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**Questions of Identity Raised During the Harlem Renaissance as
Represented in Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man***

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Abstract

This bachelor paper deals with the Harlem Renaissance and its impact on the emancipation of the African-American population in the United States. It analyzes the problem of identity of colored people using the example of a book by James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. The main protagonist of the novel explores his possibilities to live a successful life as a colored man, but after experiencing the injustice that Negro people had to deal with in the United States around the turn of the century, he ultimately gives up on his goal and reconciles himself with living as a white man.

Keywords

Harlem Renaissance, African-Americans, color line, identity, friction between races, emancipation

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá Harlemskou renesancí a jejím dopadem na zrovnoprávnění Afroameričanů ve Spojených státech. Na příkladu knihy Jamese Weldon Johnsona *Autobiografie ex-barevného muže* zkoumá problém identity barevných lidí. Hlavní představitel románu hledá možnosti jak žít úspěšný život jako barevný muž ale po zkušenostech s bezprávím, se kterým se černoši ve Spojených státech na přelomu století musí vypořádat, se nakonec rozhodne vzdát se tohoto cíle a smíří se se životem jako běloch.

Klíčová slova

Harlemská renesance, Afroameričané, barva pleti, identita, napětí mezi rasami, zrovnoprávnění

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Introduction

20th century was a century of rapid technological development and a century of great social changes. The dawning of the century saw remains of the shadow of slavery, whereas at the end of the century the world ended up transformed into a modern, tolerant and egalitarian society. In merely one hundred years the humankind made more progress than throughout its entire history. This thesis focuses on one of the many pieces of the mosaic that have led to this amazing transformation. The so-called Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century United States paved the way for the acceptance of the African-American people into society and finishing of the long emancipation process that officially started in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation and went on for the most part of the 20th century. Even though it did not directly affect any important laws and milestones, it opened the eyes of many, so to say. It changed the way many people think about the race and issues with it. The aim of this thesis is to explore these racial issues and questions of identity on the example of a piece of work, written in 1912 by one of the leading figures of Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

The thesis is divided into 5 chapters. The first one describes the cultural and historical background of the time period in which the examined book was written. Focus is placed especially on Harlem, a district in New York City, which has become a major African-American residential, cultural and business center at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, some of the most important authors, mainly writers, of the Harlem Renaissance are presented. W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington are identified as 'the spokesmen' of this generation of African-American writers and intellectuals. The second chapter focuses solely on presenting biographical information about James Weldon Johnson, the author of the book in the title, a politician and the field secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, one of the main forces in black's struggle for civil and political rights. The third chapter deals with identity in general, as it is the basic theoretical background of the researched ideas and claims of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Du Bois' book *The Souls of Black Folk* is used as the main source of information on identity. The fourth chapter is the main analytical part of this bachelor thesis. It elaborately analyzes *The*

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man with the focus on identity and presents some of the ideas explored by the author, sometimes expressed as a question, sometimes as a statement. The fifth chapter concludes the paper with the claim that James Weldon Johnson and other authors of the Harlem Renaissance played an important role in the emancipation of the colored people in the USA and that this process has been successfully finished.

1. Historical and cultural context

The United States of America in 1912: Out of roughly 93 million people living in the USA, about 11% are blacks¹. A range of laws dealing with black citizenship is in effect. Under the protection of the United States Constitution and a number of amendments to it, African-Americans legally have the same civil rights as white Americans, including voting rights and a citizenship right. The reality is different. Prejudices and often hatred of white Americans towards black Americans is rooted in the society. Public transportation, neighborhoods, work places, rest rooms and lunch rooms are segregated. Skilled black workers are barred from the American Federation of Labor. Disfranchisement rules, such as residency requirements, literacy tests or poll taxes, effectively prevent black people in some states (and poor whites) from voting. Lynching, an extrajudicial execution by mob, is often conducted on black people for crimes that would not be punished so severely in the case of whites. On the other hand, America as a nation is prospering. 1910s is a decade when the United States was first considered a world leader. It is the decade which began with America's efforts to reform itself and ended with its efforts to reform the world. The USA becomes the most industrialized country in the world. Especially car production and popular culture became the country's most important export (WHITLEY 2008). As Peggy Whitley points out, there are of course several social problems that had to be dealt with in this period. The so-called Progressive Era, lasting from 1895 until World War I, is a period of unrest and reform. Unsafe working conditions or child labor is still common, however by the middle of this decade every state had passed a minimum age law. The 19th amendment to the United States Constitution established the women's suffrage (WHITLEY 2008). Another phenomenon of this decade is the beginning of the Prohibition of 1919-1933.

In terms of culture, 1910s is a decade of several –isms that shaped the 'mainstream' artistic production at around the same time that Negro writers and poets started the Harlem Renaissance. For arts, realism, primitivism, symbolism, fauvism, dadaism, futurism and cubism were all –isms of this decade (WHITLEY 2008). For

¹ Information from <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aap/timelin3.html>>

literature, the common feature of literary pieces of work is that there actually is not any common feature anymore. Carl Sandburg writes free verse poems celebrating industrial and agricultural America (ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS 2012). Willa Cather publishes her book called *My Antonia* (1918), a piece of work that can be considered a regional chronicle or pastoral from the Nebraska prairie (BRADLEY 2011). James Weldon Johnson anonymously publishes *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, one of the books that defined his time and the community he lived in for the contemporary reader.

Ragtime is at its peak popularity. It is the first widely popular style of music that developed entirely in the United States. African-Americans contributed greatly to the development of ragtime. Some of the greatest composers were black – Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin or Ernest Hogan, the ‘inventor’ of ragtime.

1.1. Harlem: Capital of the Black World

Why did most of the leading figures of the movement known today as Harlem Renaissance gather in Harlem? Alain Locke, a scholar and a professor of philosophy at Howard University, Washington, D.C., offers an explanation. “In Harlem,” he wrote, “Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is – or promises at least to be – a race capital.” Harlem was for the New Negro what Dublin was to the New Ireland, Prague to the New Czechoslovakia, and Belgrade to the New Yugoslavia (HUGGINS 1973: 58). In fact, a huge part of black population of the United States was moving to the northern cities at the beginning of the century to free themselves of the southern racial prejudices. It was the new trend for black and white Americans alike – the shift from rural life to urban life – but additionally for blacks it also meant a chance to start a new life without racial oppression. Some of the black intellectuals moved to Harlem in the years before the World War I, James Weldon Johnson himself moved there in 1914, but the true ‘boom’, the burgeoning of the black immigration to Harlem started after the war:

“The new postwar generation of Negro intellectuals might have been attracted to Harlem by the lures of older greats, but they also brought with them the spirit of the Jazz Age. They, along with their white contemporaries, ushered in the

liberation of the 1920s. Harlem for blacks, like New York for whites, was synonymous with opportunity, the release of the individual spirit. For some, it meant the possibility to write or to be near those who did. Not a few quickened to the excitement of the musical stage and the effervescence of sophisticated and ribald nightlife. For all – black and white – New York was the occasion for breaking away from the small town life, the restrictions of family control, and for growing up.” (HUGGINS 1973: 24)

W. E. B. Du Bois in his collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk* managed to capture the desires of a common Negro and together with Booker T. Washington became a ‘spokesperson’ of the early 20th century African-American population. In 1903 Du Bois wrote that “To be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers, is the end of Negro’s striving” (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter I, paragraph 5). In that sentence he formed into words what was until then only in the minds of black people. And they needed this spokesperson, because the majority of them were still illiterate and majority, if not all of them, suffered from prejudices of whites. They wanted to become visible, but they did not know how. They needed to know who they were, before they could want to be equal with the whites. African-Americans first needed to find a new home, to build a new community upon which they can start building their culture and their identity. They found it in Harlem.

1.2. The Spokesmen

Different approaches of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois to black advancement were obvious. According to Huggins, Washington saw the problems from a rural and small town perspective. He depended on the white good will in the South and upon white philanthropy in the North (HUGGINS 1973: 19). He sought to improve the working relationship between the races through mutual agreement, understanding and self-improvement. He became the first leader of a newly established university for African-Americans – the Tuskegee Institute. Du Bois, on the other hand, saw the only option in a more militant approach. He insisted on the principle of manhood suffrage and demanded the abolition of all caste distinctions based on race or color (HUGGINS

1973: 20). This so-called “Niagara Movement” which emerged in a conference at Buffalo in 1905 issued a direct challenge to the philosophy and leadership of Booker T. Washington.

W. E. B. Du Bois used one whole chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, his most important life’s work, to criticize Booker T. Washington. He criticized his “old attitude of adjustment and submission” (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter III, paragraph 15). Du Bois blamed the Negro disfranchisement, the legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro and the steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro to Washington’s submission policy. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up political power, insistence on civil rights and higher education of Negro youth to be able to concentrate on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth and the conciliation of the South (Atlanta Compromise). Du Bois saw in this policy a triple paradox of Washington’s career:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.
3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates. (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter III, paragraph 17)

Nevertheless the criticism aimed at Booker T. Washington was well measured and respectful. It was just the unsatisfactory outcome of Washington’s model for black advancement that made Du Bois his successor as the new formal spokesman of the African-Americans. By no means was he trying to disregard Washington’s work. More precisely Du Bois built on his work and moved it to the next stage. In 1910 Du Bois initiated the foundation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was appointed editor of the *Crisis*, a monthly publication of the Association. His trenchant editorials showing his contempt for whites, his condescending behavior, together with his sharp features and rigorous appearance made

his name almost synonymous with Negro militancy (HUGGINS 1973: 21). Du Bois' approach, however, wasn't very effective then, because the conditions for social change were not right. Lynching still occurred in a large scale. American society wasn't ready to accept the blacks as white's equals, yet. Nonetheless he did lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement.

One of the examples of Du Bois' viewpoint on life can be found in the fourth chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, called *Of the Meaning of Progress*. It is a rather ironic essay on how delusional the meaning of progress is. It starts like a fairy-tale, with the words "Once upon a time...", continues as an optimistic narrative of author's life as a teacher in a rural Tennessee school and is ultimately dismantled after telling the reader of what has become of all the people that the author knew in his younger years. Progress is a very ambiguous word. Its meaning cannot be measured. It's the person's accomplishments in life that can make a difference for a black-faced man.

1.3. Other authors of the Harlem Renaissance

1920s was a period of remarkable creativity for black writers, poets and artists. Some of the famous names include Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston.

Langston Hughes was a representative of the youngest generation of black artists of the Harlem Renaissance. He was only 18 years old when he wrote the poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, which has become his most typical piece of poetry. He had just been freshly graduated from high school and was travelling by train to meet his father who lived in Mexico, when he wrote that poem. He was inspired by the river Mississippi and her troubled history for the Negro people. Another example of Hughes' work of the decade of 1920s is *The Weary Blues*, which describes an evening of listening to a blues musician in Harlem. "With its diction, its repetition of lines and its inclusion of blues lyrics, the poem evokes the mournful tone and tempo of blues music and gives readers an appreciation of the state of mind of the blues musician in the poem." (FLEISCHMANN, JONES)

Claude McKay, originally from Jamaica, encountered extensive racism in his country as early as age seventeen. According to the Poetry Foundation (poetryfoundation.org 2011) McKay developed his interest in English poetry at early age. He was first educated by his brother, a schoolteacher, and later, when he made enough money from various menial jobs, he moved to the USA to continue his education at a higher level. He had never finished the school though and in 1914 he moved to New York City. It was possibly his experience with racism that shaped his artistic style. Skeptical is probably the best word to describe his style.

Zora Neale Hurston, a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist lived her early Harlem life under the patronage of a wealthy white woman, Charlotte Mason, who also supported Langston Hughes in his early years. Nathan Irvin Huggins writes that supporting arts and artists kept this generous old lady “spiritually alive” (HUGGINS 1973: 129). When Mrs. Mason discovered Hurston’s and Hughes’ intentions to continue producing art, she covered most of their life expenses so that they could focus solely on writing. This kind of patronage allowed Zora Neale Hurston to work on her literature as well as living a life in the center of Harlem’s society.

With the connection to Harlem Renaissance it is necessary to name one person that has not been of black skin or African-American origin. Carl Van Vechten had become a promoter of the Harlem culture and a supporter of new Negro artists as well as their close personal friend. Nathan Irvin Huggins considers Vechten a collector of rare objects of art and rare people in the sense that no one actually stopped to see and think about them properly until Van Vechten showed them how (HUGGINS 1973: 94). It was not just a job for him, he became very interested, almost obsessed with the Negro and Harlem culture. He knew almost every educated person in Harlem personally – in their free time they were socializing and enjoying the night life, in their professional time, Van Vechten helped them publish their work and get recognition. He was the middleman for anyone who wished to learn about Harlem culture and people. Apart from his supporting activities, Van Vechten is also known for writing several novels, for example *Blind Bow-Boy* or *Nigger Heaven*. *Nigger Heaven* especially spawned a serious dispute among critics. Some of them praised the book and considered it one of the most important works of the 1920s (mainly the intellectuals that knew Van Vechten

personally) but some (most influential of them being Du Bois) failed to recognize the irony of the content as well as despised the title itself, which, after all, was very controversial. Nevertheless the book sold over 100 000 copies, so it was a success.

Of course there have been a lot more Negro artists that contributed to the Harlem Renaissance and to the recognition of the Negro race in the USA, but for the purpose of this paper I have named only some of them. Perhaps the best way how to illustrate the motivation of the Negro people to make literature is to quote James Weldon Johnson's words from *The Book of American Negro Poetry*:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. (JOHNSON 1922: preface VII)

2. James Weldon Johnson

This chapter of the thesis is dedicated to James Weldon Johnson, the author of the book with the title – *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

James Weldon Johnson was born in 1871 in Jacksonville, Florida to a middle-class family that was never directly affected by slavery. Johnson spent his childhood during the light optimism of the Reconstruction period in a town that thrived from tourism during the winter, which also created a moderate amount of job opportunities for blacks. After finishing the Stanton Grammar School he enrolled in Atlanta University from which he graduated in 1894. It was there at the Atlanta University, where Johnson developed his skills as a writer and a public speaker and also where he first acknowledged the depth of the racial problem in the United States. After the graduation, aged 23, Johnson returned to his hometown to become the principal of the Stanton School. School teaching, however, wasn't the only activity during his early years. He became the first African-American admitted to the Florida Bar (an association of lawyers) as well as the founder of the *Daily American*, a newspaper devoted to reporting issues of the black community. The newspaper ceased to exist within a year due to financial problems, but it was long enough to attract the attention of the two prominent spokesmen of the African-Americans, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

In 1900, to celebrate the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birthday, Johnson together with his brother Rosamond wrote the song *Lift Every Voice and Sing* which has later become the "Negro National Anthem" because of widespread popularity among blacks. This newly discovered addition to Johnson's set of talents served as a ticket to New York, where he began composing songs and writing lyrics for Broadway production. Simultaneously, Johnson became engaged in the Republican Party politics through his studies of law. With the help of Booker T. Washington, whom he supported after the split of the civil rights movement between radical and conservative factions, Johnson was appointed as United States consul in Venezuela. During his consul years Johnson finished his only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, first published anonymously in 1912. After resigning from his foreign service and returning

to New York, Johnson became an editorial writer for the *New York Age*, the city's oldest and most distinguished black newspaper.

The articles Johnson produced over the next ten years tended toward the conservative side, combining a strong sense of racial pride with a deep-rooted belief that blacks could individually improve their lot by means of self-education and hard work even before discriminatory barriers had been removed. This stress on individual effort and economic independence put Johnson closer to the position of black educator Booker T. Washington than that of the politically militant writer and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois in the great leadership dispute on how to improve the status of black Americans, but Johnson generally avoided criticizing either man by name and managed to maintain good relations with both leaders. (THE POETRY FOUNDATION, 2011)

James Weldon Johnson joined the NAACP in 1916 or 1917 and became the field secretary. Since its founding in 1910 the NAACP has become the major force in black's struggle for civil and political rights. Johnson has played an important role in this organization, but he is still better known for his literary work. He continued writing poetry and supported young black artists. He undertook the task of editing *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1925), *The Second Book of American Negro Spirituals* (1926) and published his own verses in *God's Trombones* (1927). He was undoubtedly one of the main figures of Harlem Renaissance. His memories and contributions of other artists to the New York artistic scene were surveyed in *Black Manhattan* (1930). After resigning from the NAACP Johnson continued writing in a lesser extent, while working as Professor of Creative Literature and Writing at Fisk University. His autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), argumentative book *Negro Americans, What Now?* (1934) and a verse collection *Saint Peter Relates an Incident: Selected Poems* (1934) were the major works of his late years. James Weldon Johnson died in 1938 in a car accident.

3. Identity

The following part of the thesis deals with identity as such. It is necessary to define some of the problems of identity so that these problems can be illustrated in the next part, where *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* will be explored. Personal identity has been studied since the origin of Western philosophy. For the purpose of this bachelor thesis, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (OLSON 2010) has been used as a source of academic information and W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* as the source of theoretical information.

Eric Olson considers personal identity a wide range of loosely connected questions, rather than a single problem. "Who am I?" is the first of these questions. In this sense, one's identity is roughly what makes the person unique and different from others. It is possible to define and answer this question by oneself. It is one's property and the person can manage it at will, modify it or even get by without any. "What is it to be a person?" or "What have people got that non-people haven't got?" are both questions that can be asked about personhood. They require an answer in the form of a definition of the word 'person' which is actually very difficult to create. Is it an abstract or concrete being? Can it be created artificially (for example robots or computer consciousness etc.)? "What does it take for a person to persist from one time to another?" What makes the person in an old photograph you? The problem of persistence offers only questions and no answers. Eric Olson offers more questions, but they cannot be properly related to the black identity, so I will not discuss them here. But why does identity matter? It does matter when we want to understand the problem of African-Americans in a society of the USA.

To understand the black identity and the problem of Negro of the 1920s, we must return to the beginning. We must return to the times when independent Negro character free of slave chains was forming. W. E. B. Du Bois illustrates accurately the issues of freemen in the 7th chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. It shows the life in Georgia during the Reconstruction. Georgia was the state with the highest black population in the USA, which is why it was chosen as the example. Du Bois compares the economic performance of the region before and after the war as well as the life of

ordinary black people. Cotton fields were the main source of wealth of the region. It was a prosperous state and one of the main supporters of Confederacy. The number of slaves was much greater than the number of white masters, but there was always enough work and not enough reasons for riots. This is also shown in the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind*. Even though not directly related to the Harlem Renaissance, there is every reason to believe that the Negro character was also shaped by the thoughts of this old system, which is by our today's standards unacceptable, but back then it was working well. Du Bois continues with describing the poverty this region has slipped into after the war. There are slaves no more, but instead the tenants are working the fields. They are free, but are they happier?

Now Sears, whom we met next lolling under the chubby oak-trees, was of quite different fibre. Happy?—Well, yes; he laughed and flipped pebbles, and thought the world was as it was. He had worked here twelve years and has nothing but a mortgaged mule. Children? Yes, seven; but they hadn't been to school this year,—couldn't afford books and clothes, and couldn't spare their work. There go part of them to the fields now,—three big boys astride mules, and a strapping girl with bare brown legs. Careless ignorance and laziness here, fierce hate and vindictiveness there;—these are the extremes of the Negro problem which we met that day, and we scarce knew which we preferred. (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter VII, paragraph 28)

I think the whole point of this chapter was to prepare the reader for Du Bois' idea of an educated black man. "We did buy seven hundred acres up yonder, and paid for it; but they cheated us out of it. Sells was the owner." (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter VII, paragraph 34). This is why the education and self-improvement is needed. So the new freemen cannot be cheated anymore.

And that is where the clash between a white man and a black man begins. The white man, formerly the master of the black man, does not want the black man to become his equal. He does everything he can to stop the black man from rising in the social hierarchy. It starts with minor frauds, verbal assaults and mocking remarks and ends in horrific scenes like lynching. But of course the black man does not want to stop and accept this place in society so he starts to work on his own set of rules, his own identity, his own quest for becoming the white man's equal. And by creating his own culture, by defining and understanding his own identity, the equal he becomes.

Another interesting aspect of identity is the so called “notion of two-ness”, as W. E. B. Du Bois called it in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois compares the Negro to races that in the past, too, suffered from the same peculiar state of mind which caused them to be uncertain about their own identity:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter I, paragraph 3)

This “two-ness” is, indeed, a very interesting way to describe one’s self-image. In a lesser extent, it can even be found today. We, Czechs, can identify ourselves as both Czechs and Europeans, or the Romany minority in our country can identify themselves as both Czechs and Romany. Neither of these peoples wishes for either of those selves to be lost. Du Bois wrote (chapter I, paragraph 4) that the Negroes neither want to “Africanize America”, because America has a lot to teach to the world, nor “bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism”, because the Negro also has a message for the world. Similarly, most of the Czechs can feel their national pride, but simultaneously they want to be a part of Europe and considered equal to other nations. They simply wish to be both Czechs and Europeans and have the opportunities of both. In the same way the Negroes of the 19th and 20th century USA wished to be both Negroes and Americans without having to suffer, mentally or physically, for either of those identities. This idea is further developed in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the book which I would like to focus on in this paper.

4. The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is James Weldon Johnson's first and only novel. It was written during his stay in Hispanic America as a diplomat. It was first published in 1912 and perhaps because of the fact that it was published anonymously, it attracted only little attention. The second publication came in 1927 during the late Harlem Renaissance, when black authors and Johnson himself were already widely known, read and discussed even by white audience. This time it has gained a substantial popularity and became one of the most frequently quoted works of the Harlem Renaissance.

What makes this book special and different from the hundreds of books about the Negro race that had been written before? The publishers of the 1912 edition offer their standpoint in the preface. In the previous works which dealt with the Negro community, colored Americans were only looked at as a whole. Each author only took a part of the community on which he focused. "Not before has a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relations with each other and to the whites, been made." (publishers of the 1912 edition of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* 1912: preface).

Despite the title containing the word 'Autobiography', the book is fiction. It tells a story of an unnamed man (I will call him the Narrator for the purpose of this thesis) from his early childhood up to an unspecified moment of his life when he is able to look back and reminisce about his past. It is written in a highly readable style. Especially in the first chapter, but also later, the author mentions details that could have easily happened in his life. Those little details make the book believable, while preserving the ultimate aim – to be a testimony of the Negro race in the USA.

The Narrator was born "in a little town of Georgia a few years after the close of the Civil War" (JOHNSON 1912: chapter I). There are no signs of any racial problem in the narrative about his earliest childhood. The reader is not even told that the Narrator is black. I think this is because the author wants to point out that being black or white has

no real meaning at the beginning of life. Every man is born the same. We are human in the first place; all other characteristics are to be developed throughout the life. The Narrator tells us several stories from his early childhood, as he remembers them. For example the “investigation” of the flowers that grew in the front yard of their house, which brought the Narrator a “terrific spanking” or the narrative about the wooden wash-tubs are simply stories any child would tell, black or white. And so we can read about these funny little tales before we start encountering the more serious issues this book is filled with later. Soon we find out about the Narrator’s interest in music. We find out about his ability to “thump on the piano alone” and how the love of music remained his for the rest of his life. The Narrator dedicated to music a greater part of his time, but he was also a very bright pupil, as we find out from his story. Soon he had made a good friend. He called him the “Red Head”, based on his looks. Both of the boys benefitted from this friendship – “Red Head” was the strong and faithful one, whereas the Narrator was the smart one. From this time comes the Narrator’s first encounter with the racial issue and the first mention of skin color in the book. He explains that there were several black and brown children in the school and among them there was one, who caught his attention from the first day he saw him. He was called “Shiny” because “His face was as black as night, but shone as though it was polished; he had sparkling eyes, and when he opened his mouth he displayed glistening white teeth” (JOHNSON 1912: chapter I). Shiny was the best scholar in the class, but he was generally looked down upon, along with other black children. The Narrator did not really understand why, but white children were tormenting them with mocking rhymes and by calling them “niggers”. The Narrator first realized the meaning of that word when he asked his mother about it. She turned on him very sharply. He didn’t know why, as in this time he still didn’t know he was one of them, because his skin was white and he was raised as a normal child. But thoughtful as he was, he started divulging what is bound to become his lifelong struggle with the society – his own origin.

4.1. The awakening

The Narrator discovered the truth about himself in the following rather awkward situation, which immediately affected his life and forever changed him dramatically:

One day near the end of my second term at school the principal came into our room, and after talking to the teacher, for some reason said, "I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment." I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me, and calling my name said, "You sit down for the present, and rise with the others." I did not quite understand her, and questioned, "Ma'm?" She repeated with a softer tone in her voice, "You sit down now, and rise with the others." I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise I did not know it. When school was dismissed I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying, "Oh, you're a nigger too." I heard some black children say, "We knew he was colored." "Shiny" said to them, "Come along, don't tease him," and thereby won my undying gratitude. (JOHNSON 1912: chapter I)

That was a breaking point of his life. On that day he found out that his mother was black (or more precisely "not white", as the author himself wrote it). The narrator considers that day a transition into a whole new world. He suddenly started to "take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, nor even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man" (JOHNSON 1912: chapter II).

It opens up the first question of identity which I would like to examine: Why is it that the colored people know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them? This is a statement that J. W. Johnson made in the novel (chapter II). I, personally, do not think it is that simple. It might have been true at the beginning of the 20th century, because the slaves and their descendants spent most of their days trying to understand the whites, whereas the whites did not have a reason to even consider this question. Remnants of the English idea of 'white man's burden' could be found in the American society, too. Slavery was created as a natural result of one group of people being stronger (or perhaps more resourceful) than another group of people. Originally it had nothing to do with skin color (in ancient times, slaves existed in most parts of the world and were not limited to race or nationality), but over time, as in the case of enslaved Africans brought to America, it developed into a racial problem. At the start of the 19th century, it was still completely natural in the American society to have black slaves. Sales of slaves were advertised exactly the same way as for example sales of working tools or trade goods. Slaves were treated as a mere possession, a thing, not a living person. Their masters did not concern themselves with trying to understand them as a person. For them, it was a tool. One century later, at the beginning of Harlem

Renaissance and at the time the *Autobiography* was written, it was still rooted in American society. Slavery as such was long gone, but the thinking of whites towards blacks apparently remained unchanged or changed only slightly. The whites still had not had a reason why to try to understand the blacks. James Weldon Johnson and several other authors pioneered the way to Harlem Renaissance, which created this reason. Until the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, there were only very few works of literature by colored writers. The reason for that (among others) was that colored people in America did not have an access to education. Let it be reminded that until the founding of the Tuskegee Institute (1881) there was no facility where the Negroes could have gained university education. In my opinion, the lack of educated colored populace prior to Harlem Renaissance led to whites not being interested in studying or even thinking about blacks in a broader context. This has changed dramatically when Harlem works entered the mainstream literature.

This desire of Negro authors to participate in literary production is actually reflected in the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as well. The Narrator tells us (chapter II) how he started “finding company” in books after the discovery about his race. He explains that the loneliness he found himself in was created artificially by the society. The kids themselves did not understand or appreciate any particular differences between the whites and the blacks, but they got “instructed” at home and displayed their “knowledge” in word and action. But without these “instructions” from the adults, they would not have thought about race at all and they would not have made any distinction between the whites and the blacks. This being the reason of his isolation from the other kids, the Narrator began reading all the books he could lay his hands on. The book which changed the Narrator’s thinking greatly and revealed to him many perspectives of the world he was entering, was called Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The Narrator said that this book “opened my eyes as to who and what I was and what my country considered me” (JOHNSON 1912: chapter III).

I would like to formulate here the second question of identity that I will try to find an answer to: The colored man – who is he and what is he considered in a multicultural and liberal country, such as the USA? Why is he different? To answer this question, I will borrow thoughts of W. E. B. Du Bois from *The Souls of Black Folk* (DU

BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter 9, paragraph 4): As to physical habitations, in nearly every Southern community there existed a physical line that segregated dwellings of Negroes and whites. A consequence of this might have been the fact that Negroes and whites interacted most of their time only with the members of their own community and did not have much opportunity to meet members of the other group. This resulted in alienation of the two groups. It is also worth mentioning that because of that line the best of the whites and the best of the Negroes almost never lived in anything like close proximity. The bottom line of this setting is that both whites and blacks commonly saw and interacted with the worst of each other. We can only surmise that the lower-class whites did not exactly have blacks' best interests in mind. Another consequence of this is the model of economic thinking. For centuries, the black workingmen were trained as slaves, which strengthened some qualities and skills in them, such as their will and good nature. But simultaneously a whole set of other qualities required to compete with the white workingmen, such as self-reliance, carefulness or ability to plan ahead or save money, was missing. The Negroes were free of slave chains but left alone "unguided, without capital, without land, without skill, without economic organization, without even the bald protection of law, order and decency, – left in a great land, not to settle down to slow and careful internal development, but destined to be thrown almost immediately into relentless and sharp competition with the best of modern workingmen under an economic system where every participant is fighting for himself, and too often utterly regardless of the rights or welfare of his neighbor" (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter 9, paragraph 6). This head start of the experienced and enterprising whites in the land of opportunity often led to cases, where whites deliberately used their knowledge and cunning to deceive the Negroes. One example for all:

"I have seen a black farmer fall in debt to a white storekeeper, and that storekeeper go to his farm and strip it of every single marketable article,— mules, ploughs, stored crops, tools, furniture, bedding, clocks, looking-glass,— and all this without a warrant, without process of law, without a sheriff or officer, in the face of the law for homestead exemptions, and without rendering to a single responsible person any account or reckoning." (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter 9, paragraph 8)

It ought to be taken as a fact, however unfair and unfortunate, that the Negroes of the South could not yet compete with the whites in terms of economic power and wealth generation. So that is who they are, free, but not equal. They started realizing this fact nearer the end of the 20th century. But no one doubted the “capability of individual Negroes to assimilate the culture” (DU BOIS at Bartleby.com 1999: chapter 9, paragraph 9), and so they started searching for a leader, a black leader, who would show them the way. They realized that finding an educated, college-bred spokesperson who comprehends modern civilization and who is capable of passing his knowledge to others is imperative for their success in the land of opportunity. I believe that this is the answer to the question from the previous paragraph: The colored men are free people without a leader, who are starting to realize this need for leadership and actively starting to search for it. Back to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, this idea appears there as well. The Narrator said the following on the day of his graduation from grammar school: “I felt leap within me pride that I was colored; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race” (JOHNSON 1912: chapter III). He wanted to become the leader.

4.2. A passage to the new world

After the death of his mother, the Narrator, aged 17, started fulfilling this dream. The first step was education. From the money earned thanks to his musical skills, the Narrator moved to Atlanta and enlisted at the university. In Atlanta he could see for the first time in his life a lower class black community. It was a strange encounter: “The unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion” (JOHNSON 1912: chapter IV). He was particularly amazed by the dialect of these people, which was nothing like he knew from his life in the North. Yet he did not give up on his quest after that encounter. He was even able to find a positive trait of such way of life and that was the Negroes’ ability to laugh heartily and enjoy the life, however unfair it is to them. On his first couple of days in Atlanta, the Narrator was lucky enough to have experienced both sides of Negro’s possible life in this city. He ate at a restaurant (an eating-house, more precisely) for blacks, which was dirty, cheap and disgraceful for any but the lowest class

person. He was told that this lowly place was the best a colored man could get, because if some kind of better restaurant was opened, it would not pay due to the fact that more respectable Negroes, if there are any, would rather eat at home or at friends' houses. The other day he had a breakfast at a kind-hearted woman's house, where he was invited by his friend, whom he made on the first day in Atlanta. This together with the first days at the university was a pleasing experience for him. The feelings of joy and excitement were soon to be replaced with fear for mere existence, when the Narrator discovered that all his money that he left in a trunk in his lodging house were stolen.

Now could perhaps be a good time to explore another question of identity that I have identified while reading *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. What is the role of good education in the life of a Negro striving for racial equality? As we know from previous chapters, the Narrator was a smart and witty person with good education and good attitude to learning and these qualities helped him greatly in his time of need, when he was left penniless in an unknown city. Similar experience from similar time period (Reconstruction of the South, even though Johnson's story is not dated precisely) describes also Booker T. Washington in his non-fictional autobiography *Up from Slavery*. Both men placed education on top of their striving and both men dedicated their efforts to reaching that goal. Especially the knowledge of foreign languages was most desirable. Booker T. Washington wrote (1901: 81): "I remember that the first coloured man whom I saw who knew something about foreign languages impressed me at that time as being a man of all others to be envied." Both Washington and Johnson understood that the knowledge of a foreign language is a tool that will, for them, open the gate to the world. In Washington's story, knowledge of a foreign language meant the possibility to earn a fairly good living as teachers or preachers, whereas in Johnson's story this kind of knowledge directly improved Narrator's income, for example in his first occupation in Atlanta in a cigar factory.

With the connection to his extraordinarily successful grasping of the Spanish language, the Narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* mentions (JOHNSON 1912: chapter V) an interesting term which he wrote he used to describe his "entrance to the race". He called it the "freemasonry of the race". It basically meant observing in practice what he had earlier defined theoretically about being colored and

educated. He became acquainted with the best class of colored people and had the opportunity to observe and consider things that had eluded their attention. The only way he could comprehend these things, this struggle between races, was thanks to his broad knowledge of men and history:

It is a struggle; for though the black man fights passively he nevertheless fights; and his passive resistance is more effective at present than active resistance could possibly be. He bears the fury of the storm as does the willow tree.

It is a struggle; for though the white man of the South may be too proud to admit it, he is, nevertheless, using in the contest his best energies; he is devoting to it the greater part of his thought and much of his endeavor. The South to-day stands panting and almost breathless from its exertions.

And how the scene of the struggle has shifted! The battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning; and to-day it is being fought out over his social recognition. (JOHNSON 1912: chapter V)

From the quotation above we can see how big emphasis he placed on intellect and learning which leads to the social recognition of the Negro. James Weldon Johnson also divided colored people into three groups as in their relation to whites. Lowest, the “desperate” class was the class of common people, workingmen, ex-convicts; generally it was the class that did not grasp the concept of civilization and did not care about it. They hated whites for what they were, but they did not seek any improvement of their status or relations. Though not large in numbers, they represented the core problem of the color line in America and an example that dominated the public opinion concerning the whole race. According to Johnson (1912: chapter V) “decreasing of this class of blacks” is the most urgent work of the South in order to create safety and future happiness. Johnson believed this “work” should be done by whites, as these lowest class blacks had neither means, nor will to do it themselves. The second group was a group which comprised of Negroes connected with the whites through domestic service. Servants, gardeners, cooks, waiters and many others, majority of them being religious, these were the people with the best relations with the whites. Anyone who treated them kindly was loved by them. They created the connecting link through which whites could interact with their colored neighbors. There was little to no friction between these

people. The third group, a group of educated tradesmen and independent workmen, lived in a little world of its own. This separated them from the whites for directly opposite reasons than the first group. These Negroes believed to be better than the majority of whites and did not seek contact with them. Similarly, the whites did not seek contact with them either, because they thought them to be just imitating the successful whites. This was the most pathetic side of this question, as the cooperation between educated blacks and whites would be very beneficial for both groups.

Another famous author of the time who gave some thought to the problem of education and color line in America was an Englishman H. G. Wells. He wrote that “each educated colored man is an ambassador to civilization” (WELLS 1906: chapter XII, part III). He believed that every colored man – who acknowledges the fact that the Negroes have a handicap, that they are neither exceptionally brilliant, nor clever – can do his part in the struggle for true equality. There was, however, one thing that not even a liberal visionary like H. G. Wells could imagine. He could not imagine the black living side by side, without mingling and without injustice, with the white. He greatly admired Booker T. Washington, he even discussed these matters with him personally, but in that one thing they could not find common ground. Washington believed that Negroes can become something like Jews, a peculiar minority living side by side with other groups of people in various countries all over the world. But the difference was that while Jews had a common religion and culture, the Negroes had nothing of the sort. They were outcasts from the community, rather than a community.

4.3. Moving on

Back in our story of an ex-colored man, the Narrator had just started a new chapter in his life. He lost his job, because the factory he worked in was closed. So he bade farewell to Atlanta and Jacksonville and moved to New York. Among the first things that the Narrator discovered there regarding the colored community was the difference in language they spoke. For example the word ‘nigger’ was used frequently among the blacks and its meaning was positive, something like ‘dude’ or ‘fellow’. However, it would be unimaginable for a white man to use that term while speaking

with the blacks, as in that case its use would be considered very rude. This peculiarity remained in the vocabulary of African-Americans to this day.

African-Americans in general were a powerful force in New York at that time. All classes of Negroes were represented. On one end were the poor common people, who drank half, if not whole, their wages in a bar. Gambling was not unusual among them. The least fortunate ones lost everything because of their passion and created the image of the community. On the other end were the businessmen, artists and surprisingly - musicians. At least that is how James Weldon Johnson depicts them in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* – not necessarily exceedingly rich, but satisfied with their life and enjoying every bit of it. Music always had a strong place in the hearts of African-American people, even in slavery times. And later they developed their passion and brought to the world many new styles of music. Some of them became popular in the mainstream. Relevant to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is the ragtime music. James Weldon Johnson wrote (1912: chapter VI) that “it was originated in the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis by Negro piano players, who knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe”, but their affinity for music was natural. Crude and vulgar words were often used to fit in the melodies, but nevertheless, the musical style gained substantial popularity among common people. In fact, professional musicians attempted to ignore ragtime for a while, perhaps also because of its origin in the black minority, but people liked the music and their demand made white musicians try to take advantage of ragtime. They started to imitate the original composers, slightly alter the lyrics and then publish the work under their own names, claiming the reward for it. The society was not yet ready to accept colored artists as an equal quality to white artists.

There is, however, a phenomenon that is not unusual in the books I have read about the Harlem Renaissance – the philanthropy of several rich white people. Perhaps it is thanks to those benefactors that we now know about the cultural accomplishments of colored people. Many of them would not have been able to produce culture, was it not for the support of their sponsors. As we know from the theoretical part of this thesis, writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes found their benefactors in New York. There were others who were supported by good souls and many African-

American writers including James Weldon Johnson acknowledge it in their works. The Narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* discovered this kind of mutually beneficial coexistence very soon after arriving in New York and later found his own ‘employer’.

4.4. A millionaire

After arriving in New York the Narrator, just like the most of the real colored people that linked their lives with the great city, had to look for ways to earn a living. His first attempt was to get back to his experience from Atlanta – cigar making. But realizing that his ambitions were much higher, he had soon quit the job and with moderate successes spent about a year living off of gambling and playing music in local bars. Thanks to his mastery with the piano he was able to become a renowned ragtime player in New York. He became acquainted with a kind-hearted but quiet man, a millionaire, who was so attracted to his piano playing that he offered him regular income for playing for him. This allowed the Narrator to focus on his music and on observing the life of colored people without having to worry about money. They also travelled around Europe together; the Narrator learned French and German languages during that time and became “a polished man of the world” (JOHNSON 1912: chapter IX). Along this period of several years on the road together, the racial question was not brought up. But when the Narrator after a long consideration decided to inform his benefactor of his intention to return back to the United States and become a professional musician, the millionaire revealed to him what he thought about the problem of Negro artists in America and what is probably one of the core points that James Weldon Johnson wanted to make with his book:

“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.” (JOHNSON 1912: chapter IX)

The Narrator was well aware of this fact, yet he decided to continue in his quest for cultural prowess, because he found his life's mission in it. By doing so, the Narrator (or James Weldon Johnson) endorsed Du Bois' contentions "that for blacks to be fully human they must not forsake higher cultural ideals in favor of material success" (WARREN 1995: 273). The Narrator believed in the immense cultural power of the Negro race and wanted to take part in its creation.

4.5. Seeking answers

So the ex-colored man parted with his millionaire friend and benefactor and headed back to the United States. After arriving in New England he was able to get acquainted with another group of colored people, different from those he had met during his stay in the South. Negroes of the north, at least the educated ones, were almost entirely adapted to the life among whites, Johnson himself said (1912: chapter X) they were "in speech and thought genuine Yankees". The Narrator observed that some of the problematic racial questions of the South were not known here, or, more precisely, people were unaware of their existence. On the other hand, there was a tendency, however silent and subconscious, to submit to the influence of smoothing the color line – darker women often married light-complexioned men and vice versa. This was a result of the ever present tendency of the whites in the United States to segregate from the blacks – some of the blacks were trying to reduce the differences. It was almost an economic necessity for them. There were jobs offered only to white people, segregated medical care or public transport and many more examples of economic and social disadvantages for blacks. It was a natural tendency of black parents to try to improve the life of their offspring. James Weldon Johnson summed it up (1912: chapter X) with words: "It's no disgrace to be black, but it's often very inconvenient."

The Narrator then continued with his journey to the South. What is striking about the Southern mentality is that the people there are able to start conversation with complete strangers anywhere and anytime. It appears that they always have topics for conversation. Though not exclusively, it is mostly the racial question. The Narrator observed one of these conversations in a smoking compartment of a train car. There was a cotton planter from Texas, whose opinions about the inferiority of the Negro race

could be considered a general idea of former slaveholders of the South. He only spoke of them as ‘niggers’, inferior, lesser beings with no right to be taken equal with the pure Anglo-Saxons, whom he considered “the source of everything good and great in the human race”. In the words of this fictitious Texan, James Weldon Johnson wanted to illustrate one rather important idea or a myth, if I may so call it. It is the mental attitude of whites and not the actual conditions or actions of Negroes that create the friction between races. It is possible to change this mental attitude, because it is not based on truth. How? By creating a better image of the race through culture – music, literature, arts. It is the cornerstone of the Harlem Renaissance.

I have been often confused while reading books from Du Bois and Johnson, academic reviews by Huggins and Murray or watching movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *Glory*, as to what is the prevailing attitude of middle class whites towards the Negroes. In some examples, the relationship was very friendly, respectful and mutually beneficial (early scenes in *Gone with the Wind*, some paragraphs in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*), but in other examples, often from the same works, the attitude of the masses was quite the opposite. The problem of Southern whites, according to Johnson (1912: chapter X), is that they claim that they “love the Negro better than the Northern whites do” but in truth they despise them as a race. There might have been several friendships between the black and the white, there might have been a lot of money spent by whites to build educational facilities for the blacks, but the friction was still there. Much like on the other side. Both of those groups could converse for hours with the members of their own race about the other race, and never run out of things to criticize.

4.6. Abandoning the path

The journey through the South went pleasantly for some time. The Narrator continued collecting black folk materials for use in his musical compositions. He still lived off the savings from his millionaire friend, but realizing that this supply will not last forever, the Narrator started to think about making a living by teaching and performing. A sudden turn of events occurred in an unspecified town in the South, which has prior to that become a “mine of material” for him. At this point the novel

reached its climax. The Narrator witnessed a public lynching of an alleged criminal – white mob burned a black man alive. This “making of a man into less than a man” (WARREN 1995: 273) is the central theme of the novel:

Before noon they brought him in. Two horsemen rode abreast; between them, half dragged, the poor wretch made his way through the dust. His hands were tied behind him, and ropes around his body were fastened to the saddle horns of his double guard. The men who at midnight had been stern and silent were now emitting that terror instilling sound known as the "rebel yell." A space was quickly cleared in the crowd, and a rope placed about his neck; when from somewhere came the suggestion, "Burn him!" It ran like an electric current. Have you ever witnessed the transformation of human beings into savage beasts? Nothing can be more terrible. (JOHNSON 1912: chapter X)

The spectacle that has been so violently presented to the Narrator had an immediate and far-reaching effect upon him. He realized that there is no hope for him in identifying himself as a member of the Negro race. By the speed at which the events of the book took place after this scene James Weldon Johnson wanted to illustrate the fright that overwhelmed the Narrator. He felt “shame that he belonged to a race that could be so dealt with” and “shame for his country” which was supposed to be an example of civilized democracy for the whole world. But there is something surprising about the author’s change of heart after witnessing this scene. Even though it was the mob of white people who “transformed from human beings into savage beasts”, the narrative focuses on the dehumanization of the victim, rather than the perpetrators. Kenneth Warren understands this fact (1995: 274) as a “part of an overall strategy by which we are led to judge both the narrator's and the nation's moral deficiencies”. Previous scenes are narrated in a sort of optimistic mood stemming from the romantic and chivalric nature of Southern whites and then come the violent climax that shatters whatever sympathy could have been built for the Southern people throughout reading the novel.

So this is how the Narrator became an ex-colored man. He decided to drop whatever effort he was putting into developing the Negro and become something in between – he decided to “neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race”, but to change completely his appearance and search for opportunities as a man without any

identity. He was aware 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”, but it was the only chance not to perish with the whole Negro race.

The final chapter of the novel describes how the ex-colored man managed to disregard the color line. He became a successful businessman with moderately good income and “in the capital joke he was playing” with the society breached the Southern moral code of color. He married a white woman and reconciled with the world as a place not yet fit to live in as a black man.

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. (JOHNSON 1912: chapter IX)

5. Conclusion

To summarize the findings of this bachelor thesis, several statements can be made. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* can be considered as one of the first works of the Harlem Renaissance and as a sort of an example of what to focus on and what to fight for as a black-skinned writer. The stories narrated in the book, however fictitious, are based on the real problems of the African-American community. They represent what has really happened with the whole American society during the period of Reconstruction of the South and what has been evolving throughout the course of the most part of the 20th century. Today, in 2012, we can say that the emancipation process has almost ended; there is almost no friction and, more importantly, no inequality anymore between the colored people and the white people in the USA. Even the president of the United States is black. James Weldon Johnson's story served as one of the milestones in this emancipation process. Together with the works of W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and the new generation of writers of the Harlem Renaissance it defined the identity of the black folk and created a place for them in the world's cultural heritage.

Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo prozkoumat rasový problém ve Spojených státech na začátku 20. století. I když proces zrovnoprávnění černých a bílých Američanů byl oficiálně započat v roce 1863 tzv. Proklamací o zrovnoprávnění otroků, na jejímž základě bylo zrušeno otroctví, tento milník zdaleka neznamenal faktické vyrovnání možností černochů a bělochů. Ačkoliv se to z dnešního pohledu zdá nepochopitelné, ve Spojených státech od druhé poloviny 19. století až do velmi nedávné minulosti skutečně záleželo na barvě pleti v mnoha odvětvích lidské činnosti. Černoši byli diskriminováni jak z pohledu zaměstnanosti, nebo nutnosti oddělovat se od bělochů ve veřejné dopravě, nemocnicích, jídelnách a mnoha dalších místech, tak také z pohledu vztahů bílých k nim. Tato skoro až nenávist se projevovala také v zákonech. Černoši měli teoreticky stejné volební právo jako běloši, ovšem toto volební právo bylo podmíněno současně místem trvalého pobytu, testy gramotnosti a volební daní a tyto skutečnosti účinně zabraňovaly mnoha černochům využít jejich práva. Lynčování bylo také častým jevem. Velmi dlouhou dobu byli černoši nuceni tyto praktiky trpět, neboť nebyli schopni sjednotit se v požadavcích, vybrat si mluvčího nebo vůdce a vzdělávat se tak, aby mohli použít znalosti práva a zákonitostí společnosti k vyrovnání svých možností s bělochy. Dlouhé období, které jako celá rasa strávili v otroctví, je připravilo o možnost konkurovat bílým v ekonomické síle a ve schopnosti orientovat se v moderní společnosti. Cesta z této situace byla velice složitá a dlouhá, ale dnes již můžeme konstatovat, že ji Afroameričané úspěšně zvládli. Dle mého názoru byla volba Barracka Obamy, prvního černého prezidenta, posledním krokem k naprosté rovnosti černých a bílých ve Spojených státech.

Než mohla Amerika dospět do dnešního stavu, bylo nutné odstranit předsudky vůči černým. Toho mohlo být dosaženo pouze odstraněním jejich neduhů a definováním toho, čeho vlastně chtějí dosáhnout. Jedním z prvních mluvčích afroamerické komunity byl Booker T. Washington. Stal se prvním rektorem univerzity v Tuskegee, která byla první univerzitou pro Afroameričany. Jeho cílem bylo odstranit znevýhodnění černochů ve společnosti, které vzniklo kvůli tzv. „disfranchisement“ pravidlům, což by se dalo volně přeložit jako „zbavení práv“. Chtěl dosáhnout zvýšení míry gramotnosti

černošské populace (která byla mnohem nižší než míra gramotnosti bílých), protože v tom viděl jedinou možnost postupu ve společenském žebříčku. Hlásal sebezdokonalování jako hlavní nástroj dosažení vytyčených cílů a prostředkem k tomu mohlo být jediné vzdělání. Druhým mluvčím této generace byl W. E. B. Du Bois, který často přístup Booker T. Washingtona kritizoval. Na rozdíl od Washingtona, Du Bois požadoval naprostou rovnost možností, zrušení všech disfranchisement pravidel a radikální změnu smýšlení o barvě pleti. Ovšem v době, kdy Du Bois působil, bylo stále ještě brzy na takovéto změny, jeho přístup nebyl příliš efektivní, neboť společnost jednoduše ještě nebyla připravena přijmout černochoy jako svou rovnocennou součást. Rozhodně lze ale říci, že Du Bois položil základy pro pozdější hnutí za lidská práva. Jeho slavná kniha *Duše černých lidí (The Souls of Black Folk)* je sociologickou studií o tehdejších Afroameričanech. Jsou zde definovány některé problémy, které přímo ohrožují blahobyt a častokrát i život černochoy a také je zde převedeno do slov smýšlení vzdělaných Afroameričanů. Často citovaný je zejména Du Boisův koncept dvojitého vědomí („double-consciousness, notion of twoness“), který tvoří mnoho otázek a málo odpovědí, zejména ve vztahu k sebeurčení Afroameričanů. Ovšem i tyto nezodpovězené otázky mají potenciál změnit smýšlení černých i bílých. Tato kniha sloužila jako jeden ze základních kamenů Harlemské renesance a jako inspirace pro mnoho pozdějších černých autorů, včetně Jamese Weldon Johnsona. Díky Du Boisovi a autorům na něj navazujícím si Afroameričané uvědomili, že jedním z hlavních prostředků jak udělat z utlačované národnostní menšiny rovnocennou, je kultura.

Harlemská renesance je obdobím, kdy se černí autoři začali dostávat do povědomí bílých čtenářů a vydobývat tak místo ve společnosti pro celou rasu. Začalo vznikat obrovské množství děl černých autorů a tato se začala dostávat do literárního mainstreamu. Hlavním efektem tohoto snažení byl fakt, že si bílí čtenáři začali uvědomovat intelektuální vyspělost Afroameričanů a ti liberálnější z nich je začali považovat za sobě rovné. Harlemská renesance získala svůj název podle New Yorkské čtvrti Harlem, která se stala jakousi základnou černých autorů. Mnoho z nich se sem přestěhovalo v 10. a 20. letech 20. století a dali tak vzniknout velké komunitě. Žili zde jak vzdělaní intelektuálové, tak i nižší vrstvy. Ti vzdělanější nakonec začali převažovat a díky jejich snažení se negativní obraz černochoy, vytvořený zejména na americkém

Jihu díky nigramotným a nepříteli přátelským lidem (kterých ovšem byla menšina), začal vylepšovat.

Jako příklad této nové literatury byla zvolena právě Johnsonova *Autobiografie ex-barevného muže*. Přestože má v názvu slovo „autobiografie“, jedná se o fiktivní dílo, román, který lze považovat za svědectví o životě jednoho muže, který měl možnost setkat se s mnoha skupinami černých obyvatel na mnoha místech Spojených států a vytvořit tak objektivní obraz o celé rase. Vypravěč, syn bílého aristokrata a černé matky, je zajímavý tím, že podle barvy jeho kůže většina lidí není schopná rozpoznat, že v něm koluje černošská krev. Dětství prožívá v době rekonstrukce Jihu, ale až do svých školních let se neseťkává s žádnými projevy rasismu. Je vychováván matkou, která ho vede k hudbě, a hudba se tak stává hlavní náplní jeho života. Ve školních letech je také dobrým studentem a dozvídáme se i o jeho pomoci dokončit školu kamarádovi, který není až tak bystrý. Právě ve škole se vypravěč poprvé setkává s rasismem a tyto zkušenosti jsou pro něj tak silným zážitkem, že se rozhodne zasvětit život zkoumání afroamerické menšiny, definování jejích cílů a hledání možností jak ji začlenit do americké společnosti. Jak sám říká, „začíná se dívat na svět ne z pohledu občana, ale z pohledu barevného muže“. Z jeho vyprávění, ať už o tom, co zažil, nebo o tom, o čem přemýšlel během svých cest, můžeme definovat několik otázek o identitě. Například proč barevní lidé rozumí bílým více, než bílí rozumí jim nebo v čem jsou vlastně černoši jiní než běloši? Odpověď na první otázku musíme hledat v historii, v dobách otroctví. Otroctví nebylo vynálezem americké společnosti, ta ho pouze upravila do podoby, ze které vznikl rasismus. Amerika měla dostatek času na to, aby se otroctví pevně zakořenilo do společnosti a stalo se tak přirozeným jevem, že někteří bílí otrokáři již ani neuvažovali o otrocích jako o lidech, nýbrž jako o nástrojích. A tak s nimi také zacházeli, nebylo vůbec důležité, co si myslí, hlavně když „fungují“. Otroci měli čas přemýšlet o svých pánech a o otázkách, týkajících se jejich vlastního života, jelikož díky nigramotnosti a nesvobodě neměli možnost uvažovat o věcech jako je filozofie nebo kultura. A naproti tomu bílí otrokáři neměli žádný důvod zabývat se porozuměním svým otrokům, svým „nástrojům“. Když bylo otroctví zrušeno, pro mnoho lidí tak byl nastolen nepřirozený pořádek věcí a trvalo to ještě více než 100 let, než se tento systém stal přirozeným pro obyvatele amerického Jihu. Černoši měli díky té dlouhé době v otroctví náskok v moderním pohledu na svět a vznikaly tak mnohdy krvavé neshody

mezi rasami. Tím vlastně už přesahujeme k odpovědi na druhou otázku, v čem jsou tedy černoši jiní než běloši. Barva kůže je jen druhotný znak. Je to hlavně jejich smýšlení, které vzniklo jako důsledek jejich fyzické segregace. Před i po zrušení otroctví se soustřeďovali do komunit, sestávajících výhradně z příslušníků jejich rasy a jejich společenské skupiny. Není žádným tajemstvím, že ani oni neměli bělochy nijak zvlášť v lásce a život v uzavřené komunitě tento pocit ještě umocňoval. Navíc kvůli létům nesvobody úplně postrádali některé schopnosti a znalosti potřebné k úspěšné ekonomické konkurenceschopnosti s bělochy, a ti se nebáli využít lstí a podvodů k získání konkurenční výhody. Barva pleti byla tím poznávacím znakem, díky kterému věděli, na koho můžou bílí použít svoje „znalosti“. Vypravěč *Autobiografie ex-barevného muže* měl při svém pobytu na americkém Jihu možnost poznat tyto praktiky a uvědomit si, jak důležitou roli hraje vzdělání v procesu zrovnoprávnění černých a bílých. James Weldon Johnson tímto přímo navázal na dílo Booker T. Washingtona a W. E. B. Du Boise – oba hlásali nutnost vzdělání, i když každý v jiné oblasti.

James Weldon Johnson také rozdělil barevné do tří skupin podle jejich vztahu k bílým. První skupina, manuální pracovníci, nevzdělaní lidé nebo bývalí trestanci, nebyla příliš početná, ale díky své „viditelnosti“ to byla hlavně tato skupina, která utvářela negativní názory bílých na celou rasu. Tato skupina neusilovala o žádné narovnání vztahů s bílými, nenáviděla je stejně, jako oni je a stranila se jich. Podle Johnsona bylo i v zájmu bílých co nejvíce zredukovat tuto skupinu pro dosažení lepšího života pro všechny. Druhá skupina byli černoši pracující dobrovolně pro bílé v jejich domácnostech – zahradníci, kuchaři, sluhové a další. Tito většinou věřící lidé měli s bílými naopak dobré vztahy – každý, kdo se k nim choval slušně, byl jejich přítel. Třetí skupina, vzdělaní kupci a nezávislí pracovníci se od bílých distancovali a žili si ve vlastním světě. Uvědomovali si rasový problém a věřili, že jsou lepší než běloši a nevyhledávali kontakt s nimi. Tento přístup také nebyl příliš dobrý, neboť případná spolupráce mohla být užitečná oběma stranám.

Další vypravěčova cesta vedla do New Yorku, kde se jeho názory na rasový problém dále utvářely. V New Yorku se seznámil s jedním bohatým mužem, milionářem, který se stal jeho zaměstnavatelem a přítelem. Díky němu měl vypravěč možnost nahlédnout do vyšších společenských kruhů a také cestovat po Evropě, kde se

nakonec zrodilo jeho rozhodnutí věnovat se hudbě s černošskými motivy a přinést tak slávu a uznání celé rase i za cenu nebezpečí, že toto zaměstnání nebude dostačující pro pokrytí životních nákladů. Tímto rozhodnutím Johnson také odkazuje na Du Boisův názor, že „aby mohl být černoš skutečně považován za rovnocenného člověka, nesmí obětovat kulturní bohatství za hmotné bohatství“. Ovšem tento vypravěčův sen je nakonec opuštěn po shlednutí lynčování údajného černého zločince skupinou bílých lidí. Tato dramatická scéna, která je klimaxem celého románu, naprosto změní vypravěčův pohled na svět. Vypravěč si uvědomí, že jako černoš nemá šanci získat jakékoliv uznání a opouští okamžitě všechny ideály, za které chtěl bojovat. Stane se z něj ex-barevný muž. Toto překvapující rozuzlení příběhu slouží jako varování černošům, aby se nevzdávali a nepřestávali bojovat za svá práva. Poslední kapitola popisuje život ex-barevného muže jako člověka, který našel své místo ve společnosti tím, že se distancoval od své rasy. Tento závěr považují jako autorovo přání a proroctví, že se v budoucnu všechny rasové rozdíly smažou a Amerika a svět bude místem, kde jsou si černoši i běloši rovni.

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