The Eve of the Harlem Renaissance James Weldon Johnson (II)

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V

James Weldon Johnson wrote *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in the first person and he used this fully to his advantage. Generally speaking, the method of narration is natural and the content is conveyed directly to the reader. The inner conflicts of the main character are described vividly through "I". In this novel the form not only is well adapted but also theme helps shape it.

Johnson openly treated the "passing" theme. The complex feeling toward his hidden racial identity, is expressed from the first page of the novel and as a metaphor it suggests the hero's tragic end:

> I feel that I am led by the same impulse which forces the-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.
>
> And, too, I suffer a vague feeling of unsatisfaction, of regret, of almost remorse, from which I am seeking relief, and of which

I shall speak in the last paragraph of this account. [32]

When he grew older he gradually came to realize his heritage and ask his mother about it. Her answer, however, was ambiguous:

> I looked up into her face and repeated: Tell me, mother, am I a nigger?" There were tears in her eyes and I could see that she was suffering for me . . . She must have felt that I was examining her, for she hid her face in my hair and said with difficulty: "No, my daring, you are not a nigger." She went on; "You are as good as anybody; if anybody calls you a nigger, don't notice them." But the more she talked, the less was I reassured, and I stopped her by asking." Well, mother, am I white? Are you white?" She answered tremblingly: No, I am not white, but you—your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you—" [33]

His mother's ambiguous answer deepens his complex and ambivalent feelings. From that day on the hero's attitude changes subtly and Johnson describes this psychological process skillfully. The hero reminisces:

> And so I have often lived through that hour, that day, that week, in which was wrought the miracle of my transition from one world into another; for I did indeed pass into another world. From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored, my words dictated, my actions limited by one dominating, all-pervading idea which constantly increased in force

and weigh until I finally realized in it a great, tangible fact.[34]

Moreover, he becomes skeptical about his situation and look for an answer. He can't find the answer, however:

> The older I grew, the more thought I gave to the question of my mother's and my position, and what was our exact relation to the world in general. My idea of the whole matter was rather hazy. My study of United States history had been confined to those periods which were designated in my book as "Discovery," "Colonial," "Revolutionary," "Consitutional." I now began to study about the Civil War, but the story was told in such a condensed and skipping style that I gained from it very little real information. [35]

After succeeding as a player of rag-time music, he has a chance to go to Europe with his millionaire patron, who influenced him greatly. Between them there was a very strong affection backed up by a debt which each owed the other. After long-stay in Europe he loses interest in life and worries about wasting his time and abusing his talent. At last he confesses his feelings to his patron. His patron urges him to change his mind about going back to the United States, by saying: "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 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 ... This ideas you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing

more than a sentiment . . . [36] In spite of his patron's persuasion, he stubbornly persists in fulfilling his determination, though with deepening feeling of confusion. He says of his decision:

> Finally, I settled the question on purely selfish grounds, in accordance with my millionaire's philosophy. I argued that music offered me a better future than anything else I had any knowledge of, and, in opposition to my friend's opinion, that I should have greater chances of attracting attention as a colored composer than as a white one. But I must own that I also felt stirred by an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form. [37]

He takes a ship for Boston and after staying there and Washington, he goes to the South to gather material for his music. It is in the South that he witnesses the lynching. Although his determination is firm on the surface, it is based on practically, rather than idealism, and he is discouraged easily. He changed his mind frequently:

> 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 moustache, 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. [38]

After passing into white he makes a considerable fortune as a white and soon he begins to mingle in white social circles. By this time his attitude has become cynical:

The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humor. I frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complimentary to people of color; and more than once I felt like declaiming: "I am a colored man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop on Negro blood renders a man unfit?" Many a night when I returned to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing. [39]

He gets married to a white woman and has children, and although he leads a happy life for a time, the denouement is colored by his wife's sudden death. He confesses:

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.

Several years ago I attended a great meeting in the interest of Hampton Institute at Carnegie Hall. The Hampton students sang

the old songs and awoke memories that left me sad. Among the speakers were R. C. Ogden, ex-ambassador Choate, and Mark Twain; but the greatest interest of the audience was centered in Booker T. Washington, and not because he so much surpassed the others in eloquence, but because of what he represented with so much earnestness and faith. And it is this that all of that small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race have behind them. Even those who oppose them know that these men have the eternal principles of right on their side, and they will be victors even though they should go down in defeat. Beside them I feel small and selfish. 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. [40]

A "passing novel" was a conventional form since William Wells Brown (1815–1884): however, Johnson succeeded in depicting the hero as psychological and impartial. On this point, in the preface to the original edition of 1912 by Brander Matthews, however, he commented that "this vivid and startlingly new picture of conditions brought about by the race question in the United States makes no special plea for

the Negro, but shows in a dispassionate, though sympathetic, manner conditions as they actually exist between the whites and blacks today. Special pleas have already been made for and against the Negro in hundreds of books, but in these books either his virtues or his vices have been exaggerated." [41] In a sense, it seems that the "passing" theme is somehow subtle though involving a serious problem which black people face or faced. Also it embodies the wish of many black people; that is, to be treated like beings like white people. Besides, as Robert A. Bone pointed, it may be "part of a growing body of literature which serves to adjust Americans to the realities of a society which perennially promises more than it can deliver." [42] Johnson confronted the problem and skillfully depicted the ambivalent feelings of the hero. The last scene of the novel, as seen in the quotation above, shows that with "a comicopera sense" the hero realized his moral failure in his denial of his race. Johnson himself states:

> A novel dealing with colored people who lived in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture and who naturally acted "just like white folks" would be taken to in a comic-opera sense. In this respect the Negro is much in the position of a great comedian who gives up the lighter roles to play tragedy. No matter how well he may portray the deeper passions, the public is loath to give him up on his old character; they even conspire to make him a failure in serious work, in order to force him back into comedy. In the same respect, the public is not too much to be blamed, for great comedians are far more scarce than mediocre tragedians; every amateur actor is a tragedian. However, this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist

and poet to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions. [43]

Essentially, Johnson perceives the role of the hero as tragic comedian. His treatment of the hero is intersting; however, in that he is treated in nearly every phase of black life at that time. In this regard Carl Van Vechten states:

> Mr. Johnson, however, chose an all-embracing scheme. His young hero, the ostensible author, either discusses (or lives) pretty nearly every phase of Negro life, North and South and even in Europe, available to him at that period. That he "passes" the title indicates. Miscegenation in its slave and also its more modern aspects, both casual and marital, is competently treated. The ability of the Negro to mask his real feeling with a joke or a laugh in the presence of the inimical white man is here noted, for the first time in print, I should imagine. Negro adaptability, touchiness, and jealousy are referred to in an unself-conscious manner, totally novel in Negro writing at the time this book originally appeared. [44]

Eugene Levy mentioned the weakness of the novel and also clarified its themes:

> As in many didactic works of fiction, character development and motivation is weak in *The Autobiography*. What there is was

superimposed by the author rather than growing out of the character's psychological reaction to his environment. Johnson never makes it clear, for example, why his hero chooses Atlanta university and not a small white college; nor are the reasons for his leaving Atlanta convincing. Later incidents tend to be more melodramatic than dramatic. Johnson primarily uses his protagonist as a window through which he points out and interprets the American racial scene. He had two main purposes in writing *The Autobiography*. The first was to show that there are cultured, sophisticated, respectable blacks. The second was to demonstrate that, while the American racial scheme produced great injustice, blacks had endured and had made contributions of unique value to American culture. In his novel he presented these themes in greater detail and with more clarity than he ever had before. [45]

As Eugene Levy pointed out, Johnson may have weakness in character development and motivation; but on the whole, these shortcomings do not disturb the artistic balance of the novel.

VI

The Autobiography's secondary theme is the presentation of his racial thoughts. In this respect, he clearly observes the blacks' situation. First, he classified his own race, especially in respect to blacks' relations with whites. The following citation exemplifies Johnson's thoughts as well as his technical weakness:

There are those constituting what might be called the desperate

class—the men who work in the lumber and turpentine camps, the ex-convicts, the bar-room loafers are all in this class. These men conform to the requirements of civilization much as a trained lion with low muttered growls goes through his stunts under the crack of the trainer's whip... This class of blacks hate everything covered by white skin, and in return they are loathed by the whites. The whites regard them just about as a man would a vicious mule, a thing to be worked, driven, and beaten, and killed for kicking.

The second class, as regards the relation between blacks and whites, comprises the servants, the washer women, the waiters, the cooks, the coachmen, and all who are connected with the whites by domestic service. These may be generally characterized as simple, kind-hearted, and faithful; not overfine in their moral deductions, but intensely religious, and relatively—such matters can be judged only relatively—about as honest and wholesome in their lives as any other grade of society... They come into close daily contact with the whites, and may be called the connecting link between whites and blacks...

The third class is composed of the independent workmen and tradesmen, and of the well-to-do and educated colored people; and, strange to say, for a directly opposite reason they are as far removed from the whites as the members of the first class I mentioned...

This latter class of colored people are well-disposed towards the whites, and always willing to meet them more than half-way. They, however, feel keenly any injustice or gross discrimination, and generally show their resentment. The effort is sometimes

made to convey the impressionr that the better class of colored people fight against riding in "Jim Crow" cars because they want to ride with white people or object to being with humbler members of their own race.[46]

Elsewhere he states:

> . . . among Negroes themselves there is the peculiar inconsistency of a color question. Its existence is rarely admitted and hardly ever mentioned; it may not be too strong a statement to say that the greater portion of the race is unconscious of its influence; yet this influence, though silent, is constant . . . What I have termed an inconsistency is, after all, most natural; it is, in fact, a tendency in accordance with what might be called an economic necessity. So far as racial differences go, the United States puts a greater premium on color, or, better, lack of color, than upon anything else in the world. To paraphrase, "Have a white skin, and all things else may be added unto you." . . . Northern white people love the Negro in a sort of abstract way, as a race; through a sense of justice, charity, and philanthropy, they will liberally assist in his elevation . . . Yet, generally speaking, they have no particular liking for individuals of the race. Southern white people despise the Negro as a race, and will do nothing to aid in his elevation as such; but for certain individuals they have a strong affection, and are helpful to them in many ways . . . This affectionate relation between the Southern whites and those blacks who come into close touch with them has not been overdrawn even in fiction. [47]

The secondary them is useful in developing Johnson's own ideas about the racial problem; however, regretfully, the development of the theme undermines the tension of the novel which is too long, regarding this point, Robert A. Bone states: "Johnson indisputably anticipates the Harlem School by subordinating racial protest to artistic considerations. For the most part, the racial overtones of the novel from an organic part of its aesthetic structure... Compared to the typical progaganda tract of the period. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a model of artistic detachment. Yet even Johnson can not wholly repress a desire to educate the white folks. Artificially contrived discussions of the race problem mar the novel, and at times the author is needlessly defensive. But despite an occasional laspse, he retains a basic respect for his function as an artist." [48)]

In this novel, Johnson treated Bohemian life in New York, ragtime music, cake-walk and the big meeting; therefore, he can be regarded as a precursor of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson describes the ragtime music and cake-walk as follows:

> There are a great many colored people who are ashamed of the cake-walk, but I think they ought to be proud of it. It is my opinion that the colored people of this country have done four things which refute the oft-advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race, which demonstrate that they have originality and artistic conception, and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally. The first two of these are the Uncle Remus stories, collected by Joel Chandler Harris, and the Jubilee songs, to which the Fisk singers made the public and the skilled musicians of both America and

Europe listen. The other two are rag-time music and the cake-walk. No one who has traveled can question the world-conquering influence of rag-time, and I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that in Europe the United States is popularly known better by rag-time than by anything else it has produced in a generation. In Paris they call it American music. The newspapers have already told how the paratice of intricate cake-walk steps has taken up the time of European royalty and nobility. [49]

And then he mentions the American music world:

American musicians, instead of investigating rag-time, 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 rag-time. One thing cannot be denied; it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness: it appeals universally; not only the American, but the English, the French, and even the German people find delight in it. In fact, there is not a corner of the civilized world in which it is not known, and this proves its originality; for it were an imitation, the people of Europe, anyhow,

would not have found it a novelty. Anyone who doubts that there is a peculiar heel-tickling, smile-provoking, joy-awakening charm in rag-time needs only to hear a skillful performer play the genuine article to be convinced. I believe that it has its place as well as the music which draws from us sighs and tears. [50]

Johnson described the scene of the big meeting skillfully and concretly through a preacher, John Brown, and "Singing Johnson." And then he explained what blacks think about old slave songs:

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. [51]

In these respects Hugh M. Gloster states that the novel "is an important precursor of the Negro Renaissance," [52] from the viewpoint of the so-called Negro Renaissance or Harlem school. Besides, as Gloster suggested "reissued under the author's name in 1927 with an introduction by Carl Van Vechten. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is noteworthy because of its restraint, its comprehensiveness, and its adumbration of the Negro Renaissance of the 1920's." [53]

VII

Although the description of the "big meeting" and of Bohemian life

in New York were valuable realism. Johnson couldn't be a member of Harlem School because he was was an old negro from the black middle class; that is, his mind was that new Negro but his body couldn't follow his mind. Robert A. Bone aptly expresses this:

> Because of his sympathetic portrayal of Bohemian life, Johnson has been widely regarded as a precursor of the Harlem School. It is certainly true that he is the first Negro novelist to show overt sympathy for this aspect of racial life. He champions ragtime music and the cakewalk, for example, as accomplishments of which the race should be proud rather than ashamed. Nevertheless, in terms of the structure of the novel, the Bohemian episode is presented as a evasion of the protagonist's higher responsibility. A transitional figure, Johnson is no Claude McKay; the low-life milieu of the Harlem School is hardly his natural habitat. [54]

However, fortunately, Johnson could experience the Harlem Renaissance and indirectly helped young writers and poets by giving parties. He also helped them more directly through NAACP activities and influenced them through literary activities. In 1925 he was awarded the Spingarn Medal, which was considered "the highest or noblest achievement by an American Negro during the preceding year or years," and is "the most distinguished badge of merit that an American Negro may wear." [55] In his case the medal was presented to him as author, diplomat, and public servant. Unfortunately, he never wrote another novel because he was killed tragically in the traffic accident when he was sixty-seven years old. Robert A. Bone praises Johnson, saying that "only James Weldon Johnson discovered a solu-

tion consistent with artistic integrity. His protagonist possessed human dignity but was not inhumanly virtuous. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) was the first Negro novel to contain a complex, fully motivated Negro character." [56]

NOTES

32) James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (N. Y., Hill and Wang, 1960) p. 1. (hereafter called *The Autobiography*)
33) *Ibid.*, p. 18.
34) *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.
35) *Ibid.*, p. 40.
36) *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.
37) *Ibid.*, pp. 147–148.
38) *Ibid.*, pp. 190–191.
39) *Ibid.*, p.. 197.
40) *Ibid.*, pp. 210–211.
41) *The Aotobiography, op. cit.*, p. xi.
42) Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven. Yale University Press, 1965) p. 98.
43) *The Autobiography, op. cit.*, p. 168.
44) Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
45) Eugene Levy, *James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1973) p. 134.
46) *The Autobiography*, pp. 76–81.
47) *Ibid.*, pp. 154–171.
48) Robert A. Bone. *op. cit.*, p. 48.
49) *The Autobiography*, p. 87.
50) *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.
51) *Ibid.*, p. 182.
52) Hugh M. Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (N. Y., Russell & Russell, 1965) p. 82.
53) *Ibid.*, p. 79.
54) Robert A. Bone, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
55) *Along This Way, op. cit.*, p. 378.
56) Robert A. Bone, *op. cit.*, p. 27.