage shows not merely the narrator's racial ambiguity—he "passes" even to himself—but also how people have to learn about their (and others') racial difference from the "neutral" identity of whiteness: the narrator quickly learns that being nonwhite is a mark of inferiority, for he thinks only in terms of white students and "niggers," and simply assumes he is white until he and his classmates learn otherwise. Since he is one among the white students at school, he realizes that race does not reflect inherent difference even though he sees the clear social differences between the white and black students. He even needs to ask his mother to confirm his identity in order to make sense of how he can feel and seem white but truly "be" black.

The narrator's sudden switch from whiteness to blackness shows how the American system of racial classification is based on an untenable notion of racial purity—even though the narrator is actually *both* white and black, whiteness and blackness are conceived as opposite characteristics pertaining to opposite social groups in the United States, and "one drop" of black blood is historically the standard for classifying someone as black (specifically, this was codified so that the children of white masters and their black slaves would remain enslaved). The narrator can only ever be recognized as black or white, even though, as a biracial man, he lives as both throughout his life.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"Father, father," that was the word which had been to me a source of doubt and perplexity ever since the interview with my mother on the subject. [...] And here he stood before me, just the kind of looking father I had wishfully pictured him to be; but I made no advance toward him; I stood there feeling embarrassed and foolish, not knowing what to say or do. I am not sure but that he felt pretty much the same.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Narrator's Mother, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After remaining a mystery for years, the narrator's white father suddenly appears unannounced at the family's home in Connecticut; the narrator has to cope not only with meeting his father for the first time (although he does have vague memories of the man from childhood) but also with making sense of why his mother has kept his father's identity secret for so long. "The kind of looking father I had wishfully pictured him to be" is clearly the narrator's coded way of saying that he always imagined and hoped his father to be white: even after he recognizes and accepts that he is black, the narrator still seems to take pride in the prospect of having white ancestry, yet the abstract value his internalized racism gives to his father does not mitigate the horrible awkwardness of their actual encounter. Even though his mother expects the narrator to immediately recognize and love his father, the distance between them is clear and makes him view the encounter as a brief social performance rather than a heartfelt reunion.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ In none of her talks did she ever utter one word of complaint against my father. She always endeavored to impress upon me how good he had been and still was, and that he was all to us that custom and the law would allow. She loved him; more, she worshiped him, and she died firmly believing that he loved her more than any other woman in the world. Perhaps she was right. Who knows?

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Narrator's Mother, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's mother's attitude toward his father is as romantic as it is tragic: she seems to think that Southern prejudice got in the way of their love, and that she could not be with him because a black woman could never marry a white man in the post-Civil War South. In this passage, the narrator also implies that perhaps his mother was in denial of the fact that as a black woman, she was insignificant and disposable to his father; the fact that the narrator's father never responds when the narrator's mother writes him on her deathbed supports this more unfortunate picture. While it comes from love, the narrator's mother's seemingly blind reverence for his father also points to many other black characters' tendency to worship whites instead of recognizing the difficult reality of their subjugation. This also demonstrates the unequal emotional interdependence between the class of black domestic servants and their masters, which the narrator explicates in the following chapter: the former love and depend for their identity and well-being on the latter, who love but can easily replace them (equally as laborers and as affective objects).

However, the question of the nature of his parents' relationship remains open, and the narrator takes little interest in resolving the mystery of his paternity; he sees that his mother's narrative comforts her and gives her life meaning, even if it is the product of self-deception. Of course, the narrator's eventual marriage to a white woman shows that interracial love is certainly possible, no matter how thoroughly it violates social taboos.

❝ He made a striking picture, that thin little black boy standing on the platform, dressed in clothes that did not fit him any too well, his eyes burning with excitement, his shrill, musical voice vibrating in tones of appealing defiance, and his black face alight with such great intelligence and earnestness as to be positively handsome. [...] I think there must have rushed over him a feeling akin to that of a gladiator tossed into the arena and bade to fight for his life. I think that solitary little black figure standing there felt that for the particular time and place he bore the weight and responsibility of his race; that for him to fail meant general defeat; but he won, and nobly.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), "Shiny"

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Shiny's moving speech is the book's first example of black characters successfully reaching out to whites and making an unapologetic case for political equality. However, the

lecture Shiny delivers was originally written by a white man before becoming a common graduation oratory for black students, and it simply recounts the story of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, suggesting that his incredible accomplishments prove that blacks are not inferior to whites. Even though he seems to be convincing his white audience, Shiny is like "a gladiator tossed into the arena," fighting to be taken seriously and seen as credible even though he is by far the best student in the narrator's class.

The narrator explicitly makes his classmate stand for African-Americans as a collective, using Shiny's clothes and small frame as a metaphor for blacks' status as underdogs, forced to appeal to their powerful oppressors for the rights they deserve and forced to prove their competence in navigating the norms and expectations of the white world in order to win the opportunity to be taken seriously. Of course, Shiny also offers a salient contrast to the narrator himself, who uses his savvy among whites for his individual advancement, not the struggle of the black collective.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ They filled the shops and thronged the sidewalks and lined the curb. I asked my companion if all the colored people in Atlanta lived in this street. He said they did not and assured me that the ones I saw were of the lower class. I felt relieved, in spite of the size of the lower class. The unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion. Only one thing about them awoke a feeling of interest; that was their dialect. I had read some Negro dialect and had heard snatches of it on my journey down from Washington; but here I heard it in all of its fullness and freedom.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The First Pullman Porter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

This is the narrator's first encounter with a segregated black community, but also with impoverished people of any race, and his initial reaction is "almost repulsion." In this passage, the narrator wants to distance himself and the middle-class Pullman Porter accompanying him from the people he sees, justifying his superior social status even as he finds their speech fascinating and exotic. His own overly formal manner contrasts starkly with this community's informal speech and witty humor. The narrator sees this as the only redeeming part about them, which foreshadows the way he eventually participates in the selective commodification and renunciation of different aspects of blackness: he uses his race to woo the white widow and sets out to publish black vernacular music under his own name, but continues to blame people for their own poverty and ultimately decides to give up his blackness altogether.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ I said somewhere in the early part of this narrative that because the colored man looked at everything through the prism of his relationship to society as a *colored* man, and because most of his mental efforts ran through the narrow channel bounded by his rights and his wrongs, it was to be wondered at that he has progressed so broadly as he has. The same thing may be said of the white man of the South; most of his mental efforts run through one narrow channel; his life as a man and a citizen, many of his financial activities, and all of his political activities are impassably limited by the ever present "Negro question." [...] In this respect I consider the conditions of the whites more to be deplored than that of the blacks.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

After he moves to Jacksonville and joins the city's "best class of colored people," the narrator begins developing a nuanced understanding of the forces that perpetuate racism and racial inequality in the United States. He learns how racism operates psychologically, limiting blacks' perceptions of themselves and their possibilities in the world—of course, one central purpose of his book is to widen this sense of possibility. The narrator also sees that black people must constantly confront and fight for survival in a society designed to oppress them, but that this constant struggle is as important an element of the push for civil rights as the explicit calls for abolition and then equality; it is precisely what convinces white America to heed political leaders' call that blacks are fully human. In this sense, the struggle for civil rights is a war of attrition against white racist attitudes—the narrator sees justice an inevitability

and whites as "more to be deplored" because they are simply "us[ing] up [their] energies" to blockade and delay blacks' inevitable achievement of equality. In this sense, whites, too, have their lives dominated by the racism they perpetuate.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The game was really interesting, the players being quite expert, and the excitement was heightened by the bets which were being made on the result. At times the antics and remarks of both players and spectators were amusing. When, at a critical point, a player missed a shot, he was deluged, by those financially interested in his making it, with a flood of epithets synonymous with "chump"; While from the others he would be jeered by such remarks as "Nigger, dat cue ain't no hoe-handle." I noticed that among this class of colored men the word "nigger" was freely used in about the same sense as the word "fellow," and sometimes as a term of almost endearment; but I soon learned that its use was positively and absolutely prohibited to white men.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49-50

Explanation and Analysis

As in Atlanta and Jacksonville, when the narrator stumbles upon a dice game in New York, he is fascinated by the new variety of black culture he encounters. The men's banter is interesting most of all because it re-signifies the word "nigger," turning it from a racist slur into a term of endearment used among one another. Beyond demonstrating that even language operates differently across the color line, this also demonstrates the sort of double consciousness that Johnson emphasizes in the preface: the dice-players clearly understand what "nigger" means in the white world and mark their own community's separation from it by inverting the word's meaning and gesturing to their mutual understanding of their oppression. However, the narrator's surprise also shows that he only develops this more comprehensive understanding in time, as he transitions from the mindset of a white man to one of a man of color—he begins using the word "nigger" when he thinks he is white and only later learns that its original, violent meaning can be undermined.

❝ American musicians, instead of investigating ragtime, attempt to ignore it, or dismiss it with a contemptuous word. But that has always been the course of scholasticism in every branch of art. Whatever new thing the people like is pooh-poohed; whatever is popular is spoken of as not worth the while. The fact is, nothing great or enduring, especially in music, has ever sprung full-fledged and unprecedented from the brain of any master; the best that he gives to the world he gathers from the hearts of the people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius. In spite of the bans which musicians and music teachers have placed upon it, the people still demand and enjoy ragtime. One thing cannot be denied; it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness: it appeals universally.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Pianist at the "Club"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator first hears the pianist play ragtime at the "Club," he is immediately entranced and confused; he then breaks from his narrative's chronology to offer this retrospective digression about the character and critical reception of ragtime. He sees opposing ideologies of authorship as central to critics' dismissal of black music: whereas Western tradition expects greatness to have "sprung full-fledged and unprecedented" from an author, ragtime was not the product of any "pure" artistic intention, but was instead shaped by and inseparable from particular social and historical contexts. Of course, the narrator's later attempt to sell black vernacular songs as his own compositions reflects his understanding of both these ideologies of authorship—he wants to pass off the latter as the former, to trick white critics that he invented what he merely interpreted and collected. This also parallels this book's process of authorship: Johnson apparently invented a *sui generis* life for his narrator only by gathering settings and events from his own life.

In this passage, the narrator also points out how music manages to overcome the color line (which itself functions differently in Europe than in the United States). Ragtime is universal because of its "heel-tickling, smile-provoking, joy-awakening charm," which suggests that music's value stems more from its effect on the listener than its formal qualities. This also recalls how classical music first appealed to the narrator because of the emotional resonances of his mother's playing. In both cases, music surpasses social

divisions by evoking an emotional response in everyone, regardless of their standing in the world, and uniting the crowd in their shared reaction to the performance.

❝ I began to wonder what this man with such a lavish natural endowment would have done had he been trained. Perhaps he wouldn't have done anything at all; he might have become, at best, a mediocre imitator of the great masters in what they have already done to a finish, or one of the modern innovators who strive after originality by seeing how cleverly they can dodge about through the rules of harmony and at the same time avoid melody. It is certain that he would not have been so delightful as he was in ragtime.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Pianist at the "Club"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54-5

Explanation and Analysis

After watching the pianist at the "Club" and lauding ragtime as a groundbreaking musical form, the narrator wonders whether traditional classical music not only fails to appreciate vernacular genres like ragtime, but actually rejects the terms of their innovation: he suggests here that a classical curriculum might actually train the natural talent out of people by teaching them to pursue rigid standards of musical greatness, which depend on the music of the European past. He sees an opposition between natural and cultivated talent, which points to his own complex early relationship with music: he first learned by imitating his mother, which led him to "play with feeling" and is arguably more responsible for his success than his classical training. This is also deeply ironic, for he later becomes a "mediocre imitator" of earlier ragtime artists and "modern innovator" in the genre by adapting classical music to its form.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ My glance immediately turned into a stare. Yes, there he was, unmistakably, my father! looking hardly a day older than when I had seen him some ten years before. What a strange coincidence! What should I say to him? What would he say to me? Before I had recovered from my first surprise, there came another shock in the realization that the beautiful, tender girl at my side was my sister. Then all the springs of affection in my heart, stopped since my mother's death, burst out in fresh and terrible torrents, and I could have fallen at her feet and worshiped her. They were singing the second act, but I did not hear the music. Slowly the desolate loneliness of my position became clear to me.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

When he goes to the Grand Opera in Paris, the narrator is astonished to find his father and a woman who is presumably his half-sister sitting nearby. The narrator realizes that his father has led an ordinary life without him, whether because racism prevented his parents from ever living together or because his father never truly cared about the narrator and his mother. Crucially, the narrator's feelings in this moment center on his *sister* and not his father—she represents not only his lost maternal love but also the possibility of joining a unified white family. In other words, the narrator's half-sister is a sign that his endless attempts to whiten himself can never overcome the original trauma of his race: separation from his family and birthright. Indeed, although Paris is certainly less racist than the United States at this historical moment, the narrator is likely passing for white at the opera, perhaps without even realizing it—he has reencountered his father only by rendering his blackness invisible, much like he won his favor in childhood by playing a Chopin piece.

The opera *Faust* is an appropriate backdrop for this moment, as it gestures to not only the narrator's own impending deal with the devil (he sacrifices his identity in exchange for the privileges of whiteness) but also his father's decision to forsake his original family in exchange for his own continued life of privilege. Finally, this episode foreshadows the narrator's later encounter with his old classmate Shiny, who does successfully catch up with him without revealing the narrator's race to his white wife—this

later episode might lead the reader to wonder why the narrator did not try and achieve a limited reconciliation with his father, signaling his identity without revealing it to his sister.

> He seated himself at the piano, and, taking the theme of my ragtime, played it through first in straight chords; then varied and developed it through every known musical form. I sat amazed. I had been turning classic music into ragtime, a comparatively easy task; and this man had taken ragtime and made it classic. The thought came across me like a flash—It can be done, why can't I do it? From that moment my mind was made up. I clearly saw the way of carrying out the ambition I had formed when a boy.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Millionaire

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator and the millionaire visit Berlin, they end up at a party full of musicians. After the narrator performs ragtime, another one of the guests immediately inverts the narrator's signature move by turning ragtime into classical form. This inspires the narrator to pursue the project that takes him back to the United States: collecting as-yet-unknown vernacular black music, translating it into white classical music, and publishing it under his own name. Just like when performing for the millionaire led the narrator to value ragtime for its effect on white audiences, here the narrator begins to conceive his potential in terms of his ability to woo the classical music world and his obligations to African-Americans as secondary. He takes advantage of the fact that Western audiences expect to trace music to single, autonomous composers, while black vernacular music emerges anonymously in communities; by watching the German musician subsume black music to the demands of classical form, he decides that he might achieve his potential by doing the same back in the United States.

> "My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle, of the black people of the United States? Then look at the terrible handicap you are placing on yourself by going home and working as a Negro composer; you can never be able to get the hearing for your work which it might deserve. I doubt that even a white musician of recognized ability could succeed there by working on the theory that American music should be based on Negro themes. Music is a universal art; anybody's music belongs to everybody; you can't limit it to race or country. Now, if you want to become a composer, why not stay right here in Europe?"

Related Characters: The Millionaire (speaker), The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man"

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator reveals his plans to return to the United States and translate black music into classical form for a broad audience, the millionaire protests: he thinks that the narrator is sacrificing his individual success and comfort for a dream that will inevitably be blocked by prejudice. Because he sees the narrator as having essentially freed himself of his racial identity, the millionaire wonders why the narrator would return to the black community he has seemingly escaped, sacrificing his independence in order to advance the public perception of black music—ironically, the narrator actually sees himself as pursuing his own self-interest by doing so.

The millionaire's insistence that music is universal has multiple, complex consequences in this book. For one, the narrator's equal interest in black and classical music shows that, as an art form, it truly can cross the color line and win interest from anyone open to hearing it—yet, due to entrenched cultural divisions and prejudice, black music has trouble winning white audiences, with occasional exceptions (like the millionaire himself). Whereas the millionaire suggests that working as a black composer would make the narrator's art provincial rather than universal, he instead proposes sticking to the Western classical music that he perceives as universal despite its distinct historical and geographical origins. In short, while Johnson seems to agree that music is universal in the sense that it can *go* anywhere and be appreciated by any audience, he rejects the millionaire's insistence that music is only universal if it *comes from* nowhere in particular (which,

among white audiences, is usually ethnocentric shorthand for coming from their own Western tradition).

> I could see, in spite of the absolute selfishness upon which it was based, that there was reason and common sense in [his argument]. I began to analyze my own motives, and found that they, too, were very largely mixed with selfishness. Was it more a desire to help those I considered my people or more a desire to distinguish myself, which was leading me back to the United States? That is a question I have never definitely answered.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Millionaire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In deciding whether to remain in Europe or return to the United States, the narrator feels caught between two desires: the selfish desires to live comfortably amidst white society and distinguish himself as an artist, and the ostensibly selfless desire to help "my people," which he soon realizes his music is unlikely to do. He sees this tension between self-interest and self-sacrifice as a common predicament for educated black Americans, but it is in fact one shared by everyone—although whites seldom acknowledge or confront their potential to do anything about structural racism. In one sense, the narrator realizes that his notion of common interest might be more an excuse than a real justification for his quest to popularize black music; while he seems to realize that the common interest is a better principle by which to live his life, he nevertheless comfortably accepts a selfish explanation to refute the millionaire's insistence that he should live more selfishly still, by staying in Europe.

Chapter 10 Quotes

> I sat often with the tears rolling down my cheeks and my heart melted within me. Any musical person who has never heard a Negro congregation under the spell of religious fervor sing these old songs, has missed one of the most thrilling emotions which the human heart may experience. Anyone who can listen to Negroes sing, "Nobody knows de trouble I see, Nobody knows but Jesus," without shedding tears, must indeed have a heart of stone.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), John Brown, "Singing Johnson"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

At the "big meeting" in rural Georgia, the narrator watches a congregation led by "Singing Johnson" perform old hymns from the days of slavery. As usual, the narrator only truly feels emotion through music. In this passage, like when he originally heard his mother's songs or ragtime, the narrator realizes the profound emotional impact and artistic value of black music by experiencing its role in collective emotional life firsthand. These hymns are as important for their cathartic function as for their aesthetic qualities—indeed, they might seem out of place performed for a white audience in New York, deprived of the context of religious worship and historical trauma that lends them their special power.

> As yet, the Negroes themselves do not fully appreciate these old slave songs. The educated classes are rather ashamed of them and prefer to sing hymns from books. This feeling is natural; they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced; but the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator confirms that whites are not the only ones to unfairly denigrate slave songs; upper-class blacks also look down on vernacular music because they prefer to focus on their present material success over the pain of slavery. Notably, this class's preference for "hymns from books" reflects Western norms of documentation and authorship that divide classical from vernacular music. This suggests that upper-class blacks are also worried about proving their refined tastes to the white world, much like they tend to marry lighter-skinned spouses in an attempt to "whiten" the next generation. Again, this hinges on the

conflict between self-interest ("the educated classes" want to separate themselves from the history of slavery) and the common interest (advancing black art).

> It was over before I realized that time had elapsed. Before I could make myself believe that what I saw was really happening, I was looking at a scorched post, a smoldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain; and the smell of burnt flesh—human flesh—was in my nostrils.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

When the protagonist watches a white mob lynch a black man in Georgia, he inverts his usual mode of narration: instead of skirting details, covering years in mere paragraphs, he gives a long and detailed explanation of the lynching before insisting that it actually happened in a matter of seconds. He offers a level of sensory detail unparalleled anywhere else in the book, proving how intensely this event impacted him and making an appeal to the reader.

Although he is a spectator, assumed to be white, the narrator clearly identifies with the man and understands that he could just as easily been the one lynched, had his blackness been recognizable—the smell in his nostrils is that of burning flesh and the lingering sense of disbelief at a senseless crime carried out with impunity. Suddenly, after years of seeing the color line from a distance, through the ways it limited him to certain social spaces and prevented whites and blacks from appreciating one another's music, he finally sees the depth of racism's evil firsthand. Presumably, the narrator also recognizes the inadequacy of his own solution, for the acceptance of black music could never stop the indiscriminate murder of black people in the South.

> I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

After he witnesses the most horrible kind of crime with which Southern whites continued to terrorize African-Americans after slavery, the narrator's reaction is not to dedicate himself even more strongly to the fight against racism, but rather to give up the fight altogether—to refuse to bear the psychological burden of recognizing that much of his country considers his race lesser than animals. Although he is fundamentally ashamed at the United States, the narrator's shame emerges in this passage as shame at his own blackness; it is important not to confuse his shame at being denigrated with a more conventional kind of shame at having acted wrongly, for he feels ashamed because of others' guilt and not because of his own. However, he also separates this shame from "discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity," which makes it clear that this is a selfish shame—a shame disconnected from his feelings about his compositional work and the still-achievable prospect of advancing his race.

Yet the narrator's peculiar ethnic ambiguity also makes this shame peculiar; he scarcely knows when he is subject to the "label of inferiority." In order to switch races and live as white, he need not change anything about his appearance or even "claim the white race"; he merely needs to change his mindset, to move through the world expecting the privileges of whiteness. Like the narrator's time "passing" in Europe and the train car down to Macon, this passage again makes it clear that he needed not renounce his blackness in order to live as white when convenient; he could have easily continued to live a hybrid life, moving back and forth between the white and black worlds that both accepted him on face.

Chapter 11 Quotes

What an interesting and absorbing game is money making!

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

When he moves back to New York after disavowing his race, the narrator gets a crash course in white privilege. When he still identified himself as black, he was confined to a small corner of Manhattan and was unwilling to pursue work besides cigar-rolling, even if his appearance never would have barred him from the white world's acceptance. Now, however, he visits the sights he never saw, enrolls in a business school, easily finds work even after dropping out, and even briefly becomes a slumlord. He sees, in a nutshell, how horribly *easy* it is to advance in the business world without race as an obstacle. However, his career is also emptied of its personal meaning; he no longer organizes his life around his passion for music, a fulfilling community, or a burning desire for social change, but rather sees life dispassionately as a "game" with little consequence for his, or anyone else's, survival and well-being. He learns that, across the color line, white people do not perpetuate the economic system that largely excludes and oppresses blacks because of their explicit prejudice or dogged efforts to ensure black inferiority; in the North, at least, elite whites simply see themselves as playing a fair and neutral "game."

"I understand, understand even better than you, and so I suffer even more than you. But why should either of us suffer for what neither of us is to blame for? If there is any blame, it belongs to me and I can only make the old, yet strongest plea that can be offered, I love you; and I know that my love, my great love, infinitely overbalances that blame and blots it out. What is it that stands in the way of our happiness? It is not what you feel or what I feel; it is not what you are or what I am. It is what others feel and are. But, oh! is that a fair price? In all the endeavors and struggles of life, in all our strivings and longings, there is only one thing worth seeking, only one thing worth winning, and that is love. It is not always found; but when it is, there is nothing in all the world for which it can be profitably exchanged."

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker), The Narrator's Wife / The Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

After meeting and beginning a relationship with the white woman who later becomes his wife, the narrator finally decides to reveal his true racial heritage to her before proposing marriage—but, horrified, she leaves in tears and disappears to visit relatives in another state for the summer. He writes her this letter in an attempt to win her back but gets little more than a formal acknowledgment in response. Her reaction is, he realizes, more akin to the shame that led him to give up his race than a product of her own racism. In fact, this is the only instance in which he ever reveals his secret, even to her—and he does not even explicitly mention it in his letter. Indeed, her reaction points to how white people so often perpetuate racism not because of their private prejudice but because they fear the judgment of others and, like the narrator and his wife, can sidestep it completely by dissociating themselves from blackness.

In this letter, the narrator argues for the omnipotence of love through the vocabulary of the high-powered, white business world he has recently joined. Love "overbalances that blame" and exceeds the terms of "profitabl[e] exchange." This language suggests that, despite his black blood, the narrator has thoroughly integrated himself into the white business world.

It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109-110

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his autobiography, the ex-colored man returns to the book's most troubling, fundamental question: is he *really* black or white—and how might the reader determine

this? In terms of the rigid American system of racial classification, he is clearly black; in terms of his life and social circles, he is obviously white. Genetically, he is both. However, it seems that, more than any of these external, technical definitions, what matters most of all is which racial community he identifies his disposition, affinity, and common interest with. His journey into the white world has not changed his "strange longing" to play a part in the black community, and his ability to live publicly as white but privately as black shows that race is ultimately a socially contingent product of historical and social circumstances rather than a system of bounded or absolute human categories.

> I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. They are men who are making history and a race. I, too, might have taken part in a work so glorious.
>
> My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator or "Ex-Colored Man" (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Before choosing to live as white, the narrator felt that he had the choice between fighting an uphill battle for any recognition whatsoever if he chose to continue living as black or finding relatively guaranteed success and comfort by letting the world perceive him as a white man. Years later, his picture of his options in life has not changed. However, the narrator realizes that comfort and success are exhaustible and broadly insignificant goals, in no way comparable to what his music documentation project, in its best and most altruistic version, might have represented: the opportunity to—like the author—join the history of both American music and the African-American struggle for equality.

The narrator's final words—"I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage"—is an allusion to the biblical story of Esau, who literally sold his birthright over the family for a bowl of lentil stew. The narrator's "birthright" refers to his membership in the black race and potential to shape its future, which he "sold" for the immediate but unfulfilling comforts of money, status, and property. This is, of course, Johnson's exhortation to the reader: not only should comfortable white Americans consider the political efforts of their black countrymen, which will forever change and be remembered in history, but also the black elite should recognize that "making history and a race" is a far more noble and weighty cause than pursuing their own material comfort without regard for the rest of the black community.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

"The publishers" declare that this book offers a "vivid and startlingly new picture" of American race relations "as they actually exist"; rather than making any "special pleas," like those in books with skewed depictions of African-Americans, this book is "a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race." Black Americans know all too well what whites think of them, but also that their true selves are invisible. This book "draw[s] aside" America's interracial veil and shows how some light-skinned black people choose to pass as white and avoid the pressure of prejudice. This book shows this secret "race-drama" from a comfortable "bird's-eye view."

This preface is not merely an introduction to Johnson's novel, even though it claims to act as something of a stamp of validity on the narrative. Johnson writes on behalf of "the publishers," paradoxically claiming white authority to expose the untold story of black American life and revealing this book's complex relationship to the truth: the world and many of the events it reveals are true, but the character who recounts them is not.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator explains that this writing gives away his greatest, most carefully maintained secret, much like a criminal who tells someone about his deeds, knowing that it may compromise him. The danger is thrilling, but the narrator wants to "gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society." He is also seeking to escape a lingering sense of remorse that he plans to explain in the book's last paragraph.

The remorse in question here is the narrator's disappointment that he chose an ordinary white life over the chance to shape black history. While his decision to live as white was a personal "tragedy" he now regrets but cannot take back, it is still a valuable story because it shows the contingency of race: by crossing the color line, he disproves racists' insistence that there must be an inherent difference between whites and blacks.

The narrator was born just after the Civil War in a small Georgia town that he wants to keep anonymous—its residents might find him out. He can vaguely remember the town, a small house with flowers and glass bottles stuck into the ground—he once dug them up, which led to "a terrific spanking." In the backyard, he remembers bathing in wooden tubs, adventuring in the vegetable garden, and feeding the cow in her enclosure.

Even though the rural Georgians he grew up around are unlikely to read his book, the narrator insists on hiding his identity. It is not even clear whether he grew up in a white or black community, or whether he interacted with anyone at all. His early childhood, defined by agriculture and a connection to the land, contrasts strongly with his coming years in Connecticut, where he becomes obsessed with books and music.

There were also various people in the house, but the narrator only remembers his mother and "a tall man with a small, dark mustache," **shiny shoes**, and gold jewelry, which the narrator used to admire. The man (later revealed as the narrator's father) would visit a few times a week and give the narrator a coin for putting his shoes away, and the last night they saw each other, his mother was crying, but the man drilled through a ten-dollar gold piece to make a necklace that the narrator still owns, and has worn "the greater part of [his] life."

Even though the narrator grew up in rural Georgia, and the reader later finds out that he was living with his black mother on his white father's family's estate, race has still not entered the equation. By choosing not to mention race, the narrator shows how he had to actively learn about it.

After getting the coin, the narrator and his mother "started on what seemed to me like an endless journey"—by train to Savannah, then by steamer to New York and on to Connecticut, where they lived in a luxurious cottage. She began to **dress him well**—building in him the pride that goes with being well-dressed—and take care with his friends, turning him into the "perfect little aristocrat."

The narrator's comparatively extravagant life in the North serves as a metaphor the regional differences between the South and the North, which was not only wealthier, but provided many more opportunities for free blacks. Despite his race, the narrator seems to immediately achieve status, and his new clothes recall his father's flashy outfits in Georgia.


His mother sewed endlessly, and sometimes women visited to help—she likely made a decent salary, for she got a letter with money every month. She taught the narrator to read and write, and played slow hymns on the piano every Sunday evening and, occasionally, Southern songs on other days, which she also sang. These "were the happiest hours of [the narrator's] childhood"; he was enthusiastic like "a pampered pet dog" and sang along. He particularly liked the black keys. After playing the piano, every night his mother would hold him and sing a wordless melody, and he always remembers her gazing into the fire as he fell asleep.

From the start, music plays an important part in the narrator's sense of identity and emotional belonging; his mother introduces the two competing genres that come to define his own musical career: Western music (hymns) and black vernacular music (Southern songs), which are combined in both the narrator's take on ragtime and the black hymns he eventually encounters back in Georgia.

The narrator began teaching himself to play the piano and could play all his mother's songs by age seven. Some of his mother's sewing companions convinced her to send him to a music teacher, who always insisted on tying everything back to the notes, which frustrated the narrator. The woman's daughter studied books with him—he would replace difficult words, or even whole sentences and paragraphs, with things he saw in the illustrations, and he often came up with hilarious twists to the stories. He spent two years focused on music and books, with no real friends.

Crucially, the narrator learns to play the piano by imitation first and formal training second. He originally understands music through immediate, embodied experience of performance rather than an abstracted, formal object of transcribed sheet music, a distinction that later becomes central to both the differences between white and black musical forms and the sentiment among critics that the latter, in which the composer and performer are necessarily the same, does not properly count as art.


At age nine, the narrator entered school and was surprised to be surrounded by boys of all sorts, including some "little savages." He felt like a stranger, since everyone else seemed to already know one another. But he did know his teacher, who spoke straight to him, giving him "a certain sort of standing in the class" and making him more comfortable. He started making friends but was afraid around girls—he still is—and his first friend was "a big awkward boy with a face full of freckles and a head full of very red hair," a few years older than the rest of the class because he was held back so often. "Red Head" was strong but dull, and the narrator weak but smart, so "there was a simultaneous mutual attraction."

When he finds himself embedded in a community for the first time, the narrator has difficulty figuring out where to place himself, much as he has difficulty placing himself in a particular racial community throughout his life; he considers himself superior to the other students and looks to the teacher, not his peers, for validation and instinctively aligns himself with the class's other misfit. This testifies to his peculiarly individualistic upbringing and racial ambiguity.

The teacher made the students line up and spell their places—"t-h-i-r-d, third," said the narrator on his turn, feeling lucky that his word was so easy and "impressed with the unfairness" that the students in the back of the line would have to spell words like "twelfth" and "twentieth." Red Head was next, but misspelled his place "forth." Students around the room eagerly raised their hands, but the narrator just whispered "u" to his friend, who got a second chance. He began, "f-u," and the hands went back up—before his third chance, the narrator spelled out the whole word, and Red Head finally got the answer.

The line of students, whose words get progressively more difficult, is a clear metaphor for social inequality; even though they all ostensibly have the same task, the narrator realizes that he has structural advantages compared to the other students, His willingness to help Red Head in exchange for protection begins his lifelong pattern of finding white patrons (like his music teacher and the "millionaire").

The narrator recalls how many "black and brown boys and girls [were] in the school," and especially one with skin "black as night" but a shining face, eyes, and teeth. The narrator took to calling him "Shiny," and he was the best student in the class in every respect—he learned quickly but also studied tirelessly, and won prize after prize through high school. But the other kids looked down on him.

No matter how successful Shiny is in school, there is nothing he can do to make up for the other students' prejudice against him. The narrator emphasizes the boy's stereotyped black features so strongly that his "shininess" comes to stand in for his name and identity. However, this also recalls the narrator's father's shiny shoes: a sign of social status.

The other students looked down even more on the other black students and called them "niggers." One day, they were singing a song—"Nigger, nigger, never die, / Black face and shiny eye"—and one of the black boys threw a slate, which hit a white boy and cut his lip. The narrator joined the white boys in throwing stones at the black boys while they ran. Later, he went home to tell his mother what "one of the 'niggers'" had done. She told him never to use "that word," and he was ashamed to receive the criticism.

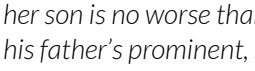
Even in the integrated North, anti-black racism is rampant—even learned by children—but also, as the song shows, clearly nonsensical. It is also clear that the narrator sees himself as white precisely because he has not yet had to confront his blackness, unlike the other children who obviously look the part.

At school one day, the teacher asked "all of the white scholars to stand for a moment," and the narrator stood with them. She told him to sit down; the white boys said, "Oh, you're a nigger too," and the black kids said they "knew he was colored."

The narrator not only learns racism in school, he also only learns about his own race there, and suddenly his own status in relation to his classmates' changes irreversibly.

When he got home, the narrator "became conscious of" his beauty for the first time, gazing at his eyes and hair in the mirror. He ran downstairs and asked his mother, "tell me, mother, am I a nigger?" Her eyes filled with tears, and the narrator "looked at her critically for the first time," her "almost brown" skin and hair "not so soft as mine." But "she was very beautiful," more than any of the women who visited the house. She replied, "you are not a nigger […] you are as good as anybody; if anyone calls you a nigger don't notice them." He asked if he was white—she said he was not, but "your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you—." She said she would tell the narrator about his father "some day." "Perhaps it had to be done," concludes the narrator, but he has never forgiven her.

This passage is full of contradictions about race. The narrator not only realizes his and his mother's blackness, but also their beauty, which suggests that he manages to avoid the strict racism of his classmates, but also depends on white beauty standards insofar as he values his own lighter skin and softer hair. Despite insisting that her son is no worse than anyone else, the narrator's mother still calls his father's prominent, slaveholding family "the best blood of the South" because of their status. Her insistence that he is neither black nor white shows that his identity as mixed-race escapes the conventional American system of racial classification, based on the "one drop rule" that any black ancestry makes someone black.



CHAPTER 2

The narrator remarks that he has always tried to make sense of that day, and especially the "radical change" in his personality after it. It was an unforgettable moment of pain, those great "tragedies of life." After that day, he "pass[ed] into another world," gradually realizing "the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence" that forces him to experience the world not as a citizen or human being but "from the viewpoint of a *colored* man." This also blinds whites to the experiences of "the colored people of this country," whose thoughts depend on experiences whites cannot understand and who therefore develop "a sort of dual personality." He declares that black Americans understand white Americans better than the inverse.

While race never shapes the narrator's character or personality, racism certainly does, constraining his sense of his own potential. He shows that racism operates as much psychologically as economically or politically: it creates not only two parallel societies but also two parallel mindsets. The "dual personality" he discusses closely follows W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of the black Americans' "double consciousness"—they must view themselves from the outside as well as from their own perspectives.

The change in the narrator's life was mostly about his increasing suspicion of his friends and fear of being hurt by them; the white kids at school did not understand their differences from the black kids, except for a few who "evidently received instructions at home on the matter," and the narrator only learned by observing how the other black and brown students were treated. He felt little about them but did not want to be grouped with them, and notes that he came to feel more comfortable around elderly white people than those his age, and that his feelings of exclusion continued throughout his life.

Given his outward ambiguity and relatively privileged Northern upbringing, the narrator never manages to fully identify with other black people and even maintains an internalized sense of prejudice against them. While he becomes sensitive to race only because it affects him, the white students pay no attention to it until they realize they can use it to for their social advantage.

When he had grown older, the narrator's "forced loneliness" led him "to find company in books, and greater pleasure in music." He discovered the former through an illustrated Bible, looking at its pictures until he started to read the story, which he found less impressive at the end. He decided to "explore" all the other books in his mother's cabinet; he never knew how she got them, but she had probably read most of them, and she encouraged his reading habit, even buying him new books and the weekly paper.

The narrator never conceives his identity in terms of race; feeling isolated from both the black and white communities, he only ever views himself as an individual. He starts with the Bible, a cornerstone of both white and African-American communities, which foreshadows his eventual interest in black church music.

The narrator also turned to music "with an earnestness worthy of maturer years," taking lessons with his church organist and learning so rapidly that, after a performance at age 12, the newspapers gave him "the handicapping title of 'Infant prodigy.'" He attributed his success to learning to "play with feeling," using the pedals to create a "sympathetic, singing" song—all because he first began by copying his mother's songs. His mannerisms were those of "great performers," and came naturally when he put his whole body and emotional force into the instrument.

The narrator naturally plays with his body and not his mind, through imitation and not theory, which is an approach he later deems characteristic of ragtime and black music more generally. Although music wins him status as an artist even in the minds of Connecticut's white community—although he never divulges the racial composition of the church he attends—he initially sees it as a way of translating and expressing his emotions rather than a way to become famous. He is frustrated, then, when his audiences emphasize his technical abilities, finding him remarkable only because of his age.

At school, the narrator was entering the third term, having managed to support Red Head by gradually starting to just do his work for him. One day, he was "impetuous" about getting to his music teacher's house to rehearse with a violinist he was set to accompany—although he has always hated accompaniment, since his "ideas of interpretation were always too strongly individual."

While he happily supports Red Head through school, the narrator does not care for supporting the violinist. This reflects how uniquely he values music as a domain of expression as well as his enduring attachment to his concept of himself as an individual and refusal to be evaluated on anyone else's terms.

The violinist was "a girl of seventeen or eighteen" whose performances had "moved me to a degree which now I can hardly think of as possible," although probably just because the narrator found her so beautiful while she played in church. He "loved her as only a boy loves," daydreaming about her constantly and dedicating everything he did to the thought of her. Of course, he carefully hid his love from her—she soon made a joke out of her friends calling him her "little sweetheart," but he "wanted to be taken seriously" and thought he might "do something desperate" if necessary.

Notably, the narrator never mentions the violinist's race. His affection to her is closely tied to the emotional power of music, which becomes a way for him to indirectly express his emotions without explicitly revealing how he feels. He continues to seem mature beyond his years, and frustrated when others view him through the lens of his age rather than his individual talents—but age, rather than race, continues to be the primary constraint on his identity.

So that day, the narrator felt a "pleasurable excitement" about being able to "be of service to [the violinist]." He got home but stopped in his tracks when he saw "a black derby hat" on his peg of the rack. His mother said someone was there to see him, and he turned out to be "a tall, handsome, well-dressed gentleman of perhaps thirty-five" even more fascinating than the hat. The narrator did not recognize the man until he got to "his slender, elegant, **polished shoes**." It was his father, his mother explained.

Despite the narrator's usual distaste for accompaniments, his eagerness to serve reflects the same conflation of labor with affection that brought his mother and father together; since his mother was his father's family's seamstress, it is accordingly no coincidence that he first notices his father's presence through his clothes—his hat and then his flashy shoes.

The narrator had always wondered who and where his father was, and especially why his mother refused to talk about him. And now, he was here—but neither of them had any idea what to do, which disappointed his mother. His father broke the silence: "Well, boy, aren't you glad to see me?" This was the worst possible thing to say—but the narrator replied "yes, sir," and stuck out his hand, which his father held. His father stroked his head and asked how old he was—which the narrator also found peculiar—and soon they "lapsed into another awkward pause," although his mother "was all in smiles," happier than perhaps ever.

The narrator's meeting with his father is suffused with the awkward, forced formalities of a business interaction; his mother has said nothing about his father, as though his refined appearance and presence will speak for themselves. She delights in the image of her secret family reuniting, even if this confuses more than comforts the narrator—precisely because she has never told him about his father.

The narrator's mother asked the narrator to play a song for his father, which he did "in a listless, halfhearted way," for he "simply was not in the mood" and wanted to leave. But his father's eager praise "touched [the narrator's] vanity—which was great." It also showed his "sincere appreciation"—this made the narrator grateful and emotional, and he channeled it into a Chopin waltz; after he finished, his father embraced him, and he asked his mother whether his father would be staying—although he could not yet manage to call him "father." His father had to return to New York but promised to visit again, and the narrator reminded his mother about his appointment and then left, saying goodbye on the way out. He recalls, "I saw him only once after that."

The narrator again uses music as a proxy for emotional expression and connection; he freely acknowledges that he only appreciated his father's recognition of his talent, and his inability to say "father" suggests that he sees the visitor more as an audience than a family member. It is unclear whether his father lived in New York or was only visiting Connecticut because he had business in the city; either way, this suggests that the narrator's father does not translate his apparent affection into action or support, perhaps because of indifference or perhaps because of the social risk he would incur.

Heading to the rehearsal, all the narrator could think about was his father, but he did not realize "that he was different from me," although the narrator also had little idea that prejudice "ramified and affected the entire social organism." But he did feel "the whole affair" should stay hidden. He was late to rehearsal and made up a lie to explain himself: his mother was sick, and would not "be with us very long," which the music teacher saw through easily—but in fact this was "a prophecy."

The narrator still seems to see racism as localized, present only at school and not in the broader world, which likely contributes to his confused sense that his father has to keep him secret but his inability to understand why. As he remembers going to the rehearsal, the narrator cannot help foreshadowing not only his mother's impending death and his eventual discovery of racism's pervasiveness, but also the way his own eventual family becomes shrouded in secrecy about race.

They practiced the duet, and the narrator "was soon lost to all other thoughts in the delights of music and love," which is at its most pure and marvelous in boyhood. He returned home to his mother sitting in her rocking chair and singing, as usual. She told him that his father, "a great man, a fine gentleman," would "make a great man of [the narrator]" too. He did not yet understand why this was only half-true.

The purity of the narrator's love parallels his innocence about the scope of racism—indeed, he might be referring to the sense in which racism gets in the way of his later relationships with white women (especially his eventual wife). His insistence that his mother was telling a half-truth probably refers to the way he became much like his father—a white businessman in New York—despite his father's absence for virtually the rest of his life; indeed, the one time he does see his father inspires his return to the United States and leads indirectly to his eventual choice to renounce his race.

CHAPTER 3

The duet went so well that "we were obliged to respond with two encores," and the narrator thought bowing on the stage with the violinist might be the greatest joy in life. In the dressing room, she hugged and kissed him, but he "struggled to get away." Soon, he joined the choir and started organ and music theory lessons—he wrote and performed a few preludes of his own before he even finished grammar school.

Through music the narrator gets to at once indulge his emotions and win status, but ironically, in rejecting the violinist's kiss, he seems to forget his love as soon as the music is over. He also begins to move away from his initial, embodied and emotional relationship to music, and instead toward the formal theory of Western classical music.

Growing older, the narrator began to wonder where he and his mother fit into the world—his history books were too broad, and newspapers "did not enlighten" him. But then, he came across Uncle Tom's Cabin. Many critics of all perspectives have criticized Harriet Beecher Stowe, but the narrator thinks she painted a relatively accurate picture of slavery (although he did not admire Uncle Tom's "type of goodness," like that of foolish "old Negroes" who stayed on plantations and helped the Southern army). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* showed him "who and what I was and what my country considered me," but he was not shocked.

The narrator finds that the nonfiction deemed to express official truths about America, but written from a white perspective, fails to acknowledge questions of race. While it is telling that he first learns about race from a white author, he also seems to hope that his own book can perform a similar function to Uncle Tom's Cabin, *uncovering the secrets of the black experience from a perspective removed enough to avoid the accompanying backlash.*

The narrator felt he could finally talk to his mother about it all, so she started telling him fascinating stories from her "old folks" and made him want to see the South. She even talked about his father—she was his mother's sewing girl, and he was back from college. He was about to marry "a young lady of another great Southern family," and so they agreed to bring the narrator North so he could be educated. The narrator's mother only ever praised his father—she never ceased "believing that he loved her more than any other woman in the world," and she may have even been right—"Who knows?"

The unresolved question that hangs over this passage—and the narrator's entire family life—is the precise nature of his parents' relationship. It could make his mother's nostalgia beautiful and subversive, because it shows that love can overcome the extraordinary social barrier of Southern racism. However, it could also be tragic if she has merely convinced herself that he loved her, even though he does not visit or support them much, out of psychological necessity or an internalized reverence for whiteness.

By his graduation day, the narrator had developed "a definite aspiration." The day was extravagant—he played a piano solo, but Shiny stole the show, giving a passionate speech to a nearly all-white audience, as though "for the particular time and place he bore the weight and responsibility of his race." He delivered Wendell Phillips' lecture "Toussaint L'Ouverture" and won over the audience. The narrator notes that other "colored speakers who have addressed great white audiences" often get the same response, perhaps because of that "basic, though often dormant, principle of the Anglo-Saxon heart, love of fair play." Shiny's diminutive frame and **ill-fitting clothes** made his speech seem like "so unequal a battle" against the world. The speech inspired the narrator to feel pride at his blackness and dream of "bringing glory and honor to the Negro race," which he talked endlessly about to his mother.

Shiny's speech exemplifies stereotypes of eloquent black political leaders who are fluent in the language and customs of white America—and therefore could easily succeed as members of the black professional elite—but instead pursue the fight for equality because of their moral values and dedication to a collective cause. The narrator clearly understands this possibility, but he nevertheless ends up putting his own success above the collective interests of the black community, which he already scarcely identifies with. While he notes the hypocrisy of whites who theoretically value equality but refuse to take action for its sake, he does not see how his own ambition follows this same pattern.

The narrator entered high school—he continued music (but quit the choir because his voice dropped) and read widely, living "in a world of imagination" and almost never doing outdoor exercise, although his health was fine. His mother's, however, was not, although "she kept her spirits up" and continued to sew to pay for her son's college. He also started teaching piano lessons, and began requesting information brochures from colleges. He agreed with his father's preferences: Harvard or Yale. Sometimes, Shiny and Red Head would come over for dinner—Shiny was planning to go to Amherst and live with his cousin, Red Head was to go straight to work at a bank and rise up through family connections.

Unlike the childhood he spent running around gardens and feeding cows, the narrator's life is now entirely intellectual. Even though his wealthy father determines where the narrator wants to go to college, his mother still has to support him financially. Red Head's white privilege—his ability to easily find work at a bank despite his thorough incompetence, only because his family is well-established and did not lose generations of wealth due to slavery—contrasts sharply with Shiny's decision to go to college in the only place he need not support himself. Both of these cases contrast with the narrator's clearly dwindling network of family support.

After the narrator graduated high school, his mother was so sick that she could not leave bed or work; she knew she was dying and wrote to the narrator's father, who never wrote back. She soon died with her son at her side, her fingers running through his hair. He soon moved into his music teacher's house, sold and gave away his mother's possessions, and found himself with 200 dollars in cash and no idea what to do.

Despite the narrator's mother's lifelong faith in his love, the narrator's father never helps in their most desperate moment. The narrator takes over his role as her primary source of emotional solace, and the music teacher takes over as the narrator's caregiver.

The music teacher convinced the narrator to hold a benefit concert; the violinist, now married, played but was losing her talent. The narrator performed Beethoven's "Sonata Pathétique" more solemnly than ever and ended up with another 200 dollars. Altogether, his 400 dollars was enough for one year at Harvard or two at Atlanta, and he still had a "peculiar fascination with the South," so he chose Atlanta.

While the narrator successfully transforms his sorrow into a masterful rendition of Beethoven's sonata, the violinist seems to have lost her talent precisely because she became emotionally unavailable to the narrator. His decision to go to Atlanta is triply significant: it was the author's alma mater, it is a historically black institution, and it is in Georgia, where he grew up but has never returned.

CHAPTER 4

Traveling south and hoping for "luxuriant semi-tropical scenery," the narrator was increasingly disappointed, and Atlanta was no improvement: it was "a big, dull, red town." There was no public space and the roads were unpaved.

The narrator's fantasy of the South, likely based in large part on his mother's stories, pales in comparison to its reality: most of all, it seems to lack the integrated North's public infrastructure, which suggests that a different form of social responsibility—one based on private, not public interest— applies in Atlanta.

Seeking a place to stay before University started, the narrator asked "one of the Pullman car porters," who offered his own place. The narrator agreed and followed the Pullman porter "to a rather rickety looking frame house." The "big, fat, greasy looking brown-skinned man" who ran the place brought him upstairs and showed him "dat cot in de corner der." The narrator suspected the bedding was unwashed and felt homesick, although his companion's noble story about "fighting his own way in the world" prevented him from crying. In fact, the house was especially for Pullman porters. They went out to find something to eat.

The narrator continues to resent the South's ugliness but still cannot see its most pernicious feature for him: racial segregation. This is precisely why the Porter looks out for him and why he has to stay in the "rickety looking frame house." The Porter's story obviously foreshadows what the narrator must now do for himself, after his mother's death.

As they wandered around, the narrator saw "colored people in large numbers" for the first time and asked the Pullman porter if "all the colored people in Atlanta lived on this street." The porter assured him that these were lower-class people; he was still uncomfortable, but was fascinated by their way of talking—especially their exclamations ("'Lawd a mussy!' 'G'wan man!' 'Bless ma soul!' 'Look heah chile!'"), their unassuming directness, and their sense of humor. He remarks that he later determined that "this ability to laugh heartily is, in part, the salvation of the American Negro; it does much to keep him from going the way of the Indian."

Although the narrator has some concept of his blackness and the racism he might face, he actually sees a black community for the first time here and is surprised at their entirely unfamiliar way of life—he realizes that his own upbringing and sense of himself as an individual (rather than a member of a collective) are more in line with white rather than lower-class black culture. Humor seems to function for this population much like music does for the narrator: it is an emotional pressure valve, a way to relieve the pain of oppression.

The Pullman porter took the narrator into a basement eatery, which he found filthy and smelly—no better restaurant would accommodate black people in Atlanta, but the narrator could go anywhere he wished, since "they wouldn't know you from white." They narrator barely touched his food, and after dinner they wandered around until nightfall and returned to the lodging-house for sleep.

The narrator is not outraged at segregation, but disgusted at the black restaurant where the porter takes him: he continues to see inequality from a privileged, white perspective, assuming he deserves better rather than seeking to understand why conditions are so unequal. He also gets affirmation from another black man for the first time that he could "pass" as white.

In the morning, the narrator hid his 300 dollars in a jacket in his suitcase and went out for breakfast, but the Pullman porter awoke, stubbornly insisted on joining, and recommended they eat with "a woman across town who takes a few boarders." The woman was "scrupulously clean" and "picturesquely beautiful," even reminding the narrator of his mother: she was "one broad expanse of happiness and good nature." He ate his delectable fried chicken, hominy grits, and a biscuit, feeling that he had realized "one of my dreams of Southern life."

The narrator implies that he was hoping to eat at a white restaurant, but could not because the porter decided to come; yet this also led the narrator to realize for the first time that he could find a place and comfort in the South's segregated black world—in fact, his "dreams of Southern life" were apparently about this world.

The woman mentioned that Atlanta University was actually opening that day, and the narrator and the Pullman porter walked over to the campus, which felt like "a bit of New England transplanted." The porter left, promising to visit on his next trip to Atlanta, and some students directed the narrator to talk with the University's president, who was warm, protective, personable, and delighted that the narrator came "all the way from the North." He met the matron, who was "even more motherly than the president was fatherly" and asked him to sign a registration document—a pledge not to drink, smoke, or swear.

The university, too, is familiar and comforting, with the president and matron seeming like the nuclear family the narrator lacked; it also promises to offer the narrator the sort of community he didn't have at home. The president is obviously interested that he came from the North because it suggests that the heart of black community and potential remains in the South.

A bell sounded, and the students and teachers all congregated for the University president's speech—the narrator was fascinated to see "all types and colors" among the students and teachers alike. After the assembly, he returned to the boarding house to retrieve his belongings—and all of his money had disappeared. The landlord insisted he could not be held responsible, and the narrator noticed that **his favorite tie** was gone, too.

Although the narrator's school in Connecticut was also integrated, Atlanta University seems to center and value its students of color; the narrator comes close to finding a community to identify with just as he gets betrayed at the other black establishment he relied on in Atlanta and finds himself with nowhere to turn.

The narrator went back to the university, intending to explain his situation to the University president, but realized it might all "sound fishy." He reached the school's gates and hesitated before turning around and returning to the boarding house. A different porter told him to look for a hotel job in Jacksonville, lent him 15 dollars, and then smuggled him onto the train, where he hid in a miserably uncomfortable laundry basket.

Despite the president's warmth and insistence that students could turn to him for help, the narrator is too ashamed and afraid of judgment to fight for his place at the university, and suddenly he has lost the education he spent so many years dreaming about and the black community that may have transformed his life.

CHAPTER 5

"With a stiff and aching body," the narrator wandered around Jacksonville until he met an inquisitive minister, who walked him to a boarding house and asked him to visit his church. The "neat and not uncomfortable" house was run by "a rather fine looking, stout, brown-skinned woman of about forty" and the landlady's Cuban husband. The other boarders, cigar factory workers, chatted rambunctiously in Spanish—the narrator worried that a fight would break out, but soon realized "they were discussing purely ordinary affairs and arguing about mere trifles" and began to enjoy their company.

While the narrator again ends up in a boarding house, this time he finds an entirely new ethnic community there; this section in his life borrows from the author's childhood in Jacksonville and extensive diplomatic work in Latin America. Notably, Jacksonville is not strictly segregated between whites and blacks; the Cuban cigar workers are also excluded from white society, and the narrator is initially suspicious of them, too, until he realizes they are not going to fight.

The narrator wandered around Jacksonville, which he found much more pleasant and green than Atlanta, before asking his landlady about work—the hotels were not going to open for two more months, so he asked whether might be able to teach music lessons (he could, but "the colored people were poor" and could only pay 25 cents per lesson). The landlady's husband offered the narrator work at the cigar factory, which he enthusiastically accepted. The cigar rollers could work at their convenience and were paid per thousand cigars, but the narrator would be a "stripper," tasked with separating tobacco stems and leaves. The landlady's husband also began talking about Cuban independence—he belonged to the Jacksonville *junta* (committee) that helped fund the Cuban rebels. The narrator was impressed with his eloquent English.

Again, all of the narrator's preconceptions and plans fall away, and he ends up planning to work in a job for which his obsessive reading and music performance have done nothing to prepare him. In contrast to poor blacks' vernacular in Atlanta, the landlady's husband's English seems to prove his legitimacy and trustworthiness to the protagonist, who narrates the entire book in a flowery and formal register that belies his failure to ever actually attend a university. The narrator seems unsure what to make of the man's political activities, which reflects his own lifelong ambivalence about involving himself in politics.

The next morning, a fellow "stripper" showed the narrator how to remove the stems—he was a natural, given his years of piano training, and soon became the fastest in the factory, making 4 dollars a week and teaching piano lessons at night. After three months, he was promoted and began to roll cigars. He also started "to smoke, to swear, and to speak Spanish," which he picked up with remarkable speed—within a year, he was "like a native," even better than the Cubans. In fact, he was even selected as the factory's "reader," the man who read newspapers and novels to the workers as well as resolving disputes. Making 25 dollars a week, he bought a piano and stopped teaching lessons.

For the first time in his life, the narrator comfortably belongs to a larger group, even though he has nothing at all in common with the cigar workers; in a sense, he is already "passing," and Johnson clearly turns satirical here. Despite his relatively sheltered upbringing and disdain for lower-class black people in Connecticut and Atlanta alike, the ex-colored man somehow falls in with the working-class Cubans and even becomes more Cuban than them, winning a position of power in the factory and suddenly rising out of this class role.

But these lessons, along with church, had introduced the narrator to "the best class of colored people in Jacksonville," or what he called "the freemasonry of the race." Because of his position as an outsider, he learned things that were too quotidian for his new acquaintances to even realize: that black Americans passively but effectively resist racism; that white Southerners squander their energy oppressing blacks; that "the scene of the struggle has shifted" from black people's humanity to their worthiness for education and now their "social recognition." In fact, he finds it remarkable that both black and white Southerners have their lives "limited by the ever present 'Negro question'" and even suggests that whites are more "deplored" insofar as they cannot help but fixate on race.

Although it allows him to essentially give up his race, the narrator's racial ambiguity also gives him a remarkably balanced perspective on American racism, since not only is he an "outsider" to the segregated South, but whites and blacks both assume he is a racial "insider." He recognizes that racism is more about white people (their fears and irrational systematic prejudices, which arose after the beginning of slavery to retroactively justify it but hold no concrete truth) than the faults, behaviors, or tendencies of black people.

The narrator thinks that, in the South, "the colored people may be said to be roughly divided into three classes, not so much in respect to themselves as in respect to their relations with the whites." There is the "desperate class" of laborers, convicts, and drunks, who hate "all white men" and do not value their lives; while this class is small, "it often dominates public opinion concerning the whole race." He thinks that reducing this class—not by violence, but by changing the horrible conditions that leads to its formation—must be a priority. The second class consists of "simple, kindhearted and faithful" domestic servants who serve as "the connecting link between whites and blacks."

The narrator's view of the "desperate" class continues to hold true in the twenty-first century: media portrayals of black America focus disproportionately on the most destitute, resulting from and recursively feeding centuries-old stereotypes about African-Americans. This leads him to a clear political demand for basic opportunities of the sort that allowed him to make an honest living for himself; yet this political vision never translates into political activity on his part. Surprisingly, he has the least to say about the class of black servants, even though his mother came from this class.


The third class consists of independent workers and "the well-to-do and educated colored people," who "live in a little world of their own" and are just as disconnected from whites as the first class. For instance, a friend once pointed out that a white man he grew up with would not talk to him since he became a professional; white people seem to think that educated and comfortable blacks are just "spiting the white folks" or "going through a sort of monkey-like imitation," rather than realizing that everyone would similarly progress given the opportunity. People in this last class are "well disposed toward the whites" but deeply cognizant of the discrimination they face, like when they are forced to ride in segregated train cars. They "carry the entire weight of the race question" but can still enjoy their lives without shame.

More affluent black people do not overcome segregation but simply have the resources to build out their separate world. As wealth and status have been exclusively available to white people until this point in American history, they are so conflated with whiteness that many think affluent blacks are trying to act white, rather than simply trying to live comfortably. The irony here is that the narrator, who has already joined this last class, in fact does *end up living as white and, when he decides to begin "passing," he cites* shame *as his reason for doing so—he seems to gain a broader understanding of American racism than African-Americans who only associate with other black elites.*


This upper class has formed discriminating societies of their own, connected across the nation and difficult to join for even upwardly mobile outsiders. Jacksonville was in the early stages of developing such a community, and the narrator managed to enter it, visiting "comfortable and pleasant homes," joining the literary society, and going to church and charity events. The next three years, "not at all the least enjoyable of my life," even brought him a short-lived romance with a schoolteacher. But it was no fantasy life: the cigar makers, indifferent to social status, taught him to spend indiscriminately and brought him to endless weekend parties, although he "can't remember that [he] ever did anything disgraceful."

The black elite's exclusionary self-definition and animosity toward outsiders not only parallel those of the Southern white planter class (to which the narrator's father belongs), but also cuts them off from the experiences and interests of the rest of black America. For now, at least, the narrator manages to sustain his relationships to the working-class Cubans on the weekends—but he seems to be starting to look down on them from his new position of status.

At one ball, the narrator saw the second porter who had loaned him the money to get to Jacksonville and eagerly paid him back—although he was wearing "what was, at least, an exact duplicate of my lamented black and gray **tie**." At another of these raucous balls thrown by hotel waiters, he watched a cake-walk for the first time. Competing for a gold watch, the couples danced in a square and the judges narrowed them down to three before declaring a winner. The cake-walk, the narrator declares, should be a point of pride and not shame: it is one of the "four things which refute the oft advanced theory that [black people] are an absolutely inferior race." The other three are the Uncle Remus Stories, Jubilee songs, and ragtime, which was so popular in Europe that Parisians simply called it "American music."

The narrator's insistence on paying back the 15 dollar loan contrasts with the porter's apparent dishonesty. It is telling that the narrator's argument against blacks' inferiority hinges on the artistic products of black culture and especially music; the cake-walk is even more interesting because, much like Johnson's book, it hinges on the appropriation and inversion of other cultural forms: it began as a satire of plantation owners' European ballroom dances and turned into an art form of its own.

Right when the narrator was thinking about settling down in Jacksonville, the cigar factory abruptly closed, and he decided to follow some of the workers north to seek work in New York.

Again, the narrator moves from the South—where he has found a place in the world despite segregation—to the North, where he finds comparative freedom but ends up relatively rootless. Curiously, he also seems to choose the cigar workers over the Jacksonville black elite, who could have presumably found him another source of income.

CHAPTER 6

The narrator arrived in New York harbor on a spring afternoon; he found it enchanting, "the most fatally fascinating thing in America," like a charming witch who crushes, condemns, and laughs at the masses. Feeling its "dread power," he felt as though he "was just beginning to live" in the dangerously addictive city.

New York is at once promising and foreboding: the narrator recognizes its storied charm as a place of unlimited opportunity but also sees the hidden underbelly of its individualism. Johnson continues to mix history, experience, and fiction by taking the image of the Statue of Liberty as a "witch" from an earlier poem of his own.

With three other workmen, they went to a lodging house on West 27th Street. Its proprietor, "a short, stout mulatto man who was exceedingly talkative and inquisitive," began planning the men's futures for them. They went out, ate supper and met some old acquaintances, who sent them to a bar full of "**well dressed** men." The narrator went to watch the boisterous game of pool in the back parlor and noted that the patrons called one another "nigger" freely and affectionately.

The lodging house's proprietor, a caricature of fast-talking New Yorkers, confirms that this may be where the narrator pursues his ambition. The narrator also sees how the word "nigger" can get re-signified; in Connecticut, whites used it in its usual, violently derogatory sense, and his mother told him never to say it, but now he sees that the black men in New York have inverted its meaning and turned it into a positive affirmation to use among one another.

The narrator followed his friends upstairs; they passed a contrastingly "aristocrat[ic]" poker game on their way to the back room, where a group of men—including some white men—were playing dice. One "tall, black fellow" shook and threw the dice with an exaggerated energy, yelling nonsensically. And the narrator's new friend convinced him to play: he dropped a 20 dollar bill on the table and immediately "gained the attention and respect of everybody in the room." They wondered who he could be; he was immensely but vainly pleased. It was his turn—and he shot seven, seven, and eleven, winning over 200 dollars.

The secret, integrated game of dice in the back room fulfills the narrator's hopes to make it in New York. He is thrilled to win attention and status by showing off with a bet he cannot quite afford in a room he emphatically does not understand; in fact, his own anonymity to the other players makes him even more remarkable, and his beginner's luck recalls the bizarre turns of fate that have diverted him from his original plan to attend Harvard or Yale to this underground gambling ring.

The narrator remarks that this success "afterwards cost me dearly"; the others persuaded him to buy them back in, and he "noticed that several of them had on linen dusters," which he soon learned the proprietor gave patrons who gambled away the **clothing** off their backs. Some, with nothing to wear, were trapped inside until they could win their clothes back. The narrator went downstairs, bought everyone a round of drinks, and headed with his new friends to "the 'Club,'" which was a few blocks away, in a house above a Chinese restaurant. He was "positively giddy" at the patrons' flashy jewelry and rolls of cash, and after they ordered drinks he noticed a man singing in the back room with piano accompaniment.

The dice game fulfills the narrator's fear that New York would prove "addictive"; much like the porter who stole his money, the others use his vanity against him, ingratiating him in order to get money and drinks out of him. The unluckiest gamblers become literally imprisoned by their addiction and must rely on the goodwill of people like him, but he does not seem to realize the unfairness or despair in this predicament; rather, he simply moves on, remaining fixated on wealth and the accessories it can buy.

After the singer finished, the pianist at the "Club" started playing "music of a kind I had never heard before." The narrator could not help but tap his feet and fingers with the beat; it was ragtime, which had just arrived in New York from Memphis and St. Louis, where it was developed by players with no training "guided by natural musical instinct and talent." White men often transcribed, slightly altered, and sold their songs, but fortunately "a number" of black performers were also getting credit and compensation for their talent and effort. Of course, the American musical establishment rejected ragtime, like most popular music, even though all great music is "gather[ed] from the hearts of the people" and ragtime had won fans around "the civilized world" (meaning in Europe).

Johnson introduces the genre of music that soon becomes the narrator's most important source of identity and status; like his earliest playing, it requires putting one's whole body into the performance and learning through imitation and innovation rather than formal training or sheet music. Johnson is also subtly undermining conventional ideas of artistic value here by claiming that ragtime comes from both "natural" individual ability and "the hearts of the people." While he notes that ragtime sometimes crosses the color line, he also emphasizes how this happens within the unequal power relations of the art world, as whites freely take credit for black innovation.

The narrator went to the back room and chatted with the pianist, who had no training and miraculously played everything by ear. Were he trained, the narrator suggests, perhaps he would only be imitating "the great masters" or trying to innovate and rejecting harmony—"it is certain that he would not have been so delightful as he was in ragtime." His friends had to drag him out of the bar at daybreak.

In lauding the pianist's creativity, the narrator indirectly comments on his own musical training, which has led him to see artistic merit in only a narrow range of works, but he also seems to ignore the possibility that one might have both *originality and training, which undermines his own coming forays into ragtime and contradicts his insistence in his childhood that he had a strongly individual way of interpreting the "masters."*

CHAPTER 7

In this chapter, the narrator takes a "pause in [his] narrative" to give a more detailed picture of this "Club," since it was "the most famous place of its kind in New York, and was well known to both the white and colored people of certain classes."

This peculiar chapter opens with two levels of irony: first, the "Club" is famous only because it is a secret—because patrons can break the taboo of interracial mixing—and secondly, he feels he needs to pause and describe it even though it is already "well known."

The Chinese restaurant in the basement made excellent chop-suey, which seemed to simply absorb alcohol and sober people up. The ground floor had two rooms. The parlor was carpeted, full of tables and chairs, and covered with "photographs or lithographs of every colored man in America who had ever 'done anything,'" mostly autographed. The back room had the aforementioned piano and a large spot for "singers, dancers, and others who entertained the patrons." There was a buffet in the closet, since the "Club" lacked a liquor license. On the second floor, the front room was for private parties and the back room served as a rehearsal space. Apartments filled the rest of the building.

The narrator's exhaustive portrait of the "Club" shows how it is physically organized around entertainment, with food and drink relegated to the margins (the basement and the closet). Unlike many of the performers' normal gigs and especially the narrator's piano concerts, the shows at the "Club" are clearly more informal and experimental, and seem more authentic and exciting than the packaged performances artists deliver to more discerning guests. The photographs of successful black people both prove the importance of the "Club" and offer implicit inspiration to the narrator, for whom the space is clearly full of potential should he choose to take art back up.

There was no gambling; famous "colored bohemians and sports" frequented the "Club," which had extraordinary performers whom other venues thought whites would never pay to see. Visiting professional performers sometimes gave impromptu shows in the back—like one minstrel whose interpretation of Shakespeare "strangely stirred" the audience, and who in his life clearly "did play a part in a tragedy." Every celebrity drew an audience that competed to prove "their great intimacy with the noted one." Over time, the narrator learned to pretend that he had heard of the visitors and soon began meeting them. And the patrons spent freely—one jockey made 12,000 dollars a year and bought everyone champagne, ending the night with at least twelve 5 dollar bottles on his own table (which the establishment never removed as a matter of course, in order to signal his status).

The "Club" is clearly a bustling center of black creative expression, but it also emphasizes the limits to early twentieth-century America's willingness to take black art and accomplishment seriously: the minstrel is stuck playing meaningless parts for white audiences despite his talent, and many guests are only there because they cannot get in anywhere else. Although he values status highly, the narrator realizes that he can fake his way to it and that it is ultimately just a complicated game based on appearances—which is the same reason incredible acts get blocked from white clubs.

There were also usually a handful of white visitors. Most were "out sight-seeing, or slumming." Some "delineated darky characters" and came for inspiration. There were also a handful of white women who regularly came to pass time with black men. The narrator fell for one of them, a French-speaking, piano-playing, **elegantly-dressed** woman of 35 who always came in a cab and met "a well set up, very black young fellow" (the rich widow's companion) dressed in finely-tailored clothes and diamonds that she bought him. In fact, "he was not the only one of his kind," and this woman—whom everyone called "the rich widow"—caused "another decided turn" in the narrator's past.

The white visitors are all presented as insincere in one way or another, there to exploit black art rather than genuinely respecting it. The widow's relationships with black men are more complicated: she clearly fetishizes them and only sees them in secret, but she also gives them access to things they could not otherwise afford—her age (35) and elegant clothes are the same as the narrator's father's on his last visit to Connecticut, which suggests a parallel in their patronizing interracial relationships.

CHAPTER 8

The next day, they awoke too late to look for work, but the narrator was not worried—he had 300 dollars and promptly lost 50 dollars of it at the same craps table from the night before. But he was sure he would make the money back; two of his friends decided to go home, proving that "gamblers are rated, not by the way in which they win, but by the way in which they lose." However, he managed to convince them to come to the "Club," and they found it much like the night before: again, the narrator was entranced by the piano music—he took a turn and tried but failed to imitate the pianist's style. They went home, woke early the next morning, and found work rolling cigars. The narrator spent most of his money on dice and the "Club," and increasingly found himself exhausted, missing work to stay home and sleep.

The narrator's newfound vices begin taking over his life in New York; having finally made up the precise sum he lost in Atlanta (300 dollars), he seems poised to again undermine his own success, for (unlike his friends) he does not seem fazed by his losses. Although he already knows he can pass for white, as in Atlanta and Jacksonville he remains confined to the small, black corner of New York. Even though he was an "Infant prodigy" in Connecticut, admired by white audiences for his natural talent, this does not seem to translate into an aptitude for black music.

Soon, the narrator decided to give up work and focus full-time on gambling, like so many other "bright, intelligent young fellows who had come up to the great city with high hopes and ambitions." Unlike many of them, he managed to escape. During his time in New York, he "did not become acquainted with a single respectable family," even though he knew that many certainly existed.

While the black people the narrator encounters in New York are not "respectable" like the Southern black elite, they are still wealthy and distinguished: economic and social class are not always the same thing, and wealth seems much more precarious in New York.

The narrator managed to supplement his inconsistent gambling income by becoming "a remarkable player of ragtime," using his classical training to become, reputedly, the best in New York. He played almost nightly at the "Club"—more and more white patrons started coming, people started calling him the "professor," and of course music distracted him from gambling.

Music again saves the narrator, but his method is opposite that of the genre's originators and the pianist he has previously watched: he translates his classical training into imitation ragtime rather than coming up with his own, much like the white musicians who take credit for black art. Still, he seems on track to becoming one of the celebrity performers who frequent the "Club."

Most of the narrator's income came through a friend: a "clean cut, slender, but athletic looking man" marked by "the indefinable but unmistakable stamp of culture," who sat silently in the corner and sent over five dollars every night he came. One night, the man (later referred to as the millionaire) called him over and offered a job playing for a dinner party at his apartment, which turned out to be luxurious and so comfortable he fell asleep in his chair. The butler brought him dinner, then sent him to work as the guests were arriving—he began with classical music, to which the refined audience of "about a dozen" paid close attention before turning to chatter and dining.

This man—whom the narrator soon starts calling the "millionaire"—clearly stands in for the refined judgment of white art critics and the public perception of art that they influence. The narrator falling asleep in the millionaire's comfortable chair can be taken as a metaphor for his lost awareness of his art's true value, evidenced by his starting the party with classical music, which the guests are likely familiar and comfortable with. Like his mother, he has become something of a servant and looks up to his wealthy white employer.

During dinner, the narrator began to play ragtime from the adjoining room—the dining room fell silent, and some of the women in attendance began gathering around to watch and ask him questions. He played virtuosically for the rest of the party and, afterward, the guests enthusiastically declared him "the most unique entertainment they had 'ever' enjoyed." The millionaire gave him 20 dollars and offered to hire him for the future, so long as he would not play for any other private parties. Thereafter, the narrator played at various parties, at the host's house and his friends', or even for him alone, for hours at a time, while he listened, chain-smoking with his eyes closed. Sometimes these hours of continuous performance exhausted the narrator, but he was paid rather well.

Notably, when the narrator switches to ragtime, he moves out of sight in another room—he seems to move from a respectable white classical performer to a black ragtime pianist who must be segregated from the dinner party's white patrons until they invade the space he has been forced into. They praise the music as "unique," which reveals that their interest stems from ragtime's exoticism rather than its value as art—and, ironically, the narrator's version is not his "unique" work but rather an imitation of others' music.

The narrator also continued to play at the "Club," but only as one of "the visiting celebrities," and started to win affection from the women who went there, including the rich widow. A friend warned him about the rich widow's black companion, with whom she had apparently been fighting—but his "finer feelings entirely overcame my judgment," although he soon realized he was only being used to make her "surly black despot" jealous.

As the narrator wins fame in the "Club," he also wins the company of a white woman and continues to distance himself from his original interest in ragtime as authentic black culture. For the narrator, New York's true menace was not an addiction to gambling, but an addiction to fame. He does not even seem to mind the widow's ulterior motives, since her company is still proof of his success.

One night, the widow's companion found the narrator drinking with the widow; they were both frightened, and the man "whipped out a revolver and fired," striking her in the throat. The man kept shooting; the narrator ran outside and walked frantically until he ran into the millionaire in a cab. He explained what happened and his employer decided to take him, instead of the valet, to Europe the next day. They drove around the park, but the narrator could not stop thinking about "that beautiful white throat with the ugly wound."

With the widow's murder, Johnson plays on stereotypes of black men as an irrationally violent or "savage" threat to white women, showing how the narrator (whom she may have "used" precisely because he looked white) buys into them: he fixates on the image of her "beautiful white throat" rather than the injustice of her murder. It seems that he lamented her death because he valued her whiteness—and his white millionaire also comes to his rescue. Through his engagement with black music, the narrator has actually solidified his alliance with whiteness.

CHAPTER 9

Traveling on the ship, the narrator continued to feel guilty for the widow's death and refused to read the newspapers—he did see her picture in one, but it "did not in the least resemble her." After a few days, he worked up the energy to look at a beautiful, glimmering iceberg, but was dismayed that, contrary to his schoolbooks, there was no polar bear on it.

Like the widow's body, the iceberg and polar bear are dazzling spectacles of whiteness that captivate the narrator and foreshadow his coming reverence for Europe.

The narrator "was able to shake off [his] gloom" only when they pulled into Havre. He was enchanted with "the strange sights, the chatter in an unfamiliar tongue and the excitement of landing and passing the customs officials." The "extremely funny," miniscule train proved remarkably fast, and the scenery was incredible; he found an unending love for France before reaching Paris by afternoon—which only compounded his reverence. They had dinner, went to a theater, and visited a café, where they joined "several hundred people, men and women, in the place drinking, talking, and listening to the music."

Like white people watching ragtime at the "Club," the narrator immediately becomes obsessed with France because of its exoticness and unfamiliarity; yet his other initial encounters with difference—with the Cubans in Florida and lower-class black community in Atlanta—led him to suspicion, not reverence. Crucially, race almost entirely fades from the picture during the narrator's time in Europe; it is unclear whether this means he successfully "passed" for white or, much less likely, that Europeans recognized his blackness but were not racist toward him.

A few women joined them—they chatted (although the narrator only in his broken high school French). The next day, they went shopping—the millionaire bought the narrator **extravagant clothes**, treating him "as an equal, not as a servant" and paying him extremely well even though he had practically no duties. For the next "fourteen or fifteen months," besides a few side trips, they spent their days sightseeing and their nights in theaters and cafes, or hosting parties at the apartment the millionaire rented. The narrator continued to play the piano, both for the parties and the millionaire, "this man of the world, who grew weary of everything" but his music. In fact, he would sometimes wake the narrator in the middle of the night to play—which was his "only hardship" the whole trip."

The narrator's relationship with the millionaire proves increasingly complicated: although his friend showers him with gifts, resources, and the fatherly affection he always lacked, the narrator is clearly not the millionaire's "equal" because of the power imbalance between them. The narrator's obligation to perform the piano is also distinctly the work of a "servant." As with his own father, in the "Club," and in his coming relationship, the narrator only wins white people's affection by commodifying black music for them.

When he did not know the millionaire's whereabouts, the narrator spent his days wandering around and his nights taking language lessons—he would buy beer and cigarettes for some young women who would teach him in return, and he gained "more than an ordinary command of French" by the time he left. Realizing that his language skills could offer him "an added accomplishment" to his music, he started reading Spanish newspapers and memorizing French words and conjugations. Soon, he could just learn by talking, which he notes is rare among classroom students. This was because he focused on a small but practical vocabulary—soon, he had successfully done the same with German.

Again, the narrator's aptitude for languages attests to his cultural flexibility and ability to "pass" in more ways than just racially. He also views it as a game of personal advancement, a way to prove his abilities and worth to a world that refuses to believe in them; of course, he needs the millionaire's money to even access his "lessons" in the first place.

One night, watching Faust at the Grand Opera, the narrator became enamored with an English-speaking girl sitting next to him, presumably on her first trip to Paris with her parents. And, next to her, the man she addressed as her father was—"unmistakably, my father! looking hardly a day older than when I had seen him some ten years before." The girl was his sister—he felt all the love he had lost since his mother died, and during the second act "the desolate loneliness of [his] position became clear," for he absolutely "could not speak." Feeling that he might yell out in the middle of the opera, he finally "stumbled out of the theater" and "for one of the very few times in my life drank myself into a stupor."

Faust *is an appropriate backdrop for this encounter: there is a clear analogy between Faust's deal with the devil in exchange for absolute knowledge and power and the narrator's ultimate decision to live as white. Again, he and his father meet under the guise of music, which frames all the narrator's most important emotional experiences. He "could not speak" not only because of the performance, but also because his very existence is a taboo: he could never reveal his father's interracial relationship to his half-sister.*

Eventually, the narrator's "benefactor," the millionaire, declared that they were leaving Paris. The narrator notes that he must have enjoyed it because he was American, for "Americans are immensely popular in Paris, much more so than in London." The one embarrassing moment was when a friend asked, "Did they really burn a man alive in the United States?" and the narrator had no idea what to say.

The friend's question about burning people alive foreshadows the events of the following chapter, and the narrator's ignorance about it now shows that he fails to understand the true, vile depth of American racism until he witnesses it firsthand.

Soon, the narrator was in London, which was "as ugly a thing as man could contrive to make," although it soon turned impressive, in the same way as "a great mountain or a mighty river," an authentic beauty unlike Paris's, which was "hand-made, artificial." He sees the difference between Paris and London as reflecting "a certain racial difference" between their people: French aesthetic values and morality; British utilitarianism and hypocrisy. The French own up to their vices, as when they drink moderately in the open air; the British hide them away, drinking as much as possible in cramped, smoky rooms. The most interesting thing in London was people's insistence on saying "thank you," even when it seemed meaningless—he wondered how the English could "accuse Americans of corrupting the language."

The "racial difference" between the English and the French is a clear foil for that between white and black America, or even different classes of black America. The difference between London's forceful beauty in aggregate and Paris's cultivated, deliberate beauty might point to the narrator's elevation of aesthetically conscious, refined white American culture over the culture of lower-class segregated blacks, often confined to smoky underground rooms, that he has considered crass ever since he first encountered it in Atlanta.

Soon, they went to Amsterdam—the canals were surprising—and Berlin—which was certainly better than London and "in some things" even better than Paris: namely, the music. One night, at a party full of remarkable musicians, the narrator was supposed to impress them with a ragtime tune—after he left the piano, one of the other guests took over and played a series of classical variations on his ragtime song. "Amazed," the narrator realized that "it can be done, why can't I do it?" and decided to go through "carrying out the ambition I had formed as a boy." He realized he was wasting his gifts and determined "to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in my inspiration first-hand"—not only ragtime, "but also the old slave songs—material which no one had yet touched."

While the narrator has made a career out of turning classical tunes into ragtime, the Berlin musician does the opposite, reinforcing the hierarchy of Western music culture by subordinating vernacular musical content to classical musical forms and tempting the narrator to do the same, which could presumably get him taken seriously as a composer and artist (rather than merely appearing as an exotic but marginal performer). The narrator's desire to turn "untouched" music composed by anonymous slaves into his own art demonstrates that his motives are more about individual than communal advancement and recognition; much like the white people who steal and profit from black musicians' ragtime compositions.

As he increasingly yearned to go back to the United States, the narrator realized he needed to leave his millionaire, whom he loved dearly—but who was clearly only using him to occupy "all in life that he dreaded—Time." One day, when the "millionaire" declared they would go to Egypt and Japan, the narrator mustered, "I don't think I want to go" and explained his reasoning. The millionaire grew "a curious, almost cynical, smile" and remarked that "you are by blood, by appearance, by education and by tastes, a white man." Why, he asked, would the narrator "throw [his] life away" by returning to the world of black America, when he could pursue the "universal art" of music "right here in Europe?"

The millionaire's ostensible fear of "time" points to the glaring economic inequality in America, which plays a significant role in all the conflicts between groups that the book addresses but the narrator somehow fails to grasp. Similarly, the millionaire points out the irony in European claims to universality, particularly in music: while this book does show that music can cross the color line in the right contexts due to its emotional appeal, the very notion that music is universal implies that there should be no difference between pursuing it in Europe and the United States.

This was the first time that the millionaire had ever mentioned race—it turned out that "he was a man entirely free from prejudice, but he recognized that prejudice was a big stubborn entity which had to be taken into account." There was no reason for the narrator to return to the United States, the millionaire continued, for "I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured and refined colored man in the United States."

While the millionaire clearly understands the fact of racism and seems to believe in people's equality across racial difference, he views prejudice in individual rather than collective terms—since the narrator looks white enough to dodge racism, the millionaire thinks he should not worry about it.

Neither of them, the millionaire believed, could do anything about "their wrongs," so the narrator "would be foolish to unnecessarily take their wrongs on your shoulders." He says that evil is indissoluble: slavery turned into the Civil War, which turned into animosity and Jim Crow. "Modern civilization" has turned the poor anarchist, socialist, and resentful instead of ignorant; "modern philanthropy" has made the miserable only suffer longer. He concluded that "my philosophy of life is this: make yourself as happy as possible, and try to make those happy whose lives come into touch with yours; but to attempt to right the wrongs and ease the sufferings of the world in general, is a waste of effort."

The millionaire uses his wide-ranging pessimism to justify prioritizing his own interests over those of any conceivable community; he pities the poor rather than seeing them as humans worthy of dignity and justice. While this principle looks appealing to those of means—including, now, the narrator—the notion that one should only look out for one's own and ignore the welfare of the disadvantaged is precisely the mindset (of indifference, *not necessarily prejudice) that allows systematic racial inequality to persist even after the formal abolition of slavery.*

The narrator was surprised and felt paralyzed, seeing the sense in the millionaire's argument "in spite of the absolute selfishness upon which it was based." He wondered whether he wanted to help his people or simply distinguish himself before the world—he has "never definitely answered" this question. For weeks, he was tortured by his dilemma, but ultimately he decided that perhaps music was the best way to be selfish, and he might even become famous precisely for being a black composer. Of course, he secretly wanted "to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form." He told the millionaire, who gave him a 500-dollar check and sent him on his way "almost coldly," and just like that he lost his "best friend" and "greatest influence" ever, besides his mother. He set out for Liverpool and then for Boston.

While the narrator recognizes the millionaire's selfishness, instead of reconceiving his mission in terms of a broader social good, he simply accepts the millionaire's premise and looks for a selfish justification for doing what he has already decided to do. By insisting that black music might only become famous when it adopts "classic musical form," he reinforces the hierarchy of formal over vernacular, white over black, and written over performed music. The astonishing fact that the narrator's best friend is the almost robotically unemotional millionaire—who does not even outwardly show much pleasure in music—demonstrates the extent of his lifelong emotional isolation and, of course, how thoroughly he internalizes the capitalist value of individual accumulation over collective connection or justice.

CHAPTER 10

En route to Boston, the narrator quickly noted "a tall, broad-shouldered, almost gigantic, colored man" (the physician) whose majestic air attracted everyone's attention; a few days later, the narrator found him smoking a cigar and saw an opportunity. The narrator offered the man a new one and mentioned that, a few days before, someone sitting near the man requested to be moved away from him—"the big man" said he did not "object to anyone having prejudices so long as those prejudices don't interfere with my personal liberty" and they struck up a friendship. The man turned out to be "the broadest minded colored man I have ever talked with on the Negro question," even occasionally defending white Southerners and firmly placing his faith in blacks' progress and having the "moral law" on their side. The man, it turned out, was a Howard University-trained physician living in Washington.

The "broad minded" physician, whose cigar-smoking immediately indexes his social status and relates him to the narrator, seems to have internalized the individualism characteristic of American capitalism and the book's white characters—he is even more extreme than the millionaire, forgetting that privilege does broadly affect African-Americans, and certainly limits his own ability to associate with those outside his community of black elites. While he believes in equality, he seems to feel that he has already achieved it, and that only the destitute need concern themselves with fighting for it.

In Boston, the narrator met "several of my new friend's acquaintances," who were educated, cultured, and wealthy, "genuine Yankees" in contrast with the black upper classes of the South. The narrator ended up spending a few weeks in Washington, also mostly with the physician and his friends; Washington seemed to have the most "developed" black society, with its many hundreds of educated professionals.

Whereas Southern blacks were both socially and culturally distinct from Southern whites, Northern blacks seem to share Northern culture even if they live mostly separate from whites. In fact, this Northern black elite reflects the values and self-image with which the narrator was raised, although he lacked a community that shared them until now.

The narrator notes that "among Negroes themselves there is the peculiar inconsistency of a color question," which is never explicitly raised but clearly exerts itself unconsciously, especially given their "tendency toward lighter complexions"—this is not internalized racism, the narrator insists, but rather a way of seeking better opportunities for their children. And the physician was harsh toward lower-class blacks—or, in his words, "those lazy, loafing, good-for-nothing darkies [...] who create impressions of the race for the casual observer." They visited various black institutions, including Howard University, and the doctor sent for various people to greet him on every stop of his trip all the way down to Macon, Georgia.

The doctor clearly becomes a black version of what the millionaire was in Europe: a cultured, well-connected guide who introduces the narrator to a new social world. Blacks' apparent internalized racism—or at least the patterns of behavior that produce racist outcomes within the black community—comes from putting self-interest before moral values. In a sense, the physician's black community ironically trains the narrator in the patterns of thinking that eventually lead him to give up his racial identity. In blaming destitute blacks for the prejudice against them, the doctor not only ignores the historical factors that have entrenched this destitution, but also forgets that stereotypes function by translating judgments about individuals onto a group as a whole, so uplifting even most of black America cannot independently change stereotypes.

In the smoking car during his train ride, the narrator quickly grew friendly with the other men there—and soon they brought up "the Negro question." Eventually, an "old Union soldier" was defending the North against a man from Texas, who considered the Civil War "a criminal mistake" and Reconstruction humiliating for the South—he insisted that "no country at all is better than having niggers over you." He asked whether the soldier was so audacious as to believe in racial equality and proclaimed that "the Anglo-Saxon race has always been and always will be the masters of the world"; the soldier pointed out that other "races and nations" actually developed all of civilization's greatest achievements—they argued about intermarriage and whether blacks deserved fair treatment, but the Texan insisted that he would never accept equality and resolved the argument by pulling out his flask.

Although many characters have told the narrator that he could "pass" at various points in the book, Johnson is careful to make the narrator's first instance of "passing" implicit in the text. While he never says this explicitly, he is only privy to this conversation because the other passengers assume he is white: the smoking car is clearly an exclusive, segregated space. The Texan's prejudice appears as irrational and self-serving: he says whatever helps him sustain his core belief in white superiority, regardless of the truth. And yet the white passengers can still set aside their disagreements and have a good time—the Union soldier tolerates the Texan's racism, and this sort of ultimate indifference even from avowed antiracists allows prejudice to continue.

Returning to his seat, the narrator was discouraged, "sick at heart." He noted that white and black Southerners alike insistently stuck to their principles, and that blacks are often "their own most merciless critics"—but none of this would ever happen in the polite, tolerant North. In retrospect, the narrator has realized that the Texan's prejudice could be a source of optimism: it reveals that the greatest barrier to racial progress not black achievement but white attitudes, which are easier to change. Just like people can understand the solar system when they learn that the sun, not the Earth, is its center, white people can learn to live in harmony with others by recognizing their "common humanity" and living in accordance with "the simple rules of justice."

The crucial piece of the narrator's argument is that African-Americans need whites to flourish: no matter how much they achieve, whites will continue to deny them the necessary resources and opportunities until white attitudes about race change. By making a case for putting "common humanity" above anyone's common race, the narrator shows how communities are not inherent or given, but rather are conceived and imagined before they can become the basis for favoritism or prejudice.

Upon reaching Macon, the narrator resolved to "strike out into the interior" and met the "rural colored people" who are so overrepresented in American literature that people can have difficulty grasping their reality outside books. This archetype of the "happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being" is always treated as absurd and used to discount serious black art and literature. There is so much "new and unknown" in black life to be revealed by writers like W.E.B. Du Bois.

While the narrator criticizes white stereotypes of rural blacks, he also imitates this logic, seeking them out as the most authentic representatives of blackness. The white stereotype not only makes blacks look shallow and foolish, but more importantly it also strategically erases the poverty, suffering across generations, and racism that the narrator soon learns also shape and constrain black rural life.

The narrator continually wished to return to Europe—his lodging was uncomfortable and cramped, and the food was horrible. Occasionally, someone had built a livable house, but most of the people were uneducated, unthinking, and submissive toward whites; the narrator almost admired Southern whites who were honest enough to publicly proclaim their opposition to education for blacks. Whereas "Northern white people love the Negro in a sort of abstract way, as a race" on whose behalf to fight for justice, Southerners hate the race as a whole but love and help certain individuals. Many families were even racially mixed, and the narrator found it amusing that he would so often be respectfully treated as white in a new town, until people saw him visiting with "the colored preacher or school teacher." He was eager to finish his data collection and return "to some city like Nashville" to start writing music.

The narrator looks down on his rural hosts much as whites and elite blacks do—so used to European comfort, like the physician he comes to blame poorer blacks for their own living conditions even as he seeks to capture their culture. Just as the narrator is already finding trouble reconciling his competing desires to achieve something for himself and to fight for his race, the North and the South seem unable to reconcile their feelings about black individuals and the black community as a whole. His admiration for Southern whites shows how much he values people's willingness to take an unflinching political stand, which is ironic because he soon undermines his own ability to do so by deciding to "pass."

At the last town he visited, the narrator stumbled upon a "big meeting," in which all the churches in an area congregated together for a week to celebrate and worship. This meeting centered on the preacher John Brown and the chorus leader "Singing Johnson," whose presence reminded the narrator of religion's foundational role in black community, despite the increasing derision it receives from "the progressive element among the colored people." John Brown delivered enthralling sermons by modulating his voice to create pauses and climaxes, even leading the whole congregation on an imaginary "heavenly march" up through the stars and the pearly gates to Zion. His descriptions of hell were just as rich.

The "big meeting" is a crucial site of community, a signal of the population's solidarity and shared struggle—something that would never be possible in the more individualistic social networks of the black elite. The narrator describes John Brown's sermon in musical terms; like ragtime, this performance is masterful precisely because it is embodied and improvised, irreducible to a written document and inseparable from its effect on its audience.

Singing Johnson was even more fascinating—he was small and dark, with only one eye and a high-pitched but powerful voice. He led the congregation's call-and-response hymns, singing the leading lines he had memorized before the congregation responded with their same refrain. He traveled all around the country, writing new songs and leading congregations in old ones—he had an uncanny ability to know what hymn to sing when, even at important moments during John Brown's sermons. Listening to the songs, the narrator contemplated where they came from, who managed to transform biblical sentiments into such enchanting and emotionally rich music. Even the black upper classes "do not fully appreciate these old slave songs," although hopefully they will one day get recognition for their foundational role as American cultural heritage.

Unlike in traditional musical performances, the congregation's music is a collective endeavor that unites the community by involving everyone in the call-and-response format. Singing Johnson is not only an exemplar of vernacular music culture—his mastery depends on his ability to respond to the environment and lead the crowd rather than merely create beautiful music in isolation. The narrator thinks that black popular music has universal *emotional appeal—this recalls the millionaire's description of music as a "universal art" and the narrator's own ability to express emotions through a range of musical styles—but also, crucially, that encountering this music can lead people to understand black historical trauma in a way that might help them overcome racist prejudices.*

The narrator left the "big meeting" inspired to begin writing music, but decided to catch a ride with a new friend, a schoolteacher who took him to his own village and revealed that he studied at the Negro college where Shiny was now teaching—the narrator determined to write him. The man, like "the majority of intelligent colored people," was overeager about the prospect of racial progress.

The "big meeting" does not inspire the narrator to seek or support the community that it is based on; rather, he just strengthens his impulse to decontextualize and control the music he hears. Shiny seems to have achieved the sort of prominent role the narrator wants for himself, but his profession is also about educating and advocating for the black community as a whole—he unites individual and collective uplift.

They pulled into the nondescript town and passed the night in the boarding house where the teacher was staying. Sometime after eleven, the narrator heard men outside—a crowd of them, yelling about "some terrible crime." Knowing that the townspeople still thought he was white, the narrator went outside and came across an enormous crowd of armed white men, growing by the minute, at the railroad station. At sunrise, smaller groups set off in different directions, but the crowd continued to grow—even some local black residents came to the train station.

For the first time, the narrator conducts himself differently because he explicitly realizes that he can pass as white; the secrecy around the white population's late-night meeting suggests that something sinister and important is about to happen (and readers familiar with the history of the Jim Crow South likely already know what it is).

Then "they brought him in"—a bound black man was dragged behind two horses as the white men shrieked and slipped a rope around his neck, then tied him to a railroad tie, his eyes "dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought," clearly "too stunned and stupefied even to tremble." They doused him in fuel and set him on fire—he let out "cries and groans that I shall always hear." Some observers cheered, others looked away, and the narrator was unable to look away until he saw the man's body reduced to "charred fragments" and "the smell of burnt flesh."

Although much of the narrator's story is vague and moves quickly, he recounts every excruciating detail of this anonymous man's lynching, which was obviously a transformative and unforgettable moment—but the narrator experiences it as a white observer, only despairing in private. The man is so terrified that he becomes emptied of all emotion and individuality: he stands at once for the totality of the black community and the utter powerlessness and in distinction to which racism reduces African-Americans.

The narrator walked away and felt "a great wave of humiliation and shame" at realizing the United States, "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." Afterward, whenever anyone said that the South should solve "the Negro question" on its own, he remembered "that scene of brutality and savagery" and wondered how Southerners able to justify and tolerate burning another person alive could "be entrusted with the salvation of a race." Despite what Southern apologists insist, there is no "great and impassible gulf" between whites and blacks—the existence of multiracial people is enough to prove this, and indeed Southern whites, while romantic when considered at a distance, are in fact living with the morality of the Dark Ages.

The narrator finally understands what his French friend meant in asking how men could be burned alive in the United States—until he experienced it firsthand, the narrator was largely blind to the horrifying depth of American racism, largely because he had proven relatively successful despite his blackness. The most powerful component of his epiphany is his realization that race is at once a constructed illusion and a myth so powerful that it can determine life and death; Southern whites are actively creating, not responding to, a "gulf" between the races.

After about an hour, the narrator barely managed to drag himself back to the boarding house—he did not see the school teacher—and get on the train back to Macon, where he immediately bought a ticket to New York and decided "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." He would claim neither blackness nor whiteness but merely "change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would." He was leaving "the Negro race" out of "shame, unbearable shame."

Although he has no reason to worry that he might be lynched himself, the narrator insists on running from racism rather than fighting it, if only because he has the rare opportunity to do so. While he is initially ashamed at his country, it seems that by the end of his reflection he becomes ashamed at his race, relinquishing it precisely in order to maintain a place in his country. His refusal to explicitly define his race—the fact that he knows he will be taken by default as white—is a crucial part of his "practical joke" on the world: he is, in his mind, not lying to anyone about his identity but merely exploiting people's consistently absurd assumptions about race.

CHAPTER 11

The narrator, now an ex-colored man, notes that this final chapter covers much time in brief and omits many details. Arriving in New York, he felt horribly lonely, thought about returning to Connecticut but decided against it, and resolved to first enjoy himself for some time by going to Coney Island, Broadway shows, and fine restaurants. Realizing that this was expensive and he did not know anyone in the city, he realized he could not teach music and decided to pursue "a white man's success" (meaning *money*). Unable to find work through the newspaper, he joined a business college—but he soon ran out of money, started working as a clerk downtown and catching "the money fever," and got promoted to a company starting a South American department.

As soon as he crosses over into the white world, it seems, the narrator suddenly has access to the entirety of New York City—but he also loses the entire community he had previously enjoyed. There is no possibility of a middle ground, living as black in some places and white in others; he does not merely use his ambiguous appearance to his advantage, as the terms of his decision in the previous chapter might have suggested. Rather, the very fabric of his social being has transformed.

The narrator considered money-making "an interesting and absorbing game"—he loved calculating the interest on his savings and even quit smoking and drinking to save money. When he made 1,000 dollars for himself, he was proud and satisfied, but had no idea what to do with his money and decided to invest in "a rickety old tenement-house," which he sold for double his original investment after six months. Over the next few years, he continued to pursue real estate and reached a position about which he "shall say nothing except that it pays extremely well." He began to move in "a grade of society of no small degree of culture," especially since he could play ragtime—he often wanted to reveal his "Negro blood" and frequently laughed about his "capital joke" on the world.

While money was always tight in his past and he was usually forced to live in boarding-houses, now he suddenly purchases his own home and can afford to continue living the lavish lifestyle he learned in Europe—but his newfound wealth, and the selfish obsession with accumulation that drives it, inhibits his lifestyle rather than facilitating it. While he was previously a black imitator of ragtime, here he becomes precisely one of the white imitators he criticized when he first mentioned ragtime in Jacksonville. The "capital joke" suggests that his "grade of society" only accepted ragtime when white musicians adopted it.

One night, at a musical party, the narrator fell in love with a singer, "the most dazzlingly white thing I had ever seen." He mainly loved her voice but was afraid to approach her—and then she remarked on *his* piano playing and insisted on meeting him. He fell "seriously in love" and, after some time, resolved to propose to her. He agonized about "whether to ask her to marry me under false colors or to tell her the whole truth," for his fear of losing her eroded his moral courage. They played music together "like two innocent children with new toys" as he returned to "the wholesome dreams of my boyhood"; he even began writing new "Chopinesque" songs for her.

Yet again, music forms the backdrop and medium of the narrator's emotional life. Here, it leads him to love, and the classical music that he returns to becomes the medium through which he expresses and, at least in the narrative structure, consummates that love. The Faustian character of his decision to "pass" becomes clear, and his relationship with the singer becomes shrouded in racial secrecy much like his own parents' relationship.

One day, they were visiting the Eden Musée together, and the narrator realized that Shiny was standing next to him. He was paralyzed, unsure what to do, but Shiny turned to greet him "and let drop no word that would have aroused suspicion as to the truth." The singer joined in the chatter, and the ex-colored man "was surprised at the amount of interest a refined black man could arouse." Indeed, he came to believe "that she herself knew very little about prejudice" and gained the "encouragement and confidence to cast the die of my fate."

Recall that Shiny, now a successful professor, is too dark-skinned to ever "pass" for white. Not only does Shiny's prominence point the narrator to the kind of achievement, at once personal and collective, that may have been open to him had he continued to live as black; Shiny's entry into the same space as the "white" couple also suggests that he can circumvent New York's informal segregation in at least an informal way, even if only because of his prominence or "refine[ment]." Despite his role as a character foil for the narrator, Shiny's decision not to say anything reflects a tacit agreement between them: he seems to understand not only what the narrator is doing but also the obvious advantages to doing so. What is perhaps more surprising is that the narrator feels no shame or guilt at apparently abandoning his people when he sees Shiny.

As the narrator played Faure's 13th Nocturne for the singer one night, he was overcome with "a wave of exaltation" and proclaimed his love for her; her eyes "glistening with tears," he admitted that "there is something more" and spoke the truth. She looked back "with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen" and began weeping on the piano. He left, feeling much like he had after encountering his father at the Paris opera and feeling "absolute regret at being colored." He tried to make sense of what had happened—he knew she loved him but not how his admission had affected her. He wrote her a letter proclaiming that he loved her and nothing else mattered; she wrote back after two days, saying she had gone to New Hampshire for the summer, and her mother confirmed this story when the narrator visited.

Although the singer clearly loves the narrator and her interest in Shiny suggests that she is not a racist, unspoken racial divisions run so deep even in the North that the intangible, invisible fact of the narrator's blackness—something she surely knows they would continue to hide from the world—devastates her. This event is, of course, a straightforward mirror image of his encounter with his father: in both cases, his blackness prevents him from receiving love from white people who do, in fact, love him.

The whole summer, the singer did not write to the narrator; he began to despair and lose all energy. Even after she returned, he wanted "to wait for some word or sign" before seeking her out. At the theater one evening, he came across the singer and her mother—along with a "young man whom I knew slightly"—sitting nearby. He felt powerless and hopeless. They met at a card party soon thereafter and "were thrown together at one of the tables as partners." They summarily won the game; for the rest of the night, he was so busy watching her that he "played whatever card my fingers happened to touch." She soon went to the piano and started playing the opening to the 13th Nocturne; he walked over and she said, "I love you, I love you, I love you." He took over and finished the piece, "involuntarily" ending it with a major instead of a minor chord.

The narrator and the singer recapitulate their pattern of expressing and achieving emotional intimacy through music, but notably she also reaches out to him precisely by citing the moment of racial disclosure that led her to abandon him. Rather than resume their relationship while simply avoiding the question of his blackness—which she has been doing so far—she addresses it directly. Of course, the narrator's accidental change to the Nocturne's final chord clearly symbolizes the "happy ever after" of their coming marriage, but it also recalls his years as a full-time performer, when he reworked classical themes to create ragtime.

The narrator and the singer married the next spring and spent a few months in France. They had a daughter with his complexion and her personality, and then a son with the opposite, who "occupies an inner sanctuary of [the narrator's] heart" because his wife died giving birth to him. They were "supremely happy" for their short marriage, but soon "there came a new dread to haunt me": the fear that she might blame his blood for his faults. She never did, and he insists that "her loss to me is irreparable." Unwilling to marry again, he has dedicated his life to his children and withdrawn from his social circles.

The narrator's son is just like him, but looks white—as "dazzlingly white" as his mother—which may be a more covert and insidious reason for the narrator's love, even though he still passes on the biology he fears could be blamed for his faults. After revealing his secret to his wife, he feels not relief at getting to acknowledge his complete self but rather fear that his white wife will never truly see him as equal. He finally manages to take the active role his own father never could; he hides his children from their own blackness, it seems, out of love and fear for the way they may be treated.

The narrator sometimes feels that he has "never really been a Negro" and sometimes that he has "been a coward, a deserter." Years ago, he went to a Hampton Institute meeting at Carnegie Hall. The students' songs "awoke memories that left me sad." The audience became enamored with Booker T. Washington's speech; his "earnestness and faith" was shared by "all of that small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race." Everyone knows "the eternal principles of right [are] on their side," and the narrator feels "small and selfish" in comparison, "an ordinarily successful white man" before "men who are making history and a race." He loves his children, but sometimes looks at the "fast yellowing manuscripts" of his old compositions and comes to think that "I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage."

This is the sense of regret that, at the beginning of the book, the narrator said he was trying to address; by re-encountering the power of black music and political leadership through his character foils, who are given perhaps the world's most prominent stage, he sees what he could have become. The last sentence of the novel is an explicit reference to the biblical story of Esau, who sold his birthright (his right to authority as his family's elder brother) for a bowl of lentil stew (the "mess of pottage"). This story, like Faust, represents trading one's identity for immediate comforts; the narrator realizes that his slightly greater comfort as a Northern white man does not resolve his shame at being black, or at seeing the way the United States treats its black population, but it does prevent him from openly fighting for civil rights. That leaves this book, an anonymous tale ending in regret, as the narrator's only way to make amends and insist on the imperative of fighting for justice.

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