*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in History and Legacy

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Initially published by an unnamed author, this fictionalized autobiography brought readers the chance to reconsider race. James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* goes against the grain of race novels, depicting the life of African Americans in New York and the experience of white-passing blacks. It manages to capture a sense of humanity, forcing readers to consider how elements of the novel are still present today.

Race novels provided African American writers the freedom to intellectually consider beyond the oppression of American society.[[1]](#footnote-1) Done to liberate readers from society’s perceptions of race and status, race novels were notorious for a reliance on hyperboles such as allegory & melodrama, creating larger-than-life situations.[[2]](#footnote-2) Characters were statically good or evil, and plots were pushed forward by “unbelievable coincidences.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Johnson’s “Autobiography” deliberately strayed from hyperbole and towards irony. With a grip on both black and white society, the narrator is constantly required to separate how things appear from how they actually are.[[4]](#footnote-4) Readers may be surprised, such as with the millionaire, who struck the narrator with “a sense of unearthly terror,” but only “very rarely.”[[5]](#footnote-5) While these novels are often narrated through the third person omniscient perspective, allowing the reader to understand every emotion the character may feel, the ex-colored man does not let readers have the upper hand; they see life through the ex-colored man. This is most simply illustrated through naming: the narrator assigned himself no name, gave his former classmate the nickname of “Shiny,” and never named any character.[[6]](#footnote-6) The narrator analyzes his moves and motives, partially allowing the readers a glimpse into his mindset, perhaps most evident in the scene after witnessing a lynching, describing his “shame, unbearable shame” at the association with people “treated worse than animals.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Critics seem to agree that Johnson’s work fits into the time period. He correctly depicts New York in relation to black people, speaking of a time when Harlem was yet to be, ragtime music was only just finding its place, and “the Negro [was] learning other things besides laughter”[[8]](#footnote-8) He documented a glimpse into the black experience in society at the time, where race often determined one’s success and image. In conjunction with the New York experience comes the reality associated with white-passing blacks. Able to appear as a member of the white race, they have the ability to “ascertain how the white race regards [blacks].”[[9]](#footnote-9) This is seen through the ex-colored man’s denouncement of his race, where he then led a life as a white man, avoiding discussion of race.[[10]](#footnote-10) This reveals the intense pressure placed upon African Americans, bringing many to allow “themselves to be forced into the white race.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Critics found this book to display the experience of these biracial people in a new light, demonstrating race as a method to advance one’s interests as opposed to a tragic, hindering fact. However, it is worth noting that this living under white pretenses is an insult to the black race, who “loses a powerful argument” for their “inherent capacity for progress and culture.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is believable as a work of biography, yet still holds fantastical elements that lend to the fiction genre, considering themes such as race in American society and the search for one’s identity. The narrator wavered between white and black, seeming to find his identity in claiming he is neither race. Although sense of place may fade and people may be vague descriptions, the way in which the ex-colored man feels, acts, and analyzes relays the human experience. What the novel may do most effectively is forcing the reader to compare events of the book to today’s society. Slavery is years in the past, lynching is no longer public, but is the cruelty over? Police brutality, especially against people of color, has found its place in the news over the last few years: unarmed black men killed for no more than perceptions surrounding their race. Society, as a whole, has yet to realize that race does not define the human. This should be the lasting legacy of Johnson’s piece: race should not be the determining factor in one’s success, identity, relationships, and life. It is time that judgement transcends skin color.

A fictionalized autobiography, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* broke standards set by race novels, opting for irony instead of hyperbole, developing more well-rounded and dynamic characters, and choosing first person narration that did not reveal every emotion rather than the all-knowing third person omniscient. It is a believable story for the time, where a biracial man seeks out his place in a time-appropriate setting under time-appropriate ideals. The lasting legacy of the piece is the idea that perspective should transcend race, with the recognition that the struggle of people of color still remains to this day.

Word count: 798

Bibliography

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Company, 2015.

1. James Weldon Johnson, Introduction to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, edited by Jacqueline Goldsby (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., xxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., xxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., xxv-xxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, edited by Jacqueline Goldsby (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 97-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Henry Salpeter, review of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson, *New York World*, August 1927. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “A Dark Question Answered,” review of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson, *Globe-Democrat*, May 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Weldon, *Ex-Colored Man*, 99-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Dark Question Answered,” 273 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “A New View of the Race Problem,” review of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson, *Boston Guardian*, July 1912 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)