
2021-2022 Great World Texts Program
UW-Madison Center for the Humanities

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Teaching *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in Wisconsin

**Reading Across Time and Place**

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is a work of fiction. While its sociocultural and geopolitical contexts are integral to its impact, and to our critical reflections on the text, it is also important to remember that this is a work of literature. While literature can help us teach culture, history, politics and so on, no one text can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. As you teach this text, please keep in mind and emphasize where you can the cultural specificities that make it unique. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will also help you and your students appreciate the text’s ability to speak across time and space. Certain sections of the teaching guide, such as Units 1, 2, and 5, will be especially helpful in this context.

**How to Use This Guide**

The material in this guide is intended to provide a variety of options for teaching James Weldon Johnson’s novel and its many contexts. We believe that the historical and cultural background is necessary for understanding this work and the questions it provokes, but we encourage you to teach the text thematically as well, tying it into other disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

**Readings**

The recommended readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some are also accessible to students. These readings provide further information for instructors as well as a variety of materials that might aid instructors in creating handouts and supplementing class discussion.

**Points for Discussion, Assignments, and Activities**

The recommended points for discussion, assignments and activities provided in this guide are designed to be tailored to the way you teach the text in your own course, as well as your particular time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units might be taught over one or several days, or over the course of a few weeks. You can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each unit is organized according to themes that include points for lecture and discussion, suggestions for close reading, specific quotes from the text or other readings, as well as in-class activities and assignments that might be used to further discussion.

**Close Reading Strategies**

The guide assumes that you will have read the entire text, but all units also offer suggestions for specific passages within the text that would benefit from careful and attentive reading, analysis
and discussion. During discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to both large-group work and small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to develop their critical thinking skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it’s important that the teacher always remind the students to point to the passage, line, or occurrence that supports their position when they’re sharing their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.” It also helps teach students to assess the text on its own merits, and to avoid essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

**Teaching Toward the Student Conference**

Schools participating in the 2021-2022 program will bring students to the University of Wisconsin-Madison on Monday, April 4, 2022 to present their work to their peers and meet the scholar and editor Jacqueline Goldsby in person. At the time of the completion of this guide in August 2021, we are tentatively planning on an in-person conference, with plans to monitor the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Unit 7 in this guide is explicitly devoted to preparing students for this visit and for the student conference. Prepare them for a successful conference by encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students’ projects must present a critical analysis of the text. Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects, which will be submitted to Aaron Fai approximately three weeks before the student conference.

Each school will select one student, or group of students, whose work is exemplary, to present to the entire conference. It’s recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the “best” project for this presentation, which will be about 3 minutes in length. It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed and timed, and that they will provide an opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. *All other students* are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference, and will have the opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present her/his work at the conference.
1. JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

OBJECTIVES

- To outline the life and milieu of James Weldon Johnson
- To introduce the conceptual metaphor “double consciousness”
- To explain miscegenation as an important theme
- To highlight the figure of the “race man”

HANDOUTS

- Excerpt from W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (see ECM, pages 179-186)
  This excerpt, the first chapter of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, summarizes the formative years of Du Bois. It provides a very good intertext for reading the Ex-Colored Man’s realization that he is not “white.”
- “Toussaint L’Ouverture”
  Toussaint L’Ouverture was a quintessential figure of Black resistance. This short excerpt from *Britannica* introduces students to him.
- Wendell Phillips’ “Touissant L’Ouverture”
  This is culled from the speech of American abolitionist Wendell Phillips. It will help to give students an idea of the content of Shiny’s graduation speech that moves the narrator.
- Worksheet: “Sample Literacy Test”

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Excerpts from Johnson’s memoir, *Along This Way* in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Norton Critical Editions), especially the passage from pp. 139-144.
- Yoni Appelbaum, “Why There Was a Civil War,” *The Atlantic* of May 1, 2017, retrievable at [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/why-there-was-a-civil-war/524925/](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/why-there-was-a-civil-war/524925/)
UNIT ORGANIZATION

This unit, as well as the next unit, is designed to provide initial historical details to support robust class discussions planned around the first three chapters of *ECM*. Much of the material presented here is fleshed out in greater detail in subsequent units, but this unit provides enough quick background to serve as entry into Johnson’s short but extremely important novel. Organized in three subsections, this unit is woven around pertinent concepts and themes in African American history and literature. The first subsection, “James Weldon Johnson: Life and Milieu,” offers a brief outline of Johnson’s life. This is not intended to be an exhaustive rendering of Johnson’s multifaceted life, but to offer enough information to understand his authorial motive for *ECM*. This subsection is broken into three sections: “The Milieu,” “Miscegenation in the South,” and “The Life.” It dovetails into the next subsection, entitled “Double Consciousness in African American Life and Letters.” The second subsection elaborates on the notion of double consciousness first named and defined by W.E.B. Du Bois, an important African American figure and Johnson’s contemporary, although much older than Johnson. This section ends in an explanation of miscegenation as an important element in the identity formation of African Americans. Bringing these important African Americans together necessitates examining the figure of the “race man” in African American history. This is the concern of the third subsection. Entitled “Traces of the ‘Race Man,’” this final subsection offers a historically grounded discussion of the figure of the “race man,” who is legible in *ECM* right from the start. These subsections are interspersed with sample close reading exercises, sample discussion questions and sample class assignments.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Why does the narrator and his mother leave Georgia for Connecticut?
2. What does it mean to be “a perfect little aristocrat” (*ECM*, p. 7)? Why does the narrator describe himself as one?
3. What major events mark the 19th and 20th centuries in the US? In what ways are they significant to *ECM*?
4. What does the narrator learn about himself after his embarrassment at school (p. 11)?

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON: LIFE AND MILIEU

The Milieu

*ECM* begins on a note of confession. The narrator discloses that by writing his autobiography, he is “divulging the great secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions” (*ECM*, p. 5). Why does he begin the narrative on such an ominous note? What conditions prompted him to guard this secret so strongly? A key to the answer is offered when he situates his birth “a few years after the Civil War” (*ECM*, p. 5), that is, during the Reconstruction. A rewarding beginning to the study of the novel therefore is a quick study of the history of African America. Moreover, literary scholars have argued that the task of interpreting Johnson’s writing and authorial objective warrants understanding the history of the social environment in which he worked (see, for example,
Noelle Morrissette’s “Introduction” in *New Perspectives on James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, p. 4. Johnson was born in 1871 during the Reconstruction Era, the period between 1865 and 1877. This was the period after the American Civil War during which the government sought to redress the inequities of slavery and rebuild the South of the US, much of which was devastated by the Civil War. The American Civil War raged for four years, from 12 April 1861 to 26 April 1865. To simply say the Civil War was waged between the Northern and the Southern states of the US is to tell half the story, because the history of the Civil War is rooted in American Slavery.

It began in 1619, more than a century before the US gained independence from Britain, when 20 Africans were brought to Virginia as indentured servants, people who work for an employer for a stipulated period of time. At this time, Virginia was an English colony, an area under British control. By the 1660s, many more Africans were brought to America as indentured servants. These indentured servants were not slaves and could depart from their employers at the end of their service terms. Because white settlers wanted to keep these indentured servants longer than their stipulated terms, the Slave Trade began in Virginia in 1661 and in all English colonies in America in 1750.

White slave traders and owners carried out the trade by spreading the idea that the black skin color of Africans (a result of the presence of melanin, the dark skin pigmentation, in the body) made them dirty, ugly, sub-human, and therefore inferior to white people in everything. However, that is untrue. Western Africa, where many enslaved Africans were taken, already boasted kingdoms that had developed sophisticated government, social, and artistic systems. Some examples are the Ashanti, the Dahomey, the Benin, the Songhai, and the Oyo kingdoms. In any case, because the Slave Trade had become profitable, some of these kingdoms lent hand in it by selling war captives to European slave merchants who transported them across the Atlantic Ocean to the US in ships. Many of these enslaved Africans died en route to the US: some by suicide, some through torture, and some through diseases. When these enslaved Black people arrived in the US to work first on tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations and later on cotton and sugar plantations, they were brutally ill-used by their white masters. Because the laws of Slavery in the US, known as the slave code, deemed enslaved people as merely three-fifths of a person and therefore sub-human, white masters abused them and devised the most terrible manners of disciplining them.

The slave system took a new turn in 1807 when President Thomas Jefferson abolished the African Slave Trade. This meant that slave merchants could no longer legally bring Africans to the US as slaves. Nevertheless, slave merchants and slave owners developed new means of keeping Slavery alive. Sometimes, they sell slaves to one another as if they were selling animals. Very often, white masters raped and impregnated their female slaves in order to multiply their slaves. Female slaves as young as thirteen years old were used in this manner.

Northern states abolished Slavery in 1804, having diversified their economies and invested in industries and transportation, but Southern states continued to grow rich on enslaved labor. They had large plantations and boasted of the richest Americans. It should be noted that although Northern states ended Slavery, their industries depended on raw materials from the South and many of their rich people invested in plantations in the South. Northern states began
to push for the abolition of Slavery across the US, but Southern states vehemently opposed such propositions. Tension grew between Northern and Southern states and came to a head in 1860 when Abraham Lincoln won the election on the platform of the Republican Party, which favored the abolition of slavery at the time. Then, seven Southern states (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas) seceded from the United States to form the Confederate States of America. An emblem of the secession is visible in the present, in the form of the Confederate flag (see image below). On April 12, 1861, soldiers of the seceding states opened fire on Fort Sumter, a defensive building meant to protect South Carolina from foreign attacks. So the Civil War began, and four more Southern states (Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina) joined the Confederate States.

(Figure 1: the Confederate flag)

Although Abraham Lincoln initially favored gradual abolition of Slavery in the Southern states and supported compensating slave owners for their slaves, since slaves were regarded as property, in September 1862, he proclaimed the Emancipation of all slaves in the rebel states. A second proclamation in January 1863 officially proscribed Slavery in seceding states. The implication of this was that Slavery was technically not abolished; only the Southern states that seceded from the US lost their right to own and trade in slaves. It was not until 1865 when the Civil War ended that Slavery was abolished in all of the United States. But Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation indicated that the Civil War was a battle over the continuity of Slavery. The War, fought between Federal forces known as Union soldiers and secessionist forces known as
Confederate soldiers, eventually ended on April 9, 1865. When it did, the Confederate States were reabsorbed into the United States and the period known as the Reconstruction era began.

It should be mentioned that before the Civil War, the abolitionist movement agitated for the freedom of enslaved people in the United States. This movement, a group of people driven by a common goal usually towards social justice, was based upon a similar movement in Britain that resulted in the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1830. Some members of the abolitonist movement took a religious angle and argued that slavery was ungodly. Others argued from a purely politico-economic perspective that slavery flouts the tenets of free labor and, therefore, does not make economic sense. Abolitionists were made up of free Black people and a few white people. Free Black people, at the time, were of three categories: 1.) descendants of indentured servants who were brought to the US before the Slave Trade; 2.) free Black immigrants from the West Indies; and 3.) Black people who were freed by or escaped from slave owners in the South. These Black people were some of the founding members of the abolitionist movement in the US. Some of the most popular and most celebrated Black abolitionists were Frederick Douglass, whom James Weldon Johnson met in 1881; Harriet Tubman, who also escaped enslavement and helped other enslaved people to reach the North through the Underground Railroad; and Sojourner Truth, who like Douglass and Tubman escaped slavery to become a prominent voice in the abolitionist movement. White collaborators of these abolitionists included Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was famous for her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (see reference to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in ECM, page 24).

The Reconstruction era was the period immediately after the Civil War, from 1865 to 1877, when the United States sought to rebuild Southern states and promised to ensure the freedom of formerly enslaved Black people. In keeping with these goals, the government granted pardon to Southerners who pledged loyalty to the federal government. As a result, former slave owners kept their wealth and their property except slaves. The Constitution was amended in order to, purportedly, decisively end Slavery. The most important constitutional amendment in this regard is the 13th amendment, which was passed by Congress in 1865. The amendment reads thus: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist in the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” As with the language of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, there is a loophole in the 13th amendment which many erstwhile slave owners seized unto. The conditional clause, “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,” provided that a free Black person may still be enslaved if found guilty and convicted of a crime. Even so, the 13th amendment was regarded to have officially ended Slavery across the United States.

To ensure, too, that Black people were able to participate in elections, the 15th amendment accorded freed slaves the right to vote. This amendment was passed in 1869 and ratified in 1870, about a year before James Weldon Johnson was born. Note that at this time, suffrage did not extend generally to women until 1920. Black men went to the polls in the South and voted and were voted for. Enraged at this new development, white people sought to limit voting rights for Black men, and only five years after the 15th amendment was ratified, its loophole was exploited to keep Black men from voting. But as it was with all legal documents designed to enable the freedom of Black people, the 15th amendment was faulty because it did not
dismantle other forms of limitation to the rights of Black people to vote. In a court case in 1876, the US Supreme Court ruled that the amendment only forbade electoral discrimination based on race, color, and status of servitude alone. Following this ruling, Southern states began to devise means of excluding Black men from voting. They demanded poll taxes which many Black people could not afford and literacy tests which were administered by white officials with the intention of failing Black people. It should be emphasized that the literacy tests were merely a ploy to keep Black people from voting because they were impossible to pass. An egregious example is the literacy test administered to Black voters in the State of Louisiana (see worksheet, “Sample Literacy Test for Black Voters”). It was not until the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a culmination of the efforts of many Black activists, that Black people could exercise their rights to vote without discrimination or fear of intimidation. But care must be taken to establish that although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 offered Black people more socio-political freedom, it did not end acts of racism against them.

Circumstances surrounding the end of Reconstruction were politically motivated. In 1876, the Republican president, Rutherford Hayes, reached an informal agreement with Southern states. Terms of the agreement included autonomy to Southern states, as much as allowable by the federal constitution, and withdrawal of federal troops from Southern states. This was the end of the Reconstruction era. The Southern states implemented measures to keep Black people subservient and denied them many economic opportunities that were otherwise available to white people.

You may ask students to take the “Sample Literacy Test for Black Voters” in 10 minutes. Be sure to observe the same conditions under which the test was originally taken: they have 10 minutes to take the test, and one wrong answer indicates failure of the test.

Miscegenation in the South

Opening Discussion

1. Why does the narrator not tell us much about his mother and father?
2. What kind of man is the narrator’s father?
3. Consider the following passages from ECM:

I have a dim recollection of several people who moved in and about this little house, but I have a distinct mental image of only two; one, my mother, and the other, a tall man with a small, dark mustache. I remember that his shoes or boots were always shiny, and that he wore a gold chain and a great gold watch with which he was always willing to let me play. My admiration was almost equally divided. (p. 6)

I remember distinctly the last time this tall man came to the little house in Georgia; that evening before I went to bed he took me up in his arms, and squeezed me very tightly; my mother stood behind his chair wiping tears from her eyes. I remember how I sat upon his knee and watched
him laboriously drill a hole through a ten-dollar gold piece, and then tie the coin around my neck with a string. (p. 6)

...I saw a tall, handsome, well dressed gentleman of perhaps thirty-five; he advanced a step toward me with a smile on his face. .... I looked at him from head to foot, but he was an absolute blank to me until my eyes rested on his slender, elegant, polished shoes; then it seemed that indistinct and partly obliterated films of memory began at first to rapidly unroll, forming a vague panorama of childhood days in Georgia.

My mother broke the spell by calling me by name, and saying, “This is your father.” (pp. 19-20)

Why the progression of recollection in these passages? What do the adjectives highlighted in the passage above reveal about the narrator’s father?

Miscegenation is central to *ECM*. The word “miscegenation” is derived from the combination of two Latin words: “miscere” (to mix) and “genus” (race). *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types. Miscegenation was considered a taboo in America right from the earliest arrival of Black people in Virginia in 1619. As a result, laws were enacted to proscribe all acts of interbreeding between white people and Black people. In a 1986 article for *The Washington Post*, James Kinney, then an associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, recalls that as early as 1630 a white man was “soundly whipped” for “defiling his body in lying with a Negro” (“Miscegenation: The Long Cruel History of Our Last Taboo,” in the *Washington Post* of 23 February 1986). As early as 1662, Virginia enacted the first law prohibiting interracial marriages, and many other places soon followed in this direction. Soon, there arose the need to differentiate between white Americans and those of mixed parentage. Virginia, again, led these efforts. In 1785, Virginia passed the law that defined anyone who had a Black parent or grandparent as white. These laws flowed from the incorrect assumption that Black people were inferior to white people, and the assumption in turn underlied the framework that upheld Slavery.

Georgia’s anti-miscegenation laws were enacted in 1750 and were in place until 1967. They forbade whites from marrying non-whites. Although the narrator in *ECM* does not mention that his father is white, he directs attention to many artefacts that indicate that he is wealthy. In response to the narrator’s question about whether his mother is white, she replies: “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—” (*ECM*, p. 12). Instead of revealing directly that the narrator’s father is white, employing synecdoche, she instead refers to the belief among Southern whites that their blood is better and purer than that of Black people. In an article written for *The Washington Post* in 2017 entitled “The Myth of the Southern Blood,” Jason Morgan Ward, a professor of modern American history at Emory University, explains that the belief of racial superiority held by many Southern whites was largely responsible for the anti-miscegenation laws in the South. In the South, anyone who has a single drop of “black blood” in them is considered Black. In other words, if any white person could locate a Black person in their ancestry, they are
considered Black. This is what is known as the “one-drop rule.” So, when the narrator’s mother refers to his father as “the best blood of the South,” she indicates that he is white.

Interestingly, Walter Francis White, an African American civil rights activist who took over from James Weldon Johnson as leader of the NAACP, was the grandson of a Georgia slaveholder. White was a writer who, in order to investigate racial violence in the South without being harmed, passed as white. To pass as white is to identify as a white person if one has Caucasian features even if one has a Black ancestor. This phenomenon is dealt with more broadly in Unit 5.

(Walter Francis White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP from 1929 to 1955, retrieved from https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/white-walter-f-1893-1955/)
Note that although laws banning intermarriage were put in place as early as 1639, white slaveholders slept with their female slaves. After a while the act became tolerated if a white man slept with or involved in an affair with a Black woman, but an affair between a Black man and a white woman was never tolerated and were punishable by law. The affair between the narrator’s mother and his father was therefore strained. Also, because such affairs were regarded as taboo, the offspring of such affairs were estranged from their white fathers. Before Emancipation, such offspring were counted as slaves, and after the Civil War, they were just disregarded by their fathers because their very presence tainted the respectability of their white fathers. Noting these points explains why the narrator is often silent about his father and does not say much about his mother.

As explained in Unit Two, ECM anticipated the Harlem Renaissance in many ways. The character of the narrator’s mother, for example, finds an equal in “Blood-Burning Moon,” a short story by Jean Toomer, one of the notable writers of the Harlem Renaissance. It revolves around the love affair between Louisa, a young Black woman who works for a white household, and two men—Tom, a Black fieldworker, and Bob Stone, son of her employer. Both men, furious that they are fighting for the love of the same woman, attack each other. It ends in the lynching of Tom by an angry white mob because he gravely injures Bob Stone.

The Life of James Weldon Johnson

The following is a broad outline of the history of the social environment in which Johnson was born. His parents lived in the Bahamas in the 1860s before they migrated to the United States. Johnson reveals in his own autobiography that he had a relatively privileged upbringing, as much as that was possible for a black person in the American South. Two reasons may be advanced for this. First, his grandfather Stephen Dillet was the first Black person to win an election to the Bahamian legislature at a time when the British ruled the Bahamas. Her mother thus had a privileged upbringing in the Bahamas and she herself became a schoolteacher in Florida. Second, his father gained a reputation as a headwaiter and a property broker. Expectedly, James Weldon Johnson and his brother hardly considered themselves to be limited by the color of their skin.

His mother cultivated his flair for English literature and classical music. Grounded thus, he went on to Atlanta University. Atlanta University is a historically black college that emphasizes classical education as a means to the advancement of African Americans. Founded in September 1865, three months after the Civil War ended, the University became the first to award bachelor’s degrees to African Americans in the South. Its motto—“I Will Find a Way or Make One”—tellingly signals the social impediments on the path of the African American. The university charges its students to engage their education in promoting the betterment of African Americans.

Johnson imbibed this ideal, and in the summer of 1891, after his freshman year, he taught descendants of slaves in a rural Georgia town. He recalled this experience in glowing terms: “In
all of my experience there has been no period so brief that has meant so much in my education for life as the three months I spent in the backwoods of Georgia” (quoted in The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie A. Smith, p. 781). He considered the period as one that shaped him and brought him to full maturity because for the first time, he was left to his own devices. But more importantly, Johnson reveals that it was at this time that he took full cognizance of his racial classification as black in the US. He writes: “It was this period which marked...the beginning of my knowledge of my own people.” He vouchsafed further that it “laid the first stones in the foundation of faith in [African Americans] on which I have stood ever since” (The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 781). Undoubtedly, Johnson took this experience very seriously and went on to become principal of Stanton School in Jacksonville.

After Atlanta University, Johnson went on to become principal of Edwin M. Stanton School in his hometown of Jacksonville, where his mother had been a teacher. In 1900, while he was principal of Stanton School, Johnson composed a famous poem entitled “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” in commemoration of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. His brother John Rosamond Johnson set the poem to music. The stirring lyrics resonated with African Americans so much so that it quickly came to be regarded as the “Negro National Anthem.” A close reading of the poem reveals, among other things, that by 1900, twelve years before he published The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, that Johnson was aware of the social limitations against African Americans at the time and indeed believed in the fortitude and resilience of African Americans:

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

When in 1901 Johnson left Jacksonville for New York, it was to join his brother in writing songs for Broadway. Their musical endeavors were hugely successful. In Brooklyn, New York, Johnson mingled with the top ranks of African American society. He joined Theodore Roosevelt’s campaign team in 1904 and was appointed as the United States consul to Venezuela. In 1909, he headed the US consulate in Corinto, Nicaragua. In his years as a diplomat, he published poems in national periodicals and finished The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. He served in the US diplomatic corps until 1913. When he resigned from the Foreign Service, he took on editorial work. He also organized for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), rising to become the first African American leader of the Association in 1920. Johnson had studied law and passed the Florida State bar exam in 1898, becoming the first Black person to pass the Florida bar exam. His study of law proved necessary because he went on to draft bills that promoted the welfare of Black people in the US. One of these was the anti-lynching bill, he himself having narrowly escaped lynching in 1901 (see pages 139-144 of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Norton Critical Editions). He resigned from the leadership of the NAACP in 1930 to take up a professorial appointment in Creative Literature at Fisk University, another historically black college.
Johnson was a man of many parts: educator, poet, novelist, composer, lawyer, diplomat, and civil rights agitator. Like many of his African American contemporaries, he diligently espoused the idea that Black people had contributed much to the prosperity of the US, and they deserved to be accepted as dignified American citizens. The formation of this ideal could be tied to the notion of double consciousness, which has proved to be a primary theme in African American literature.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you respond to assertions that laws are the most important elements in achieving social/racial justice? (This may be done as a writing exercise.)
2. After he meets his father, the narrator is confused and decides to hide that knowledge from others (see the last paragraph on p. 21). Why do you think he was confused by meeting his father?

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND LETTERS

The notion of double consciousness is the idea that Black people always see themselves through the eyes of others. This notion was first described by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, in his classic work of non-fiction entitled The Souls of Black Folk, published in 1903. W.E.B. Du Bois was born and raised in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Although it was believed that the South was intolerant of Black people, the North was just as intolerant to them. Du Bois describes his experience of racial prejudice in Great Barrington, a moment that shaped his definition of double consciousness. This moment is comparable to the anagnorisis in ECM.

anagnorisis: a moment in a play or a novel when a character discovers their true identity or their true circumstances

He noted that when he was quite young, he had happily bought a visiting card, like other boys and girls, to exchange with a white girl who arrogantly rejected it. This was the point at which he discovered that he belonged to the group of people considered inferior by others. He depicts the US as a society divided by a large veil: “Then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil” (The Souls of Black Folk, p. 4; see The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Norton Critical Edition, p. 180). The girl’s arrogance rested on her believing that young Du Bois was not worthy of her. By the rejection, she therefore acknowledged her status of privilege, her agreement to her social categorization as superior to Black people, and her unwillingness to bridge the social gap between her and Du Bois. This revealed to young Du Bois that to bridge the racial gap would be a daunting task. His dejection was double. On the surface was the embarrassment of having been rejected by another person. On a much deeper level was his realization that he would always be considered unworthy by whites. This is why Du Bois makes his famous pronouncement: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line...” (The Souls of Black Folk, p. 12). By color-line, Du Bois means the social division constructed between people because of their skin color.
Du Bois evoked the metaphor of the veil in the sense that it is a divider of space and a manifestation of ignorance. It refers to the social structure by which white people set themselves apart from Black people. As a result, both groups do not often relate well with each other because of the social barriers put between them. Usually, the group that considers itself superior to the other ends up being ignorant about the other. Think of the veil literally as a covering draped over someone to hide their face from clear view but through which they can see others. Du Bois speaks of the veil in that sense: a covering that sets apart groups of people but as a result of which one group does not know enough about the other. This accounts for the frequent misjudgments of the intentions of Black people by white people.

Represented in this manner, Black people face the difficult task of understanding themselves as portrayed by white people, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, understanding themselves as they truly are. This double objective arises from what Du Bois calls “double consciousness.” As Du Bois describes it, double consciousness is the fact of looking at oneself through the eyes of others. It arises from being conscious of having been pre-defined by other people an issue that white people do not have to deal with. At this point, the Black person discovers that they have been pre-defined and yet they are aware that the pre-definition is wrong. The result is a feeling of “two-ness” as Du Bois calls it: “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” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 5).

Consider a young Black boy who wants to play with a toy gun but cannot do so, because he is conscious that white people and sometimes others who do not look like him erroneously believe that he is naturally prone to violence. This sort of disposition is what Du Bois calls “double consciousness”: they boy knows that he is not prone to violence, and also knows that society believes he is and could subject him to harm or even death based on that erroneous assumption about him. Du Bois implies that to have to live under this burden of pre-definition by others is unfair.

To surmount the veil, Du Bois resolved to be the very best at everything he did. By the end of his life, he had indeed established a distinguished reputation for himself. He was the first African American to graduate with a doctoral degree from Harvard. He was a brilliant sociologist considered to have started the field of urban ethnography, a systematic study of city life. His doctoral dissertation was so compelling that it was published as the first volume of the Harvard Historical Studies series. He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. The effects of that organization influenced the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and, consequently, the Black Lives Matter movement of the present. At the March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous speech, “I Have a Dream,” the 200,000 demonstrators who gathered observed a minute of silence in Du Bois’s honor after his death in Ghana a day before the March. In short, Du Bois was one of the greatest African Americans to have lived and the foremost Black intellectual of his time.

African Americans of Du Bois’s and James Weldon Johnson’s ilk, therefore, sought to overcome this biased classification of Black people as inferior to other groups of people, particularly much inferior to white people. This determination to live above prejudiced definitions was exhibited...
by the crop of Black people (usually Black men) known as “race men.” The next section turns to the figure of the race man.

Suggested Close Reading and Discussion

1. On page 10, the Ex-Colored Man introduces Shiny, a Black boy, as the most intelligent student in his school. Yet he was often disrespected by his peers. Why is this so?

2. Students should read excerpts from the first chapter of W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk with attention to the visiting card incident. Thereafter, they should read the following passage, moment of anagnorisis in ECM when the narrator realizes that he is not white:

   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’am?” 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.” (11)

   How does this passage relate to Du Bois’s moment of rejection by a white girl? Why do you think the narrator has to be told to sit down? Why does he draw readers’ attention to his feelings when he realizes that he is not white?

3. Students should consider the long passage on page 12 of ECM in which the Ex-Colored Man looks at himself in a mirror and discuss how the “looking-glass” serves as a symbol for the Ex-Colored Man’s double consciousness.

4. In the passage in which Red Head is introduced on page 9, the narrator criticizes the unfairness of his teacher’s spelling exercise. Do you agree that the teacher was unfair? Based on your answer, write a short response to this statement: “Merit, rather than privilege, should determine success.”

TRACES OF THE RACE MAN

Opening Questions

1. List five prominent African Americans without including entertainers. Why do you think they are significant to the history of the US?

2. How many women are on your list? Why does it matter to include women on the list?

3. Why do you think an African American must strive for success? Does the success of an African American affect the social standing of other African Americans? If so, how?
Even after Emancipation, white people still considered Black people to be inferior. As shown in the section above, they represented Black people as not quite human. To white people, Black people were inferior, backward, incapable of higher learning in the arts and sciences, and therefore cannot attain social and civic equality. African Americans therefore had to prove themselves capable in all fields of human endeavor, and the figure of the race man arose from this imperative. Thus, a race man is an African American male who, having proved his capability in an area of human endeavor, dedicates himself to asserting the rights and dignity of people of the Black Race.

Many scholars connect the emergence of the race man to the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois. In her book, *Race Men* (1998), Hazel V. Carby quotes W.E.B. Du Bois’s journal entry on his twenty-fifth birthday in which he mentioned his desire to achieve the best he could for the sake of uplifting Black people: “I ... work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world” (Carby, p. 9). This journal entry is reflected in *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he recalls his unpleasant feeling when a white girl haughtily rejected his visiting card. After the incident, Du Bois determined to become the very best he could possibly be:

> Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said: some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could not decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful takes that swam in my head,--some way. (Du Bois, p. 4)

What made this lofty aim more imperative is that the determination is made on behalf of a people. The aims of the race man are influenced by his understanding that he is seen to represent his community. Thus, he considers himself to be bearing the burden of society on his shoulders, and circumstances often lead him into activism. African American history furnishes very many examples of other race men, some preceding Du Bois and some after him: Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr.

One reason for the prominence of the Black male figure as champion of the cause of Black people is that histories of the agitations of oppressed people always centered on men as revolutionists who fought for the liberation of their people. One example is Toussaint L’Ouverture, who led the Haitian Revolution of 1804 (see the handout “Toussaint L’Ouverture” for his succinct biography).

But the figure of the race man is a flawed one, in that the total freedom of Black people is tied to the person, success, and achievement of the Black male. Some scholars have challenged this promotion of Black males as representatives of Black people. Hazel Carby, for instance, noted that Du Bois strategically promoted himself as spokesperson for Black people and played an important role in the designation of the figure of the successful Black person as being always a man. He had discussed double consciousness and the will to succeed on behalf of Black people only through how he felt as a Black man. The omission of the Black female in creating this figure should indeed be challenged for, at least, two reasons. The first is that it undermined the
travails and successes of Black women. Black women suffered much during the Slavery regime in America. Note, again, that when Thomas Jefferson abolished the African Slave Trade in 1807, white slave owners began to rape and impregnate their female slaves. Children born in this manner were regarded as slaves, and that was how white slave owners multiplied the number of slaves that they owned. Like men, female slaves were also subjected to the indignities of hard labor. So, in addition to the violations of their bodies, they were also often brutally whipped. Black women’s successes have equally been significant for the total freedom of Black people. Examples of women in this regard: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Hallie Quinn Brown, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King, and Angela Davies. The important achievements of these women are often dimmed in the shadows of the towering figures of their Black male counterparts.

The second reason is that the emergence of Black males as selective representatives of Black people made them a means by which white America could evade collective responsibility to a collective people. This undue emphasis on the male figure as vehicle of salvation of Black people meant that America imagined that Black men were the indications of how well or not all Black people fared. In doing so, the specific social and political needs of Black women were disregarded, and their achievements often went unsung. In the present, the phrase “race woman” has come to designate Black women who distinguished themselves and fought for the freedom and dignity of Black people.

Note in class that to be a race man or a race woman is an unfair burden. It is unfair that the worthiness of African Americans to be treated with dignity and respect hinges on their exceptional achievements. Even so, achievements do not necessarily guarantee that they will be treated with dignity. Examples abound of Black people mistreated despite their social status as exceptional people. Two examples come to mind: Oprah Winfrey told she could not afford a purse in a Zurich store (https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/oprah-winfrey-victim-racism-switzerland-billionaire-told-she-can-t-afford-expensive-handbag-exclusive-zurich-store-8753660.html), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. arrested in front of his own home (https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/us/21gates.html).

Suggested Close Reading and Discussion

Consider this description of Shiny at his high school graduation on page 25:

[Shiny] was the principal speaker of the day, and well did he measure up to the honor. He made a striking picture, that thin little black boy standing on the platform, dressed in clothes that did not fit him any too well, his eyes burning with excitement, his shrill, musical voice vibrating in tones of appealing defiance, and his black face alight with such great intelligence and earnestness as to be positively handsome. What were his thoughts when he stepped forward and looked into the crowd of faces all white with the exception of a score or so that were lost to view. I do not know but I fancy he felt his loneliness. I think there must have rushed over him a feeling akin to that of a gladiator tossed into the arena and bade to fight for his life. I think that solitary little black figure standing
there felt that for the particular time and place he **bore the weight and responsibility of his race**; that for him to fail meant general defeat; but he won, and nobly. His oration was Wendell Phillips’ “Toussaint L’Ouverture,” a speech which may now be classed as rhetorical, even, perhaps bombastic; but as the word stale from “Shiny’s” lips their effect was magical.

1. What words or phrases from the passage construct Shiny as a race man?
2. What is the significance of Shiny’s comparison to a gladiator? Is the comparison a good thing? Why or why not?
3. Could the narrator be inviting us to consider the unfairness of having to be a race man? What words or phrases in the passage above or in the other parts of this scene support the suggestion that it is unfair to have to be a race man?
4. Do you consider it unfair that Black people have to be race men or race women? Why or why not?
5. What is it about the Ex-Colored Man’s mother that you do not know but would like to know?

**ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS**

1. Have each student choose and introduce a prominent Black person. Their introduction should cover birthplace, social challenges, and contributions to American history. Your list should include less publicized important African Americans such as James Rainey, Thomas L. Jennings, Hiram Revels, Edwin Taylor, Crystal Bird Fauset, Shirley Chisholm, and Ralph J. Bunche.
2. Have students work in groups to present arguments for or against the assertion that laws alone cannot achieve social justice.
3. Divide students into groups to stage interviews with James Weldon Johnson. Each group should concentrate on an important aspect of his life: as a poet and music composer, as a novelist, as a diplomat, and as a professor.

**WORKS CITED**


2. BLACK MODERNISM: THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND THE BLACK NOVEL

OBJECTIVES

- To provide a brief history of the rise of African American literature
- To determine how ECM departed from Black literary tradition
- To situate ECM in the Harlem Renaissance

HANDOUTS

- James Weldon Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”
  
  This very important poem by James Weldon Johnson was considered the Negro Anthem. Written in commemoration of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, it touches on the sufferings of Black people in the United States.

- “Form of slave narratives”
  
  This list here complements the list provided in this unit. Use it as a supplement when you introduce students to the form of slave narratives.

- “Themes in the Works of James Weldon Johnson”
  
  Students will find it helpful to keep in mind this list of issues raised in Johnson’s works as they keep reading ECM.

- Map of New York (see media folder)

- Langston Hughes’s “I, Too”
  
  This poem by Langston Hughes exemplifies the spirit that animated the Harlem Renaissance. Students can compare this with Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

- Worksheet: Slave Narrative v. ECM

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Isabel Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns (2011)


- Jacob Lawrence, “The Migration Series”
  https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series/panels/1/during-world-war-i-there-was-a-great-migration-north-by-southern-african-americans
UNIT ORGANIZATION

This unit provides a literary-historical context for ECM. The aim here is to structure students’ interaction with the history of African American literature. Proper literary appreciation of the text depends on the ability to firmly situate the text in literary history. To this end, this unit divides into three subsections. The first, “The Rise of African American Literature,” offers a brief history of African American literature from its very beginning. It is but a quick survey of the African American literary tradition up to the time of Johnson. It should be supplemented by suggested texts in the Preparatory Reading section above. The second, entitled “Convergences and Departures,” explores the manner in which ECM conformed to and departed from the Black literary tradition that preceded him. Scholars have argued that ECM conforms to the features of modern novels (see, for example, Brooks, 1995; Glaser, 2017; and Nowlin, 2017), and the second subsection synthesizes the modernist features identified by those scholars. The final section, “The Harlem Renaissance,” introduces the Harlem Renaissance and how ECM fits in the period of African American literary revival known as the Harlem Renaissance. The subsections are interspersed with sample discussion questions.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. How is a narrator different from an author?

2. What books did the Ex-Colored Man read as he grew up? Why do you think the narrator includes them in this story?

3. Why is it important to the Ex-Colored Man that Alexandre Dumas was a colored man?

4. What role do you think literature serves in a society?

THE RISE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The Ex-Colored Man’s attention to books and his delight at finding out that Alexandre Dumas was a colored man could scaffold a discussion of African American literature. This is because Dumas represents to him the fact that Black people could produce literary work. The rise of African American literature does prove this, as this section will show. It is important to stress, in addition, that the rise of African American literature is a resounding testimony to the resilience of Black people in the face of brutal oppression by white people. Masterpieces such as ECM emerged from a literary tradition forged under duress.

From the very beginning of Slavery, Black people resisted enslavement. One of the earliest revolts of enslaved people was the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, regarded as the largest insurrection of slaves before Independence. Following this revolt, legislators feared that the continued communication among slaves would inspire future revolts. They therefore
criminalized any form of literacy, including writing and drumming. Because of the prohibition of learning, African Americans could not document the rich literary tradition that they came with from Africa. They reworked them and developed folktales, work songs, and religious songs that spoke to their experiences in America. When Black people worked on plantations, they sang songs of freedom, some sorrowful and some assertive. Through this oral tradition, they demanded justice, equality, freedom, and peace. Their songs contained cryptic messages of the desire to escape enslavement into the land of freedom, which in the imagination of the enslaved was the North or Canada. Because of the obvious religious notes of those songs, they were called “Spirituals,” but some of the earliest African American writers, such as Frederick Douglass, observed that many of the “Spirituals” referred to freedom and not to heaven. Examples are songs like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.” That African Americans produced songs that employed double entendre marked a literary sophistication, which was lost on their white oppressors. In the same vein, folktales told among the enslaved revolve around the wiles of a weaker animal in overcoming a stronger animal. In those tales, the wily weaker animal symbolizes the enslaved, and the stronger animal who ends badly in the tales stands for the white slave owner. Some of these vernacular expressions were not so discreet. They sometimes openly expressed the will to be free. An example of this is found in the song “Before I’ll Be a Slave”:

O Freedom;
O Freedom!
And before I’ll be a slave,
I’ll be buried in my grave!
And go home to my Lord and be free.

But African Americans were not to be kept down. Despite laws that forbade them from learning to read and write, some Black people became literate at the time, especially those who were bought as slaves in the North. In the South, many slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, taught themselves to read and write. As a result, they began to produce written literary pieces. In 1770, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw became the first African to author a piece of written literature, his autobiography entitled A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince. Another notable first work by an African American was Phillis Wheatley’s collection of poems, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, in 1773. Wheatley was the first African American to write poetry in English. Wheatley’s poetry was so profound that many white people at the time doubted that she could have mastered English so well as to compose the poems. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s narrative, published in England, marked the beginning of what came to be known as slave narratives, autobiographies of former slaves who either fled from plantations or attained freedom. The first slave narrative to be published in African America was written by Briton Hammon in 1760 and entitled A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man. Other slave narratives followed and predominated African American literature.
These early African American writings were significant for two reasons, apart from inaugurating African American written literature. First, they proved that Black people were indeed capable of producing written literature of the highest order. This is despite persistent ridicule by white people of the time, exemplified by Thomas Jefferson, who ridiculed Phillis Wheatley’s poetry in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). He states dismissively: “Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry.” That Jefferson went out of his way, in a book supposed to be a political treatise, to disparage African American creativity thus shows how widespread was the belief that Black people were culturally backward and intellectually deficient. But, of course, Jefferson was wrong. Wheatley’s poetry, some of which she structured in *iambic pentameters*, are so sophisticated that a committee had to be convened to determine whether she wrote it herself.

**iambic pentameter**: a line of poem containing ten syllables, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Consider these four lines from Wheatley’s poem, “On being brought from Africa to America”:

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Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
"Their colour is a diabolic dye."  
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.
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Second, slave narratives provided material for abolitionists. The accounts of the horrible treatment of slaves in slave narratives appealed to white abolitionists who intensified efforts to demand an end to Slavery. That slave narratives serve a political purpose did not diminish their literary finesse. Writers of these narratives made deliberate literary choices for their texts to achieve their dual purpose as political tools and as literary expressions. In an essay first published in 1984, James Olney outlines the characteristics of slave narratives. The most obvious and generalizable characteristics are 1.) a portrait of the narrator; 2.) a long title which includes the author’s designation such as “An African Prince,” “An Ex-Slave,” or simply “A Negro”; 3.) the title includes the phrase “Written by Himself/Herself” (intended to celebrate the author’s literary achievement despite all odds); 4.) a set of testimonials by white friends, usually abolitionists; 5.) an epigraph; 6.) the narrative; and 7.) appendices of newspaper articles and various historical documents, sermons, anti-slavery speeches or appeal for funds to continue abolitionist struggles. (See handout, “Form of Slave Narratives,” for further details about the structure of slave narratives.)

Slave narratives popularized autobiographies. At the end of the Civil War and the proclaimed end of Slavery, when white terror of Black people took new forms and abolitionist movements were no longer necessary, African American writers turned to autobiographies. These autobiographies sought to celebrate the individual achievement of Black persons. In other words, early African American autobiographies were geared towards a different political objective than slave narratives, which is to emphasize the respectability of Black people. Jacqueline Goldsby notes that unlike slave narratives, post-Civil War autobiographies were written “to encourage African American readers to realize their potential for self-help” (*ECM,*)
Norton Critical Editions, p. xvii; for more on this, see the section of Goldsby’s “Introduction” that runs from p. xvii to p. xxiii). Notably, titles of those autobiographies became shorter, but they kept some of the narrative features of slave narratives. For instance, Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, published in 1901, was succinctly titled but retained the “I was born” formula of slave narratives. Johnson acknowledges the foundational status of both genres by including Frederick Douglass on the Ex-Colored Man’s reading list (*ECM*, p. 26). Frederick Douglass exemplified Black people’s resilience and excellence for many reasons. He was enslaved; as a slave, he taught himself to read at a time that slaves were prohibited from learning; he escaped enslavement and became the most distinguished African American of his time. Incidentally, James Weldon Johnson met Frederick Douglass in 1886, which must certainly have been an exhilarating experience for Johnson.

By 1912 when Johnson published *ECM* anonymously, African Americans had produced literature in various forms: realism, romance, sentimental literature, and parodies of writings by white Americans. However, Johnson deviates in some ways from slave narratives and autobiographies, choosing instead to upset readers’ expectations of the form of Black novels. The next section turns attention to this characterization of Johnson’s novel.

**Suggested Discussion and Exercise**

1. Some early African American writers and readers, such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, taught themselves to read and write with no financial aid and at great risk. If you had tried to learn on your own everything you now know, what problems would you have encountered? Now write a short essay in praise of the literary achievements of early African American writers.

2. Using the “Slave Narrative v. *ECM*” worksheet, indicate features of slave narratives that you find in the first chapter of *ECM*. Mark “+” or “−” to show the presence or absence of a feature.

**CONVERGENCES AND DEPARTURES**

**Opening Questions**

- After Emancipation, slave narratives hardly commanded the attention they did at first. They could therefore no longer effectively convey the oppressive conditions of Black people after Slavery, because white people believed that Emancipation had solved all the injustices endured by Black people. Now, think about a time that you knew you were right about something or you were treated unfairly but you could not accurately describe how you felt either because you lacked the appropriate words or because circumstances were against you. How did you feel about that incident? What could have helped you to obtain fair treatment at the time?
• What might prevalent assumptions about Slavery and racism be after Emancipation, given that Emancipation proclaimed the freedom of Black people? Based on the assumptions you have generated, how do you think white readers would have received slave narratives and autobiographies by former slaves after Emancipation?

After Emancipation, white oppression of Black people did not end. Rather, it took on a new form, varying in outlook across the North and South regions of the US (as will be elaborated in Unit 3). Slave narratives and autobiographies by Black authors no longer served the political purpose of calling attention to the brutal treatment of Black people, since whites wrongly assumed that Emancipation granted Black people American citizenship and the freedom that came with it. At best, slave narratives served only to educate those who wanted to know about the regime of Slavery. Sentimental literature and race novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did not represent the conditions of Black people after Emancipation as cogently and complexly as they should. Johnson meant for *ECM* to overcome this literary barrier.

In order to do this, Johnson made a number of choices that departed from perceived notions about African American literature (again, see Jaqueline Goldsby’s introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of *ECM*). First, he chose to blur the lines between fiction and reality. Before *ECM*, African American autobiographies had been stories about real people and readers had come to expect that of autobiographies. Even more, the first edition of *ECM* was published anonymously. Johnson actively sought to keep people from knowing that he wrote the novel. In his letter to his wife on June 26, 1912 (see *ECM*, p. 226), Johnson told her to ensure the anonymity of the novel. He writes that “the absolute secrecy of the authorship must be maintained” because “as soon as it is known that the author is a colored man, interest in it will fall.” White readers had narrowed their expectations of African American autobiographies, and he needed them to pay attention to the complex issues that the novel raises.

It can be said, therefore, that *ECM* plays upon objectivity. Literary scholar Jeff Karem observes that *ECM* plays upon objectivity by “constructing a ‘false’ self and a ‘false’ text in multiple dimensions.” Karem identifies three such dimensions. The first is that *ECM* pretends to be an autobiography (non-fiction) when in fact it is a novel (fiction). The second arises from the fact that *ECM* was published anonymously so that its initial readers thought that the writer was the narrator, and therefore, the writer was the Ex-Colored Man. The third is that it presents an antihero instead of hero figures of Booker T. Washington’s and Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies.

By featuring an antihero, *ECM* further shatters readers’ expectation of clearly outlined heroes and villains. This feature is commonplace in race novels, narratives about race relations in the US. An overt aim of race novels is to appeal to the morality of whites to stop oppressing Black people, which is why they employ the literary doctrine of sentimentalism: “the thoughts and actions of characters should be perfectly transparent to readers who, in turn, would find such narratives credible or true because of the mirrored response that the story would evoke” (Goldsby, p. xx). By avoiding this strategy, *ECM* challenges the notion that Black people need a
white savior. Students should be guided at this point to closely read the Ex-Colored Man’s interaction with his father on page 20 of ECM.

**antihero:** A central character in a story who lacks the admirable qualities expected of heroes

Note also how ECM flows swiftly and fluidly without lingering on events and dates too long, so that by the second page of it, we have moved from the narrator’s birth to his boyhood. An important reason for this is Johnson’s use of the stream of consciousness style. *Oxford English Dictionary* describes stream of consciousness as “a literary style in which a character’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions are depicted in a continuous flow uninterrupted by objective description or conventional dialogue.” The term has its roots in *Principles of Psychology*, a textbook published in 1890 by American philosopher and psychologist William James. It was named in 1918. But it was not considered to have been used in literature until the writings of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were published. It is therefore significant that Johnson anticipated the use of this technique in literary writing.

ECM is a bold experimentation with form. It broke the mold in order to undercut readers’ expectations of the structure of African American literature and challenge them to consider race relations in the US in a new form. This way, ECM influenced some other literary works written after it. That ECM was published just a few years before the period regarded as the era of the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940) and reissued right in the midst of the literary boom of the period effectively marked it as a potent shaping force of African American literature in the 20th century. Consequently, a brief exploration of the Harlem Renaissance should be in order.

**Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. Not included among the features mentioned above is that ECM’s narrator is biracial, of a white father and a Black mother, but he looks “white” enough. (Show students a picture of Walter Francis White, mentioned in Unit 1.) How do you think such a narrator complicates a story about Black people?

2. In the 1700s and 1800s, it was common for white writers to misrepresent Black people. As Black people wrote and challenged these assumptions, opinions of white people about them did not change. After Emancipation, white people retained their assumptions about Black people as culturally backward and intellectually deficient. In what ways does Shiny, the narrator’s classmate, challenge these assumptions?

**THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

It should be made clear that ECM was first published in 1912, seven years before 1919, which is considered as the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. None of the events in the novel
happen in Harlem. But it is significant that ECM gives a glimpse of how Black people lived in New York before the Harlem Renaissance. The purpose of this section is to introduce students to the period of African American literary flourish during which ECM was reissued in 1927.

(A map showing Harlem, https://whereismap.net/where-is-harlem-new-york-what-county-is-harlem-in-harlem-map/)

Across essays and books written about the era, three general factors could be identified to have marked the period: 1.) migration of Black people from the South to the North; 2.) a sense of knowledge of the world, or worldliness, exuded by the Black people of Harlem at the time; and 3.) a shift in the literary aspiration of writers.

A deciding factor for the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance was the Great Migration, the mass movement of Black people from the South to the North. After Emancipation, white people in the South continued to employ instruments of violence to oppress Black people and to severely limit their options for economic prosperity. The newly freed Black people of the South to whom the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments of the Constitution had granted freedom, citizenship, and voting rights were left, in most cases, with no other option than to keep working for their former masters or any white people who had land to be farmed. Southern whites who used to own slaves were faced with an economic problem: they had land but did not have labor. Some of the freed Black people, having not been trained in other trades and having little education, had to make agreements with landowners to plant on the land. This arrangement was known as sharecropping: a system where a landowner lets a tenant use land in exchange for a share of the tenant’s harvest. These agreements allowed them to live on the land, but it also meant that the landowner got up to two-thirds of their harvests, leaving only...
little for the free Black workers and their families to subsist on. This systematic impoverishment of many Black people continued in the form of plantation store credits. White landowners built stores and imported essential commodities which they sold at exorbitant prices that many of the Black farmers could not afford. This was done to ensure that they remained indebted and unable to move on to better jobs. Even if they wanted to move on to better jobs, the contracts they agreed to favored the white landowners and ensured that Black sharecroppers could not leave.

Another way in which Black people continued to be oppressed after Emancipation was convict leasing, ironically enabled by the 13th Amendment. The law included a clause which legalized the enslavement of anyone convicted of a crime. Many Southern states exploited this clause, arresting and convicting Black people of frivolous charges. The states then sent out convicts to work for individual farm owners and companies in exchange for a fee. This system was known as convict leasing. In Alabama, for example, this system generated 73 per cent of state revenue in 1898. Complementing the loophole in the 13th Amendment were a set of laws, known as the Black Codes, passed between 1865 and 1866 and designed to restrict the rights of Black people. The effect of Black Codes was only a bit minimized by the presence of Union military governors in the South. But when Reconstruction ended in 1877, the Black Codes restricted the freedom of Black people even more brutally.

Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, a novel published in 2016, portrays a Black sharecropper who is accused of looking at his employer’s daughter. Simply known as H, the sharecropper is an immediate descendant of freed slaves. H is convicted and imprisoned. The narrator writes: “By sunrise the next morning, on a sweltering July day in 1880, H was chained to ten other men and sold by the state of Alabama to work the coal mines just outside of Birmingham.” (See Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, pp. 157-176).

As if the economic hardship was not enough, whites in the South systematically stripped Black people of their civil rights. The Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization, intimidated, tortured, and murdered Black people who dared to exercise their civil rights and discouraged their white sympathizers. Cases contending those civil rights were taken to court. As in the example given in Unit 1, most of these cases went in favor of the whites. In short, Black people had no respite in the South.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of industries in the North and the beginning of the First World War meant a shortage of factory labor. Black people therefore came up to cities like Chicago and New York to work. Thus began the Great Migration of about 6 million Black people from the South to the North in 1916. This mass movement impacted the growth of major US cities in the North. Particularly, the Great Migration triggered questions about housing. Scholar Adrienne Brown, for example, attributes the invention of skyscrapers in the US to this mass movement. As explained in Unit 3, the housing tension intensified covert racism in the North. As Black people populated New York, they soon began to congregate at Harlem. Harlem was
originally built to accommodate middle class whites, but because it was overbuilt many houses went unsold. A real estate agent, Philip Payton, proposed to landlords in Harlem that he could get them Black tenants. Soon enough, Black people populated Harlem so much so that James Weldon Johnson called it “the greatest Negro city in the world” (in Alain Locke’s The New Negro, p. 301).

To say that Harlem was the Negro capital of the world was to acknowledge that it accommodated Black people from around the world. Also around this time, African Americans were returning from studies abroad and were moving in and out of the US, visiting cities abroad. Jessie Redmon Fauset, who was literary editor for The Crisis and therefore also shaped the Harlem Renaissance, studied at Sorbonne in Paris. Paris was indeed a top destination at the time: The Anthology of African American Literature notes that Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Alain Locke had visited Paris at the time. This exposure led to the sense of worldliness that pervaded the Harlem Renaissance, and it was deepened by the participation of Black people in the First World War. W.E.B. Du Bois, who at the time was editor of The Crisis, the monthly magazine of the NAACP, had vigorously encouraged African Americans to join in the war efforts. To him, by participating in the World War, Black people would gain the leverage they needed in order to assert their citizenship. Although African Americans did fight on the battlefields, Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928) and Ann Petry’s The Street (1946) indicate that some of them were assigned to menial jobs in the army. Nevertheless, Black people made up some of the most successful troops. Of particular significance was the all-black 369th Infantry Regiment known as the Harlem Hellfighters. They returned to Harlem in February 1918, arousing a sense of pride in the Black people who gathered to welcome the heroes back to Harlem (see image below).
(369th Infantry Regiment Returns to Harlem, https://www.flickr.com/photos/ssave/45484796195)

It did become clear that the Great Migration and the air of worldly knowledge that has permeated Harlem was energizing artistic expression anew. One of the most prominent shapers of the Harlem Renaissance was Alain Locke, an educator who earned his doctoral degree in philosophy from Harvard. In 1925, Locke edited *The New Negro*, an anthology of the works of Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance—only three years after James Weldon Johnson’s own anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Locke’s anthology is considered to have defined the Harlem Renaissance, and it conferred on him the affectionate appellation of “the Dean of the Harlem Renaissance.” In his essay titled “The New Negro,” which begins the anthology, Locke writes of the congregation of Black people in Harlem in glowing terms. (See handout titled “The New Negro” for excerpts from and summary of the essay.)

Alain Locke celebrated this new artistic energy, declaring that “the New Negro” has arrived and “Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on” (Locke, p. 5). Sambo was a derogatory name for African Americans that gained popularity after the civil war. The term “New Negro” defined the generation of Black people that expressed great pride in being Black and asserted themselves boldly as dignified citizens of the US determined to not be held down by racism; hence the shift in the literary expressions of that generation of writers. The writers of this period focused on the complexity of urban life rather than continue in the sentimental tone of the writers before them. To be sure, the preceding generation of writers who wrote race novels and slave narratives addressed the burning issues of their time. Again, Alain Locke, as well as David Levering Lewis, observe that the complexity of life in Harlem drove the literature of that era. Langston Hughes’s poem, “I, Too” is perhaps one of the most expressive of this literary spirit (see handout “I, Too”). It is therefore to be noted that African American writers proudly celebrated the distinct African American forms of artistic expression. (Unit Four explores *ECM*’s treatment of African American music.)

James Weldon Johnson’s significance in this period is based on his innovative style in *ECM* (which has been explained in the previous subsection), his prediction of the rise of writers who would produce literature portraying the complexity of African American life beyond the frame of slave narratives and autobiographies, and his work with the NAACP alongside W.E.B. Du Bois. In addition, he mentored and actively promoted the writing careers of younger writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen (Goldsby, xi).

**Suggested Discussion, Close Reading Exercises, and Projects**

1. Imagine that James Weldon Johnson was addressing younger writers of the Harlem Renaissance, what issues would he likely raise in his address to them?

2. In the stream of consciousness style, summarize the first three chapters of *ECM* from the perspective of the Ex-Colored Man’s mother.
3. James Weldon Johnson was a mentor to Langston Hughes. Compare Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (see handout) with Langston Hughes’s “I, Too” (see handout) and discuss the common features or themes in both poems.

ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. You may create a chart titled “The Harlem Renaissance Hall of Fame” and have each student write a speech nominating James Weldon Johnson into the Hall of Fame.

2. Have students choose an image which they consider most representative of the Great Migration from Jacob Lawrence’s “The Migration Series.” Then ask each student to produce any piece that represents their own impressions of the image they have chosen. Their response may be a piece of writing or drawing, a song, or some other form of craft.

3. In Chapter 3 of ECM, the Ex-Colored Man laments that there are no books to teach him about his history as a Black person. Ask each student to make a list of three books for the Ex-Colored Man, two works of fiction and one work of nonfiction about Black life. They should summarize and mention the significance of each book on their list.

WORKS CITED


3. GEOGRAPHIES OF MODERN RACISM

OBJECTIVES

- To explain that the racial histories of different spaces shape racial experiences in those spaces
- To trace the Ex-Colored Man’s changing understanding of racial relations in the US and where he travels
- To explain the Ex-Colored Man’s mobility as a strategy of undermining racial classification

HANDOUTS

- “Plessy v. Ferguson”
  This summary of the landmark case provides background information to supplement the synthesis provided in this unit.
- James Weldon Johnson’s “The White Witch”
  This poem about New York by James Weldon Johnson usefully complements the narrator’s poetic description of New York City. Students will find it useful to compare both descriptions of the city.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- “Florida’s Culture of Slavery” by Florida Humanities (retrievable at https://floridahumanities.org/florias-culture-of-slavery/)

UNIT ORGANIZATION

There are multiple ways of contextualizing the complex social history presented in ECM, and this unit takes the Ex-Colored Man’s journeys as one way of doing so. Among other things, those journeys demonstrate the multiple dimensions of racism. As a result, this unit touches upon events across the entire text. As the Ex-Colored Man journeys South, his description of the landscape changes and his self-perception takes on a much sharper edge than in the first three chapters of the novel. Unpacking this change in landscape and perception requires that students understand the racial politics of the Reconstruction and the period after it, stretching
until at least the 1960s. Also essential is clarifying the actions of some of the other characters that the Ex-Colored Man interacts with in the South. Providing such a scaffold is the aim of this unit, and it is thus divided into three subsections: “Racial Politics of the Reconstruction in the South,” “Reading Race in New York,” and “The Ex-Colored Man Travels the World.” Respectively, these subsections outline the racial practices of the Reconstruction era, explain racial practices in the North, and explore the narrator’s interpretations of the world cities that he visits. Expectedly, the subsections are interspersed with sample discussion questions.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. In the opening paragraph of Chapter 4, the Ex-Colored Man provides a description of the Southern landscape as follows:

   The farther I got below Washington the more disappointed I became in the appearance of the country. I peered through the car windows, looking in vain for the luxuriant semi-tropical scenery which I had pictured in my mind. I did not find the grass so green, nor the woods so beautiful, nor the flowers so plentiful, as they were in Connecticut. Instead, the red earth partly covered by tough, scrawny grass, the muddy straggling roads, the cottages of unpainted pine boards, and the clay daubed huts imparted a “burnt up” impression.

   What does he see in Atlanta? Why is he disappointed in the appearance of the South?

2. What does it mean to not belong to a place? How does non-belonging affect one’s actions and one’s connection to a place?

3. How does the Ex-Colored Man compare Atlanta University to its surrounding environment? What about Atlanta University excites him?

THE RACIAL POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION IN THE SOUTH

The Ex-Colored Man in Atlanta

After his mother’s death, the Ex-Colored Man journeys to the South in the hope of starting his college education at Atlanta University. It quickly becomes clear that he is disappointed in the appearance of the South because he contrasts the landscape he sees as he proceeds Southward to the lush landscape of the North. This description provides a backdrop for his portrayal of social life in the South. To understand the Ex-Colored Man’s disdain for the South and the Black people he sees there, students must first understand him as an unreliable narrator. This does not disqualify him from narrating the events in the novel, but it puts on the reader the burden of sifting through the narration to fill out gaps.
unreliable narrator: a narrator who cannot be trusted because their credibility is compromised by a lapse in judgment or memory, a known self-serving motive, naivete, or illness. We know that the Ex-Colored Man is unreliable because he gestures at the beginning of Chapter 2 that he is reconstructing the events from “one of the few incidents in my life that I can remember clearly” (13) and because he reveals to us that he is playing a “practical joke” on society. It is important to stress that the narrator’s perception matures as the story progresses, but it is tainted by his confusion about his identity (discussed in Unit 1).

At this point, you may pause to ask students why they think James Weldon Johnson creates an unreliable narrator to tell this story. (Asking this question will prepare students for Unit 6 which examines the formal features of ECM.)

The difference in landscape that the narrator mentions at the beginning of Chapter 4 could be taken as 1.) a reference to the slow development of the South and the effect of the Civil War on the region; 2.) foreshadowing of his rough introduction to the social life of the South; and 3.) a reflection of the social conditions of the majority of Black people in the South. As discussed in Unit 1, the South was heavily scathed by the Civil War. Because theatres of the War were mostly in the South, much of its public infrastructure was destroyed in the War. This is in addition to the fact, again as mentioned in Units 1 and 2, that the economy of the South depended mostly on agriculture unlike the industrial economy of the North. After the War, the South returned to agriculture and did not develop at the same rate that the North kept developing. In Atlanta, the Ex-Colored Man sees “colored people in large numbers” and wonders why. He also finds that his options of where to eat and whom to interact with are severely limited. This social strain directly results from Jim Crow laws, which succeeded Black
Codes. Southern white supremacists, white people who believe that whites are superior to people of other races and should dominate society, designed both systems of laws to severely limit the options of Black people in the South.

The racial politics of the Reconstruction, the period between 1865 and 1877, built a new system of oppressing Black people in obvious ways. The Freedmen’s Bureau, short for the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, an organization responsible for providing aid to formerly enslaved Black people, which already had limited funding, was disbanded in 1872. This was a result of continued pressure by white Southerners. At the end of the keenly contested 1876 presidential election between Rutherford Hayes and Samuel Tilden, there was no clear-cut winner. For Rutherford Hayes to emerge as president, he reached an informal arrangement with Southern whites who favored Tilden and agreed to pull out federal troops from Southern states. This move effectively ended the Reconstruction era and with it the protection of the civil rights of Black people in the South. It meant that to the North and the South, Black people were disposable in order to achieve national unity.

Withdrawing federal troops from the South enabled Southern whites to continue the oppression of Black people blatantly and legally. Segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws, designated spaces within which Black people could function. A sample Jim Crow law regarding restaurants in Georgia reads: “All persons licensed to conduct a restaurant, shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room or serve the two races anywhere under the same license” (for examples of Jim Crow laws, see Ferris State University’s online archive at https://www.ferris.edu/HTM LS/news/jimcrow/links/misclink/examples.htm). Other laws like this prohibited Black people from living in white neighborhoods, and white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan helped to enforce those rules through lynching and other forms of violence.

Segregation laws got their greatest boost from the 1896 court ruling in the case known as Plessy v. Ferguson. Homer Plessy, a mixed-race social activist who had obvious Caucasian features, had agreed, upon the behest of a civil rights group, to violate Louisiana’s Separate Car Act. The Act demanded the separation of people on trains according to their race. Plessy bought a first-class ticket and sat in the whites-only car. When the conductor came to collect his ticket, Plessy disclosed that he was seven-eighths (87.5%) white, but he refused to sit in the passenger car reserved for Blacks. By deliberately violating the law, he sought to reveal the absurdity of racial categorization and to point out that segregation laws implied that Black people were inferior to white people. Plessy lost the case in Louisiana and appealed to the US Supreme Court. Seven of the eight justices of the Supreme Court agreed with the Louisiana court decision, declaring that although the 14th Amendment granted legal equality to every American, it did not outlaw social distinctions between the races. The Supreme Court justices reasoned that as long as the separate facilities for whites and Blacks were of equal standards, segregation was acceptable under law.

In reality, public facilities for Black people were of low quality. Schools for Black people were underfunded as were the hospitals, the cars reserved for Black people on trains were unkempt despite the fact that they paid the same fare as white people. Expectedly, the restaurants in
which the Ex-Colored Man could eat in Atlanta were poorly kept—not because their proprietors were disorganized but because they had very minimal resources for running their restaurants.

The Jim Crow laws effectively cordoned off Black people from whites, and conspicuous signs such as the image above complemented the laws to mark the different spaces allotted to whites and Blacks. Jim Crow laws also further intensified the impoverishment of Black people in that it limited their opportunities for social advancement. For instance, that the schools for Blacks were underfunded meant that teachers in those schools could not access excellent teaching resources that must be available to whites. This social arrangement deepened the economic hardships of Black people and created an exploited class of Black people. The drastic economic limitations that white supremacy placed on Black people drove some Black people to crime. Instead of redressing the economic inequality, white ideology characterizes Black people as prone to crime. The theft of the narrator’s money should be read, thus, with less emphasis on the “criminality” of the porter who steals his money but with more emphasis on the social and economic conditions that encourage crime.

Homer Plessy

Plessy did not win his case in 1896. But in 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in another case that segregation in schools was unconstitutional. The court case, known as Brown v. Board of Education, is considered to have overturned the 1896 ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson. In 1951, Oliver Brown sued the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, after it refused to admit his daughter Linda Brown to the all-white elementary school in Topeka. The case went on to the Supreme Court, and after initial oppositions, the court delivered a unanimous verdict in favor of Oliver Brown. The 1954 verdict is generally considered to have overturned the verdict in the Plessy v. Ferguson case.

Guide students to re-examine the Ex-Colored Man’s revulsion at “[t]he unkempt appearance” (31) of the poor Black people he sees in Atlanta. Adjectives such as “unkempt” (synonymous with “untidy” and “messy”) often turn out to indicate subjective judgment—that is, evaluation from one’s own presumably privileged perspective. Cultural critics have observed that dirt is an interpretive category that indicates our judgment of others’ morality, hygiene, economy, and beauty. By this they mean that when we declare a place or a person dirty (or unkempt, untidy), we are also evaluating a lot more than their hygiene; in fact, we may be voicing our own unexamined bias. It is important to remember that the Ex-Colored Man is an unreliable narrator who is projecting his unexamined bias.
The narrator’s shock at seeing Black people also stems from the different racial dynamics in Atlanta, completely different from what obtains in his hometown in Connecticut. He knows about racial separation at this point: her mother keeps to herself; at school, he is pointed out as Black; Black students are jeered at and disrespected at school. But he has not seen such a concentration of Black people in one community. He is also shocked that a lot of them live in extreme poverty. His knowledge of these racial distinctions, up to this point, does not reach the level of accurately reading the exploitation of Black people in Atlanta.

On his way to Atlanta he meets a Pullman porter who helps him to navigate his first days in Atlanta. The narrator mentions the personal misery of the porter, a student who has been fending for himself since he was fourteen years old. The porter therefore better understands the limits that white society places on Black people and defends the narrator when the landlord demands immediate payment at the boarding house that they lodge in. The narrator finds the accommodation to be poorly kept and compares it to his comfortable home in Connecticut. The narrator is compelled to keep his disappointment to himself because of his knowledge of the porter’s own difficulty. The porter is the first to suggest to the narrator that he could pass as white. At this point, the narrator thinks little of the prospect of passing, and he sees for himself nothing but a bright future rooted in an education at Atlanta University. The hostess of the cottage in which the narrator has breakfast on his second day in Atlanta complements the porter as the narrator’s immediate support in Atlanta. The terms in which he describes the woman shows his loneliness and desire for family in Atlanta. That the hostess calls him child makes him feel at home so much so that the terms in which he talks about her are akin to the description of his bond with his mother.

When he arrives at Atlanta University, the narrator is delighted: his first sight of the school grounds “made me feel that I was not far from home” (29). After he has met the fatherly president of the University and the motherly matron, he finds again a hint of family in Atlanta. He sees that the students are beautiful African Americans of various shades and hues. It strikes him that the “blackest” among the students are “decidedly pretty” and finely built. He indicates hereby that the Black students he sees at Atlanta University surpass his expectations of what Black people should look like. He immediately finds a sense of belonging among the people at Atlanta University and resolves to start his education at once.

The narrator’s plan to enroll at Atlanta University is thwarted by the theft of his money. The theft signals the narrator’s naivete: he does keep the money in the first place where anyone would look. He thus finds himself in an indescribable situation: “If the reader has never been in a strange city without money or friends, it is useless to try to describe what my feelings were; he could not understand. If he has been, it is equally useless, for he understands more than words could convey” (p. 35). Here another Pullman porter sympathizes with him, lends him some money, and offers to help him get away to Florida. Almost penniless, he now has to steal away in the Pullman porter’s laundry closet. A good question to ask students at this point is: can we possibly read the narrator’s uncomfortable journey from Atlanta to Florida as a metaphor for the extreme hardship of Black people?
Suggested Discussion and Close Reading Exercises

1. Identify all the ways in which the Ex-Colored Man misunderstands the subjugation of Black people in the South. Can you find an instance in the earlier part of ECM that accounts for his misjudgment of Black people (for example, his aversion to being classed with his Black classmates, p. 15)?

2. Does the narrator arrive in Atlanta with unexamined bias? Is the bias learned? Can bias be unlearned?

3. What similarities are there between the predicaments of the Ex-Colored Man and the Pullman porter who helps him to settle in Atlanta (p.30)? Does the Ex-Colored Man detect any similarities in their conditions? Why or why not?

4. When the Ex-Colored Man finds an acceptable restaurant, he is impressed by the motherly disposition of its owner (see p. 33) to the point of fantasizing about “[going] to sleep on her bosom.” Comparing this to how his mother holds him in her arms (pp. 7-8) and placates him when music drives him to tears (17), what does his fantasy about a mother’s embrace suggest about his inner turmoil in the South?

The Ex-Colored Man in Florida

Opening Discussion

- As soon as the narrator finds a place to lodge in Florida he proceeds to describe it before revealing that it is owned by a brown-skinned woman who is married to a light-skinned Cuban cigar maker. This may be a good point to pause and ask students why they think the narrator pays attention to how things appear and what that shows about him (the second paragraph of Chapter 5 offers a great example for analysis).

The boarding house is the locus of the narrator’s actions in his first few years in Florida. He observes that this boarding house is better kept than the one from which his money was stolen in Atlanta and that the landlady of the house is married to a Cuban cigar maker. He discloses to the landlady his intention of finding a job in one of the big hotels in Florida. Upon learning that the hotels will not open for two months, he tells her about his dire financial situation. The landlady thinks with him about where to look for income. He is struck by the fact that the landlady does not consider the possibility of his teaching piano to whites but instead she tells him that colored people will not be able to pay much for piano lessons. Eventually, he is invited to join the cigar making trade. The narrator reveals that “the color-line is not drawn” in the cigar-making trade. This could be because its workforce is made up of immigrants and because of the Florida’s different history of slavery and colonization (for information about this, see “Florida’s Culture of Slavery”). Florida was initially a Spanish colony. The Spanish were more open to Black people and freed them whenever they escaped to Florida, as long as they accepted Catholicism. When the Spanish eventually left Florida, it became as brutal towards slaves as other Southern states.

Finding a sense of belonging with this group, he masters Spanish and is selected as reader in the factory. He spends his time among them attending social events and participating in whatever
activities they do for pleasure. He gets so comfortable squandering his earnings that he is no longer able to save in order to return to Atlanta University, and he gives up the idea altogether. In Florida, he runs into the Pullman porter who helped him to steal away from Atlanta and discovers his favorite tie on him. Interestingly, the chance meeting passes without fuss, the narrator at once astonished and humored by the situational irony of it. Whether or not he finds it painful is not clear, because he does not revisit the theft after this.

The Ex-Colored Man is class-conscious in Florida. He is selected as reader in the cigar factory and thus rises from among the group of workers who do the monotonous jobs of stripping and wrapping cigars. This selection significantly improves his income so that he stops giving music lessons to the poor Black pupils who do not pay him enough anyway. Through his music skills, he becomes acquainted with some wealthy Black people. He joins a literary society and begins to make efforts to observe Black life in the South. His ease of movement in and out of Black circles ties up with his ambiguous racial identity and he understands this privilege of being light-skinned.

Although he hints at his more understanding view of Black people in the South, his description of the three classes of Black people is both simplistic and distant. Distant because he does not count himself as one of them. Note that he repeatedly uses the pronoun “they,” not “we,” in his description. His classification is reductive because it too simply classifies Black people in spite of their oppression and the multiple ways in which each group of Black people is affected by the oppression. The first are the desperate, criminal type who hate whites and are in turn feared by whites. The second are kind, faithful, and simple workers who work for whites and are satisfied with their social positions as long as their white employers are kind to them. The third are the wealthy independent traders and educated Black people disdained by whites and embarrassed by the activities of the lowest class of Blacks. The erudite tone in which the narrator presents his classification mirrors the voice of a distant observer who, through generalizations, offers sweeping conclusions about a vast and complex group. The second class of Black people, for example, are no more satisfied with having their economic options severely economically limited to working for whites than the “desperate class” (42) are satisfied with being hemmed in with unfavorable economic structures. Students should be guided in reading the narrator’s classification of Black people, with attention to the narrator’s caution: “And it is not at all a hopeless class; for these men are but the creatures of conditions, as much as the slum and criminal elements of all the great cities of the world are creatures of conditions” (42).

It is in this phase of his life that he encounters cakewalk, a dance that originated from African American slaves’ mimicry of the dances and pretensions of white slaveowners. He praises this cultural expression which contributed to the emergence of ragtime, the African American music form that he falls in love with as the novel progresses. In all, Florida reveals that the narrator is beginning to rely on his skills and that his knowledge of Black people has improved from the snobbish attitude in Atlanta to a more understanding disposition in Florida. He considers himself an outsider to both whites and Blacks, and he begins to come to terms with his racial ambiguity.

There are two chief indications in this phase of the narrative. The first is that the narrator continues to outperform most other Americans he meets. With amazing ease, he learns to
speak Spanish in about a year, better than other Cubans for whom Spanish is more or less a first language. This points to his future success in music in New York. When he gets to New York, he learns to play ragtime so well that he is renowned as “professor,” a consummate master of the genre. Second, featuring the Cuban as he does indicates the inadequacy of the double opposition established between whites and Blacks. Because this opposition is aimed at portraying Black people as inferior, it eliminates other groups because including them complicates the otherwise simplistic and broad evaluation of one group as superior to the other.

Suggested Discussion and Close Reading Exercise

1. Revisit the first two paragraphs of Chapter 4 and identify what you think would be indicators of the racial politics of the Reconstruction era?
2. Keeping in mind how the racial politics of the Reconstruction shaped the social life of Black people in the South, write a rejoinder to the narrator’s description of the Black people he saw on the streets of Atlanta (described in the second paragraph on p. 31).
3. What do you make of the narrative impossibility expressed on p. 35, when the narrator discovers the theft of his money? What is the narrator calling our attention to by noting the impossibility of language to describe his situation adequately?
4. Often, it is not enough to merely have laws to protect people against social injustice. But sometimes, the very existence of a law is what is needed. The 13th Amendment proclaimed freedom for Black people, but the Black Codes of the Reconstruction easily criminalized Black people. What factors account for the implementation of laws regarding social justice?

READING RACE IN NEW YORK

The cigar factory folds up suddenly, and he joins others in traveling to New York by train. Upon arriving in New York with other workers from Jacksonville, the narrator gives a poetic overview of the city. He compares it to “a great witch” that ensnares newcomers to the city (p. 48). His poetic description echoes James Weldon Johnson’s poem entitled “The White Witch” (see handout “James Weldon Johnson’s ‘The White Witch’”). This metaphor of an alluring witch serves as background to the narrator’s interactions with the city. The city deceptively presents itself to him as a place of opportunities: “New York had impressed me as a place where there was lots of money and not much difficulty in getting it” (p. 58). But he is soon disabused of this opinion and reveals as much in the sentence that follows. His description of and activities in New York show a different system of racial oppression in the North, more subtle but as limiting as in the South. In New York, the narrator does not offer the broad categorizations that he does in Atlanta and Florida. This is because the deplorable condition of Black people in the North are harder to map than they are in the South.

As soon as he arrives in New York, he samples clubs and makes some fortune at the gambling table. He does not feel that he is suited for the tedium and monotony of cigar factories, so he quits his job and divides his time between the club and the gambling table. Here he briefly
introduces the reader to other gamblers, young Black men who come to New York with the hope of making money but are faced with limited options. Among them is a Harvard Medical School dropout: “There was one popularly known as “the doctor”: he had had two years in the Harvard Medical School; but here he was living this gas-light life, his will and moral sense so enervated and deadened that it was impossible for him to break away” (p. 60). Through the passive verbs at the end of this short introduction, the absence of a subject, the narrator indicates the invisibility of the system that impoverishes him in the city.

Fascinated by ragtime, he again summons his music skills and learns it so well that he achieves celebrity status as the best player of ragtime in New York. He plays ragtime often at a Chinese restaurant which doubles as a club frequented by affluent Black people. The restaurant often hosts prominent Black superstar performers who sometimes regale patrons with performances. Some of these performances are new and superb, replicating excellent performances by the all-Black theatre companies in New York at the time who provided avenues for Black performers to exercise the full range of their talents. This opportunity is otherwise not available to those performers because white theatergoers expect them to perform stereotypical roles of maids, laborers, and minstrel characters. The narrator describes a Black minstrel performer who, when urged to perform an act at the club, always does a reading from Shakespeare. To the narrator, he exemplifies how the reality of many Black people in the North falls short of their ambitions and excellent capacities.

The history of African American theatre offers much insight in this regard (see Marvin McAllister’s “The Rise of African American Drama, 1822-79” in The Oxford Handbook of American Drama). The earliest documented African American drama, The Drama of King Shotaway, was written by William Brown in 1823, after notable brushes with the white establishment. Brown started the African Grove Theatre in 1821 and provided space for Black dramatic expressions. He, in fact, staged some Shakespeare plays. In January 1822, his theatre group was arrested mid-production at a hotel for staging a Shakespeare play without authorization. But the real reason was that white theatre groups were not happy that his group was successful and competing favorably with theirs. This harassment continued until, eventually, Brown shut down the theatre.

At the time, white audiences preferred to watch Black performers play insignificant roles in stage plays and, later, they would rather have them perform minstrel shows. A minstrel show is a performance in which actors and actresses paint their faces and hands black and mimic what they think is the mannerism of Black people. This performance originated among white actors, one of whom was New York comedian Thomas Dartmouth Rice. in 1828, Rice wrote a song titled “Jump Jim Crow” in which he portrays the caricature of an African American man named Jim Crow. “Jump Jim Crow” portrayed African Americans as shabby, lazy, bumbling buffoons, and this portrayal became very popular with white audiences. Jim Crow later came to be used to describe the body of segregation laws enacted across the US to oppress Black people. For more on minstrelsy, see this brief history by CBS: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgID-eZm1ck.
The part of New York where African Americans lived in the early 1900s before they began to populate Harlem was called Negro Bohemia, and this is the narrator’s circle in New York. It provides a preview of Black life in New York, before Harlem. It is populated by musicians and artists, rich and poor, and heavily punctuated with clubs and other social spaces. But in spite of the wealth of the Black patrons and the orderly air of some of the wealthiest clubs in Negro Bohemia, it does not attract white patrons based on those merits. Few white people patronize it. They are “out sight-seeing or slumming” (p. 57). Goldsby’s footnote on page 57 of ECM defines slumming as “visiting areas or establishments below one’s socioeconomic class purely for the sake of diversion.” This implies that 1.) white people consider the restaurant substandard, even when it caters to some of the wealthiest Black people; 2.) they only condescend to patronize it in order to while away their leisure; and 3.) white people live apart from Black people. A takeaway about ECM’s portrayal of racial relations in the North is that there are limits to what wealth can do, and this is highlighted even more when the narrator sees his father again in Paris. (More on this in the next section.)

Of the wealthy white slummers in the club where the narrator plays ragtime are the millionaire and the rich white widow, both of whom change the course of the narrator’s journey. The millionaire employs the narrator to play ragtime exclusively for him. With this employment, he can now afford to abandon his frequent playing at the club, and he begins to develop interest in a rich white widow who is involved with a Black man. The Ex-Colored Man cultivates the widow’s friendship, despite warnings from one of his acquaintances to be wary of the woman’s lover. He is drinking with the rich widow in the club one evening when her lover enters and shoots her. The narrator quickly flees the scene and runs into his millionaire friend who offers him an opportunity to travel across Europe with him. The shooting incident demonstrates the danger in mixed race love affairs at the time. More often, such relationships turn out as tragic for the Black lover. In this case, however, it ends tragically for the white woman and the Black lover definitely goes to jail.

In sum, segregation practices were not limited to the South. Although the North was not conspicuously hostile to Blacks, it practiced de facto segregation all the same. In an article for The New York Times entitled “The Jim Crow North,” Joe Bubar writes that schools were segregated in the North as they were in the South. Also, white neighborhoods kept out Black people by refusing to sell houses in white neighborhoods to Black people. Sometimes, this intention is blatantly stated as on the sign pictured below, taken in Detroit, Michigan, in 1942. The 1958 American play by Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, provides an example of this. Lena Younger, a widow, receives insurance payment after her husband dies and goes to buy a house in a white neighborhood in Chicago. Before she can move her family into the new house, the neighborhood sends a Mr. Karl Lindner to buy back the house from the Black family so as to prevent them from moving into the white neighborhood.
Pullman Porters, Trains, and the Staging of Racism

Justice will not have been done to the Ex-Colored Man’s journeys without attention to Pullman porters and trains. These two were essential to setting racial boundaries in the US, and the narrator calls attention to them throughout his journeys across the US. With the aid of laws, segregation was easy to achieve across the United States. But when white supremacists in the South began to demarcate different spaces for whites and colored people, they had not initially thought about transportation. When it occurred to them that traveling would allow Black people to mix with white people, they enacted laws to ensure segregation on trains and public buses. In the North, where racism was not as obvious as in the South, such laws were not enacted, and this presented a situation in which when train passengers arrived in Washington D.C., en route to the South, they had to ride in segregated cars. Social interactions on trains became reminders of the segregation that was going on in the larger society, even where the segregation was not obvious. That riding on a train was central to *Plessy v. Ferguson* says much for its importance to the history of racism in the US.

As the railroads expanded and train business boomed in the US, in 1859, a Chicago businessman by the name of George Pullman got the approval to convert two old passenger cars into comfortable, luxury sleeping cars. These train cars were fixed up exquisitely and became preferred by wealthy travelers. By 1867, George Pullman had started to employ African Americans, most of them former slaves, as servants to white patrons. Although they were paid minimally, Pullman porters earned more than other African American workers. The porters were subjected to indignities akin to what they experienced as slaves. For example, in a manner that recreated the naming system of the Slavery era, some white patrons called them “boy” or “George”—after George Pullman. Although the porters endured indignities like this, they were acutely aware of the system of social relations that has recreated the slave-master scenes of the Slavery era. They endured because it paid better than most other jobs and were opportunities to travel around the US. This therefore explains why the Pullman porters that the narrator encounters are not as naïve about racial relations in the South as the narrator is.
Suggested Discussion and Exercises

1. What is the implication of likening New York to “a great witch” as the narrator does?
2. Compare the narrator’s description of New York to James Weldon Johnson’s poem, “The White Witch” (see handout). What is common to the descriptions in both renditions? What metaphors do both use and what feelings do the metaphors incite about the city?
3. In the novel, are there events in New York that confirm the narrator’s characterization of the city as an alluring witch?
4. Do a close reading of the middle paragraphs on page 56 about an actor who visits the night club in New York. In what two different ways does the narrator use the term “tragedy?” Explain tragedy in both senses.

THE EX-COLORED MAN TRAVELS THE WORLD

From the first chapter of ECM, movement structures the narrator’s life. Importantly, it helps to highlight racial relations and the absurdity of the color line as central themes in ECM. Literary scholar Daphne Lamothe writes that the Ex-Colored Man’s travels “function as a sign of his anxiety and ambivalence about his identity; yet always throughout the novel his actions are driven by the desire to identify and claim spaces of communal and national belonging.” Foregoing sections have hinted at how this shows in the novel. Presented here is a brief outline of his travels across and interactions with European cities after he flees the orderly Chinese restaurant, scene of the tragic murder of a white widow whom he has begun to like in New York.

The narrator is agitated by the murder until he arrives in France with his millionaire friend. He is surprised that the train to take them to Paris has “little compartment cars” and tiny wheels. He soon finds that contrary to his initial opinion, Paris is a beautiful city. Notably, the millionaire treats him as an equal, because Paris is a relatively neutral ground. Although they visit the Mediterranean, Spain, Brussels, and Ostend, Paris is where they spend much of their first fifteen months in Europe. Again, he summons his language skills and learns to speak French. His enjoyment of Paris may have stemmed from his access to wealth through his millionaire friend. He has access to the best of the French society, and he does not raise the question of his identity or of racism until he sees his father at the Grand Opera.

At the Grand Opera, where he goes to hear Faust, an operatic rendition of the legend of Faust, a scholar who barters his soul to the devil for youth and love, he notices that he is sitting next to a stunningly beautiful young girl. He is so captivated by the girl that he pays attention to her words and finds that she addresses a man and woman who sit next to her as her parents. When the narrator looks up at the man, he discovers that he is his father. He is pained by the realization that although he is in the same space as his father and his half-sister, he cannot claim kinship with both of them. Although he has carried on in Paris as if race does not matter, it turns out that even in the neutrality of Paris to him and his father and despite his wealth,
racial separation manifests to disrupt even very close ties. He likens his severance from his family to a tragedy, and he restrains himself from screaming so in the theatre.

His brief interaction with a Luxembourger, the last significant event before he leaves Paris, casts doubt upon his commitment to working for the freedom of Black people from racial oppression. Possibly reading him as white, the Luxembourger asks him about lynching in the US: Did they really burn a man alive in the United States?” The narrator notes that the question embarrasses him, and he is not able to answer coherently. He therefore misses an opportunity to enlighten his acquaintance about the plight of Black people in the US at the same time that he shows his inner confusion about his identification in and with the US.

The narrator’s travels to London and Amsterdam go fleetingly. The narrative pauses to compare the free spirit of Paris to the conservative seriousness of London. Berlin changes his course. At a dinner hosted by the millionaire and attended by some German artists and musicians, the millionaire summons him to play ragtime. But no sooner does he end his music than a German musician shoves him off his chair and plays instead a classical version of ragtime music. Interestingly, he is not annoyed by this displacement; he realizes instead that he can document ragtime in classical form. In shoving him aside and transposing ragtime onto classical music, the German gives ascendancy to European music forms. The author, rather than insist on imposing ragtime on classical music, begins to see for himself an opportunity to announce himself as a serious composer. This does indicate, again, that in his travels, the Ex-Colored Man does not see himself as Black.

It is important to note the relationship between the narrator and the millionaire, his patron. A much-discussed passage in the ECM is on page 64. The narrator, having agreed to play ragtime exclusively for the pleasure of the millionaire, keeps playing at his dinners and parties. Sometimes, the millionaire summons him to play music through the night. The narrator begins to find this unbearable: “At times I became oppressed with fatigue and sleepiness that it took almost superhuman effort to keep my fingers going: in fact, I believe I sometimes did so while dozing. .... He seemed to me to be some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant....” But the narrator does not consider his millionaire friend extremely bad because he rewards him handsomely. This relationship mirrors Black artists’ interactions with their white patrons who demanded much of them. Furthermore, the millionaire tests his resolution to return to the US to work on Black music. Here is the point where his millionaire benefactor betrays his racial prejudice by encouraging the narrator to pass as white instead of throwing away his life, he says, “amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of black people in the United States” (75). Guide students to reevaluate the narrator’s characterization of the millionaire as “a man entirely free from prejudice” (76).

There is more to the music scene and to the narrator’s travels. It is striking that this novel pays attention to trains and interactions in train cars. Unit 6 examines his journeys some more in a discussion of the journey motif in ECM, and Unit 4 explores music in ECM.

Suggested Discussion, Assignments, and Close Reading Exercises

1. Read with the Ex-Colored Man’s final sentence in the novel, could the tragedy of Faust (or Doctor Faustus) be taken as foreshadow of his eventual betrayal of his race?
2. When the narrator sees his father, he again doubly evokes tragedy. What two levels of tragedy does he refer to in his seeing his father (pp. 70-71)?

3. How do these levels of tragedy relate to the levels of tragedy noted on page 56?

4. Read closely the millionaire’s “serious talk” from pages 75 to 76 and identify the themes he raises. Now write a rejoinder with the aim of persuading the narrator to pursue his goal of documenting African American music.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. Ask students to use Google Earth to track the narrator’s travels. Ask them to indicate how each place shapes him.

2. Ask students to write, as unreliable narrators, a story about an aspect of their lives.

3. Ask students to re-read Johnson’s poem “The White Witch” and the narrator’s poetic description of New York, and then compose a short, creative piece (poem, prose-poem, song, etc.) about the city in which they live.

WORKS CITED


4. BLACK MUSIC IN ECM: FROM SORROW SONGS TO RAGTIME

OBJECTIVES

- To introduce Black music from sorrow songs to ragtime
- To outline how music structures ECM

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Robert O’Meally’s “Spirituals” (in The Norton Anthology of African American Literature)
- Edward A. Berlin, Ragtime, A Musical and Cultural History (see excerpts in ECM, particularly pp. 205-208)

UNIT ORGANIZATION

ECM pays close attention to music. Music is woven into every phase of the Ex-Colored Man’s development to demonstrate its importance as a form of Black creative expression. Its prominence demands that readers learn about Black music and why it is so important that the Ex-Colored Man considers documenting it as a critical contribution to the Black race. Even more, literary scholars have described music in ECM as a racial metaphor. It therefore serves the purposes of arriving at a broader comprehension of ECM that attention should be paid to music in the text. This unit is broken down into two subsections built around the novel. The first, “Use of Music in ECM,” pays attention to how ECM invites us to read how music shapes the narrator’s journey towards self-identification. The second, “From Sorrow Songs to Ragtime,” provides a brief historical background of the novel’s reference to African American music from its inception during Slavery to the early twentieth century—the period in which ragtime flourished. Note that the Norton Critical Editions of ECM contains some historical pieces on African American music. In the media folder, there are links to music videos that should make for rewarding listening sessions in class. You may play some of these songs during class discussions to create ambience for the interesting conversation about music that ECM always ignites.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. What contemporary forms of American music do you know and what do you know about the origins of these music forms?
2. What do you think most people assume about African American music? What stereotypes about African American music have you heard?
USE OF MUSIC IN ECM

Apart from overt references to sorrow songs, cakewalk, and ragtime, ECM further uses music to structure the narrator’s development and journey. Generally, music could be read as an indicator of the narrator’s consciousness as a mixed-race person. Along this line, there are three ways in which this manifests: 1.) it sets up a conversation between orality and literacy as equally important modes of knowledge acquisition and transfer; 2.) it demonstrates ECM’s larger move of blurring differences; and 3.) it outlines the narrator’s inconsistent journey(s) towards maturity.

In reading music as setting up a conversation between orality and literacy, this guide aligns with scholars who have paired music with literacy in their interpretations of ECM. Orality refers to a tradition that relies on transfer of knowledge by word of mouth and encourages learning by immersion. This was the primary mode of knowledge transmission among Black people during Slavery not only because slaves were legally barred from learning to read and write but also because this was the original mode of knowledge transfer in Africa and therefore of the earliest enslaved Africans in America. Care should be taken here to note that orality is not an inferior mode of knowledge acquisition and transfer. Consider that for many years, the rich epic of Sundiata of the Mali Empire was handed down through griots (community storytellers) through orality and, equally, the 256 chapters of Ifá literary corpus of the Yoruba religion were preserved through orality by babalawos (people who learn to interpret the verses of the text). Epics and religious texts like this are complex and rich and their preservation through orality depicts that, contrary to widely held assumptions about orality, it is a legitimate means of gaining and transferring knowledge.

White people dismissed this manner of knowledge production and transmission simply because it was not written. The narrator, on the contrary, indicates early his preference for the oral, although he adjusts his position as the story progresses. When he describes his mother’s playing on a little square piano, he mentions that she picks out a hymn to play every Sunday, but her tempo is very slow because she is playing from a music sheet. When she plays Negro spirituals, however, she is freer. He himself at first learns to play by ear, that is, by immersion, and when he begins to learn to play from music sheets, he finds it difficult to adjust to the new style. Years later in New York, when he meets the ragtime pianist, he admires him for being a natural musician, one who has not learned the theory of music. He wonders that if he had been trained in the theory of music, he might have ended up a mediocre musician.

But he soon learns to blur the difference between the improvisation and the learned methodology. The two most important instances of this surface in his learning French and his musical performances. When he learns French, he argues for a method of learning by immersion. With great erudition, he explains that his method of learning a new language is to “learn to speak merely by speaking” (69). He finds this method rewarding. He derives much success from blending the improvisational feature of ragtime with classical music, which is always written and demands a method of playing. His fame in New York is owed to his subjecting classical music to ragtime. This manner of playing is disrupted when the German musician in Berlin plays ragtime in classical form, and here is where he reverses the order of blending European music form with Black music tradition.
The narrator includes a key detail at the beginning of the novel when he introduces his mother as a musician. He notes that he “had a particular fondness for the black keys” (7). This is less about race, since he is not conscious of his being black at this point, than about his developing artistic taste. Literary and music scholars have observed that the pentatonic scale, the five black keys on a piano, is the structure of early Black music. His mother possibly played Negro spirituals on the pentatonic scales and by watching her, he begins to develop an artistic taste of his own which comes to the fore in his adulthood when he turns attention to Black music. Also, music prominently appears at every stage of the narrator’s social development. The first girl he falls in love with is his music partner, just as the young white lady that he eventually marries. Music provides the means by which he travels Europe and decides on his self-assigned task of documenting Black music.

FROM SORROW SONGS TO RAGTIME

Sorrow Songs

The Ex-Colored Man’s association with music turns up at the very beginning of the novel. After he has moved with his mother to Connecticut, his mother settles to sewing. Every Sunday, she picks out a hymn to play on a little square piano in deliberately slow tempos. At other times, she plays Negro spirituals by ear. When she plays Negro spirituals, unhampered by notes, she is freer. The narrator’s introduction to music in the form of hymns is a metaphor for the beginning of African American music. There is a more sustained reference to the connection between hymns and Negro spirituals, African American folk songs woven around religious themes, when the narrator returns to the South to document African American music. In Macon, Georgia, he attends a big religious meeting that attracts many Black attendees because of the renown of the preacher and the song leader. The narrator is impressed that the preacher electrifies his audience and is even more enthralled by the song leader who knows by heart “the leading lines of all the Negro spiritual songs” and knows just when to interject the meeting with one of them.

Spirituals, also called sorrow songs or work songs, emerged from among slaves, an expression of their quest for freedom in the face of oppression. As mentioned in Unit 2, although enslaved Black people were forbidden from communicating with one another, they devised means of doing so. Spirituals are one of those means. Spirituals served the functions of poignantly expressing the agonies of an oppressed people, challenging the authority of slave owners, and communicating with other enslaved people. These are in addition to being a principal feature of the religious gatherings of enslaved people. This means that the songs were not limited to religious gatherings; they were sung every time, during work or play.

Emphasis should be laid on the unbearable conditions in which these songs were produced. African American producers of this music were not only subjected to back-breaking labor in the fields, their spirits brutalized by the indignities of slavery, but were also forbidden to learn to read or write. Oral tradition was readily available to them, and they used it to express their deepest felt pains, anguish, defiance, and hope.
To merely say, therefore, that these songs arose from religious meetings papers over the creative resistance of the enslaved Black people and that even through these songs, the enslaved staged a subtle critique of the religious institution. Slaveholders thought that Christianity would make enslaved Black people docile. So they engaged missionaries to preach sermons of obedience, emphasizing that slaves should obey their masters. Because they are forbidden from gathering, enslaved Black people held secret religious meetings of their own. Those meetings quickly became spaces for them to express their agonies and sadness. The songs that emanated from those meetings were therefore melancholic, as the narrator describes the effect of the music at the religious meeting he attends. Many of the songs, he states, “contain more than mere melody; there is sounded in them that elusive undertone, the note in music which is not heard with ears. I sat often with the tears rolling down my cheeks and my heart melted within me” (95).

It is, again, mentioned in Unit 2 that these songs encoded secret messages. Spirituals and work songs, provide a rich example of African American creativity and capacity for intricate artistic expression. It is nothing short of marvelous that the enslaved, amidst unbearable suffering in the hands of white slaveholders and denied every means of communication for the fear that they might stage insurrections, composed songs that served multiple purposes. Hidden in the familiar themes of the songs such as “Steal Away to Jesus” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” are calls to the enslaved to escape from slavery and references to the train to take the enslaved away. The River Jordan in “Roll, Jordan, Roll” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7iCMNIPNf8) came to represent the Mississippi or Ohio Rivers that led to the North; and “heaven” or “home” refer to the slave-free North or Canada or just anywhere beyond slavery plantations.

After Slavery, the Fisk Jubilee Singers popularized these songs. The Fisk Singers, a nine-member choral group organized by George L. White, vocal music teacher at Fisk University, founded in 1866 to offer liberal arts education to African Americans. (Some accounts put the number of initial members of the group at eleven, see Jacqueline Goldsby’s footnote 1 on p. 188 of ECM.) In 1871, only five years after Fisk University was founded, White took the group on a music tour of the US and Europe in order to raise funds for the university. On their tours, the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang sorrow songs in highly stylized forms. They were initially met with scorn from white audiences who expected minstrel performances from them, but they gradually gained enthusiastic acceptance, standing ovations, and enough money to send back to the university. In 1873, the group grew to eleven members and toured Europe. The funds they raised in 1873 went to constructing Jubilee Hall, the first permanent building in the university. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, who were invited to perform at very important national and international events, were highly renowned in Europe, offering to the world a distinct music style.
W.E.B. Du Bois documents the evolution of the African American music in the fourteenth chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. He traces the history of sorrow songs and the resounding contributions of the Jubilee Singers in popularizing those songs. Du Bois points out the profound messages of the sorrow songs and notes that those songs laid the foundation for American music. And Du Bois was right. Other genres of music that have originated in the US have their roots in sorrow songs. After Slavery, the sorrow songs gave rise to gospels, blues, jazz, rock and roll, funk, rap, and hip hop. Du Bois notes, as does the Ex-Colored Man, that early African American music exemplified the enormous contributions of Black people to the culture of the United States. In Jacksonville when the Ex-Colored Man watches cakewalk, he declares it as one of the four cultural products of African Americans that demonstrate their capacity for creativity and originality; the other three are African American folktales, sorrow songs, and ragtime.

Here are links to some renditions of sorrow songs

“Deep Down in My Heart” [https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196565](https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196565)

“Come by Here” [https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197143/](https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197143/)

*swing low beyonce*

*Swing Low Sweet Chariot* - Fisk Jubilee Singers (1909)

*You May Bury Me in the East*

*Paul Robeson* - Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

*Bessie Jones* - I'm A Rollin', I'm A Rollin' (Everybody's A Rolling Stone)

*Oh Freedom!* - The Golden Gospel Singers (Lyrics in Description)
Cakewalk

Cakewalk refers to an intricate dance and its accompanying music that originated among plantation slaves. It was not named cakewalk until Slavery ended, when it became a social dance. It derives the name from the practice of awarding a cake to the best dancer. The name belies the subtle resistance enacted through the dance.

During Slavery, slaveholders often had slaves dance for their entertainment. This entertainment activity overseen by slaveholders was meant not just for entertainment but also to show that enslaved people were happy in servitude. On their own part, the enslaved performed dances that imitated the ballroom dances of the slaveholders. It was, for them, both a break from the excruciatingly enervating tedium of plantation work and a way of mocking white slaveholders’ pompous manners. Initially, the dance consisted of smooth strides, with the body erect. But as the satirical quality of the dance took form, it became an energetic dance system of struts, prances, and exaggerated body movements.

Cakewalk, like some other African American musical forms, was appropriated by white performers, mostly to deride those forms of music and to portray stereotypes of African Americans. This imitation of Black music further entrenched already pervasive racist views of African Americans in the national psyche. The perversion of Black music forms was done to maintain the dominance of white people by undermining the sophistication of Black musical expression. The irony though, in the case of cakewalk, is that the form was originally a parody of the mannerisms of white people. But because white performers did not know about this function of cakewalk, they continued the parody thinking that they were mocking Black musical culture. Like work songs that disguised their subversive functions, cakewalk disguised its joke so that the joke of its parody was on white imitators.

Cakewalk gradually became fine-tuned and a dancehall favorite. Black and white Americans learned the dance. For some white Americans, it was a social dance. In spite of the parody of white performers, the fame of cakewalk grew so much that it was thought to be a uniquely American dance style. Its accompanying music heralded ragtime which features prominently in ECM.

Here are some links to performances of cakewalk:

Cake Walk

Uncle Tom’s Cabin - Group and Solo Cakewalk dance (1903)

The Cakewalk 1943

The Cake Walk Dance (a 3-minute video essay)

Ragtime

If sorrow songs express the profound despair of Black people during Slavery, ragtime was a means through which they showed their elegance, exuberance, and their joyful embrace of freedom. But both cannot be separated from each other, because the roots of ragtime are found in musical practices of enslaved Black people before the Civil War. John Rosamond
Johnson, James Weldon Johnson’s younger brother and musical collaborator, has been cited by scholars as making the case that the structure of ragtime is influenced by the foot patting and syncopated hand clapping of enslaved Black people during Slavery. Syncopation is a style of music in which a weak beat is stressed to produce an off-beat tune.

*ECM* portrays the overwhelming positive response to ragtime every time the narrator brings it up, and the string of responses in the novel start with his own response to the music. He is so enthralled by the music that he goes to sit with the pianist and, after the encounter, begins to learn to play it. When he learns to play it excellently, he begins to transpose classical music into ragtime, to the amazement of his listeners.

The narrator’s success at ragtime mirrors James Weldon Johnson’s own musical success. With his brother, he wrote many songs for numerous major musical theatre performances in Manhattan. At the time when America contested the enormous contributions of Black people to the national culture and the national economy, through music they asserted their excellent capabilities. By paying attention to music, the narrator shows two things: first, that Black people have been the foremost producers of uniquely American music, and second, that the idea of a race man is tied to musical capacity.

From sorrow songs to ragtime, African Americans invented musical styles that were hitherto unknown to white Americans who derived their style of music from Europe. Reaching to the syncopated rhythms of sorrow songs, as the enslaved had to improvise after they were forbidden to drum, ragtime stood apart from classical music and became internationally recognized as “American music”—meaning music that originated from America.

Certainly, ragtime was fiercely contested by white Americans, who argued that it did not deserve the attention it got because it was not high art, like classical music. In *ECM*, the narrator gestured towards this by describing ragtime as having originated from “questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis” (53). Ragtime started as the chief form of entertainment in brothels in St. Louis, Missouri. During the late 1800s when it originated, Missouri was a favorite stop for Americans travelling North or South. This helped make it a center for commercial activities. Black entrepreneurs thrived, and one of them, John L. Turpin, opened a saloon at Chestnut Valley, a sporting district. His son, Tom Turpin, took after him and started a brothel. Tom Turpin was also a pianist, so he treated his audience to ragtime music. Other self-taught pianists, such as Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe, known as Jelly Roll Morton, played ragtime in brothels. But it was Scott Joplin who first popularized it in written form. In 1899 he wrote *The Maple Leaf Rag* which sold one million copies.

Notably, ragtime was developed by African American pianists who had no training in music but improvised the exquisite and moving rhythm. The narrator pauses at his discovery of ragtime to offer insight into how American musicians received it. The invention of ragtime led to a culture war in the US: white Americans, most of whom specialize in classical music, dismissed ragtime as vulgar and low art. According to music scholar Lori Brooks, in the early 1900s, organizations such as the Chicago Federation of Musicians, the American Federation of Musicians, the Dancing Teachers Association of America, and the National Music Teachers Association were sites of the debates for and against ragtime. The National Music Teachers Association, in fact, determined to discourage the use of ragtime in any form and manner. Despite these efforts,
ragtime remained a popular musical form, and Black musicians like James Weldon Johnson and his brother documented it.

Two important reasons for this documentation were to preserve the music and to reclaim its ownership from white musicians who had begun to transcribe it and sell it under their own names. The Ex-Colored Man pauses after his first encounter with ragtime to extol its broad international reach and to decry its dismissal by “American musicians”, who, “instead of investigating ragtime, ignore it or attempt to dismiss it with a contemptuous word” (54). The attempt to dismiss it, as the narrator interprets it, is an attempt to dismiss the contribution of African Americans to American culture. The dismissal of ragtime as low or vulgar art is inspired by racist assumptions that music that originates from Black people is worthless. As Brooks further notes, it mattered to Johnson that ragtime is not just called American music without indicating that African Americans invented it. Such a move will rob African Americans of the credit they deserve and the acknowledgement of their inimitable contributions to American culture: after all, a 20th century American music critic described ragtime as “the one original and indigenous type of music of the American people” (quoted by Lori Brooks).

In this light, the Ex-Colored Man’s ambition to document Black music proves a crucial contribution to racial advancement. His realization of this task takes place outside of the US. In Berlin, when he is called upon to play what his millionaire patron calls the “new American music” (74), he treats his German audience, predominantly consisting of musicians, to classical songs in ragtime form. But as soon as he is done, he is shoved aside by a German musician who reverses the format by playing ragtime in classical form. This symbolic action could be read as a cultural contest, as an insistence on the ascendancy of European art forms over other forms. By accepting his unceremonious displacement by the German pianist, he indicates his willingness to submit to European musical form. The German thus reasserted what to him is the primacy of classical music, and the narrator agrees to this without question. This action prefigures the narrator’s eventual identification by the end of the novel. Music is used in ECM in this manner to highlight important points in the development of the narrator. For the Ex-Colored Man, music was a path to self-understanding.

Please point out in class that Black musicians have done more than produce spirituals and cakewalk, ragtime and jazz. What is not often recognized is that Black people have also composed symphonies. You may ask students to do some research and find out about African American musicians such as William Grant Still, Undine Smith Moore, and George Walker.

Sample ragtime:
Scott Joplin - Ragtime (Full Album)

Discussion Questions and Close Reading Exercises

1. Compare the rise of African American literature to the rise of African American music. What similar conditions underlie both?
2. Based on what you now know about the denigration of Black people, why is it significant to pay attention to African American music?
3. Consider the passage about the narrator’s visit to a camp meeting in the South (pp. 93-95). What effect does the congregational music have on the narrator? What words does the narrator use to describe the music? What effect do those words have on you? What do you think gives the music the effect it has on the narrator—its history, its melody, or the collectivity of the act of singing?

**ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS**

1. Ask students to do some research and find out about some other ragtime players not mentioned in this unit and make a poster presentation about any one of them. This is best done as a group activity. To get the best of this project, ask students to do research about the biographies and songs of the musicians they choose. In doing so, they should pay attention to the musicians’ influences and present an analysis of one of the musician’s songs.

2. Ask students to produce, in groups, video essays on genres of African American music. Each group should explain the origin of one genre of African American music, its function, its originators and prominent performers, if applicable. You may limit students to the genres of music discussed in this unit, depending on the class population.

3. Ask each student to prepare a music playlist that samples songs from the music genres covered in this unit. They should include statements about the songs that they select.

**WORK CITED**


**Further Reading**

5. CROSSING THE COLOR LINE: PASSING AS SOCIAL CRITICISM

OBJECTIVES

- To provide a brief history of passing
- To outline the conditions for passing
- To explain passing as social criticism

HANDOUTS

- “Slavery Era Ads Indicating Passing”
  These Slavery-era adverts published in newspapers show that white slave owners were aware of passing as a social phenomenon. Mary Cutter, who provides the excerpts, argues that slave owners’ fear manifests by their inclusion of that detail in their adverts.

- A review of the 1912 edition on page 285 of ECM
  This review offers an exemplary racially biased review of ECM. Students will find it useful to unpack the bias in it by analyzing the tone of the review.

- “McIntosh-White Privilege”
  This 1989 essay provides a detailed explanation of white privilege and its often very subtle manifestations. Students will benefit from discussing this essay, and this may provide material for an entire class discussion session.

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Matthew Wills, “Passing for White to Escape Slavery” (retrievable at https://daily.jstor.org/passing-for-white-to-escape-slavery/)

- Darryl Pinckney, “Passing for White: A Literary History” (retrievable at https://lithub.com/passing-for-white-a-literary-history/)


UNIT ORGANIZATION

This unit examines the social phenomenon of passing in ECM. Although it has been hinted at in Unit 1, passing deserves to be examined in depth in class. As it is with previous units, this unit is presented in subsections. There are two subsections here: “Conditions for Passing” and “The Social Criticism of Passing.” The first subsection takes account of the trope of passing in American literature and outlines the social conditions that necessitates passing. The second
looks at how ECM constructs social criticism by its characterization of its author. As always, there are discussion questions and suggestions for close reading exercises and class projects.

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Why would someone want to identify as white?
2. What is white privilege? How does it work? Who benefits from it?
3. Under what conditions can non-white people benefit from white privilege?
4. Is it possible for those who benefit from white privilege to give it up? If so, how? If not, why?
5. White privilege is upheld by an unfair social system. How can it be corrected?

CONDITIONS FOR PASSING

The Ex-Colored Man begins his narrative by gesturing to a great secret that he has guarded carefully. As the novel progresses, it turns out that the secret is that he is considered “black” but now passes for “white.” His father is the wealthy offspring of a slave owner in Georgia who fell in love with his mother, who worked for the wealthy family either as a servant or as a slave. The Ex-Colored Man is therefore light-skinned, like many African Americans at the time (revisit the examples that have been given so far). In spite of his being light-skinned, he is not considered white because of a system of classification known as “the one-drop rule,” which defines as non-white anyone who has a non-white ancestor. Twice, his acquaintances hint that he could easily pass for white, but he does not consciously act on those suggestions until his traumatic witnessing of a lynching scene. ECM is not only built on the social phenomenon of passing, but it also dramatizes the conditions that make it desirable. What ECM shows is that Slavery gave rise to a bodily marked social history of the US, which determined social acceptability by how “white” or “black” the body looks. The definition of a body as “white” or “black” is both unnecessary and tenuous, and this shows in the fact that the Ex-Colored Man and many other people could identify as white without consequences. For real life examples, consider again Homer Plessy, Walter Francis White, and, to offer a contemporary example, the Shreck family in East Jackson, Ohio, whose story was published in The Guardian (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/25/race-east-jackson-ohio-appalachia-white-black) in 2019). They all looked “white” but were classified as “black.”

As defined in Unit 1, to pass is to identify as white in order to enjoy the citizenship rights and social privileges extended to white people. It is not clear who was the first African American to have passed, but historians have found that the social act of passing goes back to the era of Slavery. The urge to escape enslavement compelled those who passed during Slavery to do so. But this social act cannot be undertaken by just any person; they must look “white” in order to successfully pass for white.
White slaveholders were quick to recognize this social act, as newspaper advertisements from the era shows. At the time, when slave owners desired to sell their slaves or look for a slave who had escaped, they put out advertisements in local newspapers. In these newspaper advertisements, slave owners included descriptions of the escaped person and indicated whether or not the runaway slave could pass for white (see handout titled “Slavery Era Ads Indicating Passing” for sample newspaper advertisements). The slave owners did not recognize that the impulse to pass for “white” is based on the categorization of some people as “black” and fit for enslavement, and others as “white” and should always be free. The longing for freedom, therefore, caused the light-skinned Black person to pass. It should be noted that the light-skinned Black person, during Slavery, was the direct or indirect product of the rape of a Black slave by a white slave owner: direct, being the offspring of the rape, and indirect, being a descendant of someone born of the relationship. Such offspring were counted as slaves and disinherited by the very same men who raped their mothers. In many cases, the slave owner sold off his own children, offspring of his relationship with a Black slave. Remember that when Jefferson outlawed the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1778, white slave owners raped their slaves in order to have more slaves. Sometimes, a white slave owner professed love to one of his slaves and persuaded her to sleep with him, and sometimes it is one of the legally recognized children of the white slave owner who falls in love with one of his father’s slaves. Whatever the circumstances surrounding their births, the mixed-race children of those relationships were counted as slaves. This is because of the belief that Black people were less than human, inferior to white people, and if anyone had the blood of a Black person in them, they were tainted by the so-called inferiority of Black people and should therefore not be counted as white. Wanting to escape enslavement and enjoy the privileges extended to white people, light-skinned Black people passed for white. A notable example is from 1848 when Ellen Craft, an enslaved light-skinned woman, passed for a white man and her dark-skinned husband escaped with her by pretending to be her slave.

After the Civil War, the unbearably oppressive conditions in which Black people lived were not any better. All over the US, their economic options were severely limited. They were blatantly shut off and terrorized in the South; and in the North, there was a limit to how they could pursue economic prosperity. In order to escape the terror of white supremacists and to gain access to white privilege, light-skinned Black people passed for white. These are also the reasons for the Ex-Colored Man’s various acts of passing.

**white privilege**: the socio-economic advantage and benefits of being white in a society that consistently denigrates and limits the socio-economic choices of non-white people. Although there are recent explanations of white privilege, a classic explanation is in a 1989 article (see handout titled “McIntosh-White Privilege”).

*ECM* demonstrates that there are three phases involved in passing. In the first, one is pushed to pass by a tragic event or a series of unfortunate circumstances that show one’s socio-economic disadvantage. The most obvious moment of the narrator’s passing for white is triggered after he witnesses the lynching of a Black man. Back to the South to begin his work of documenting
Black music, the Ex-Colored Man spends time at a religious service after which a young man invites him over. At the man’s house, as he begins to jot down his observations about the music he has begun to collect, he hears a noise and the sound of a horse’s hooves hitting the ground. In spite of his host’s caution, the narrator goes out only to find that an irate mob of white people is bent on killing a Black man. He watches, mortified, as the white mob sets the Black man ablaze. Long after the lynching is done, he sits there dazed, and he resolves to dissociate himself from a race that could be so easily killed. He decides to change his name, raise a mustache, and let the world decide how to identify him. He knows, of course, that he will be taken for white.

But for the Ex-Colored Man, passing is more recurrent than it appears. Apart from the fact that he must have been taken for white on his journeys across Europe, he reveals that on his return to the US he travels in Pullman sleeping cars. On his trips to the South, he travels in Pullman cars. Those were luxury sleeping cars attended by Pullman porters, two of whom he met earlier in his life. These cars were reserved for white and wealthy travelers, and the Pullman porters are employed to serve them, to replicate the manner of relationship between white and Black people during Slavery. This means that he is travelling as white (p. 82). He is taken as white as he travels throughout the South, and he attributes his boldness in going out to witness the lynching scene described above to his certainty that he will be taken for white (p. 96).

In the second phase of passing, one enjoys the bliss of one’s new life after passing. The Ex-Colored Man returns to New York and reaffirms his resolution: “I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man’s success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means ‘money’” (101). He becomes successful at business and gains access to the highest social class in New York, made up of white people. It is in this class that he meets a beautiful young woman who was “white as a lily” (103). He falls in love with her and begins to nurture dreams of marriage.

But here is the onset of the third phase of passing: the realization that one must cut all ties to one’s former identity. To some degree, the Ex-Colored Man does not have to worry about cutting familial ties, because his father has practically disowned him, and his mother is dead. When he falls in love with a white girl, he initially keeps her from knowing that he is colored. An event that most emphasizes the necessary severance of his ties to his old life happens when one Saturday afternoon, he runs into Shiny at a museum. He hesitates to call Shiny’s attention until Shiny calls out to him. Gratefully, Shiny gives no indication of the narrator’s childhood as a colored boy. Eventually, the narrator decides to reveal to the white girl that he is colored. After breaking up the relationship initially, she agrees to marry him. Their marriage is cut short by the convenient death of his wife after her second child.

The decision to pass is trailed by an internal struggle, and the narrator has his own share of this. Close to the end of the novel, he attends a gathering at which Booker T. Washington gives a speech. He cannot help wondering if he has not chosen a selfish part. The novel ends on this note. Comparing himself to a biblical character who exchanges his birthright for food, he mourns his “dead ambition” of uplifting the Black race by collecting and publishing the music of
Black people and his “sacrificed talent” as a musician. As the novel closes, it is certain that this regret will torment the narrator for a long time.

Suggested Discussion Questions and Close Reading Exercises

1. Compare the scene in which Shiny gives a speech at his high school graduation and on pages 25 and 26 to the one in which Booker T. Washington gives a speech on pages 109 and 110. In both instances, the speeches affect him differently. In what different ways do the speeches affect him? What has changed in his situation between both events? What effect does each event have on the narrator?

2. Also consider the narrator’s opinion about himself here: “It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that U 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” (109).

This passage reveals his internal struggles. But do you think there is really any difference between the narrator’s outlook at the beginning of the novel and his outlook at the end? Does he really pass for white, or has he always projected a consciousness of being white? What incidents in the novel would support your opinion?

PASSING AS SOCIAL CRITICISM

The functions of passing as a theme in ECM are to 1.) draw readers’ attention to the absurdity of racial classification; 2.) reveal racial divisions as artificial, and 3.) demonstrate that being Black does not mean one is less intelligent than white people. This strategy for criticizing race effectively shows that if white supremacists cannot easily tell when their so-called pure white social circles are breached by people categorized as “black,” the categorization is therefore illogical.

Passing, as a literary theme, had not always performed those functions, though. The theme of passing had appeared in American literature before Johnson wrote ECM. Author Darryl Pinckney recounts in an essay on Nella Larsen, the notable African American writer, that the earliest novels about passing written by white authors punished the act of passing. They generally revolve around a Black woman who is driven by circumstances to identify as white. Her beauty attracts a rich white man who falls in love with her. Shortly before the wedding, her true identity as a Black woman is revealed and she is deserted. Almost always, the abandoned young woman dies of fever or commits suicide. On the contrary, ECM reverses this trend. In ECM, the narrator succeeds in passing for white and his secret is well-kept until he decides to reveal it himself.

By portraying a narrator who successfully crosses the color line, ECM portrays the system of racial categorization as both absurd and artificial. The narrator prepares us for this work at the beginning of the text by announcing that he is playing “a practical joke” on society. The joke,
rich with irony, is that he is able to pass as white and therefore he is a literal challenge to the system that categorizes him as “black” because of the one-drop rule. It is like Harry S. Murphy, Jr.’s joke on the University of Mississippi, recounted by historian Allyson Hobbs. In 1962, the University of Mississippi had vehemently and violently opposed the enrollment of a Black man named James Meredith. Although a federal court had ruled that Meredith be allowed into classes at the university, his attendance ignited a riot at the school. When Harry S. Murphy, Jr., an alumnus of the university heard of the riot, he laughed at the university for fighting a lost battle. Murphy’s laughter was because he, who by ancestry was “black” but light-skinned like the Ex-Colored Man, had attended the University of Mississippi between 1945 and 1946. University officials had simply assumed that he was white.

In like manner, most of the Ex-Colored Man’s interlocutors assume that he is white, and he does not correct them. He takes pleasure in exposing the absurdity of the idea of racial purity. That he pulls off this trick of passing indeed shows that he is much more intelligent than most of his white interlocutors. After he moves to New York to live as a white man, he remarks the ignorance of his white interlocutors who make fun of Black people: “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 of Negro blood renders a man unfit?’ Many a night when I return to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing” (p. 102).

Thus, an important achievement of ECM is that it tested racial boundaries. By doing so, it angered a few disgruntled reviewers. For example, a reviewer of ECM for Nashville Tennessean declared that “once a negro, always a negro” (ECM, p. 285) and did not quite understand why the novel was being sold in Nashville. This reviewer’s assertion that racial classification cannot be upset falls flat in the face of the Ex-Colored Man’s narrative.

Suggested Discussion Questions and Close Reading Exercises

1. When the Ex-Colored Man has passed for white, he laughs at his interlocutors’ ignorance when they make jest of Black people. Many times, he feels like saying to them: “I am a colored man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of negro blood renders a man unfit?” (p. 102). In what ways does he disprove the theory?

2. Read the review of the 1912 edition of ECM on page 285. What do you think is the writer’s attitude toward passing? What is your own reaction to the review? If you had to write a rejoinder to the review, what issues would you raise in it?

3. ECM has been described as a text that is “passing,” like its narrator: it passes itself off as a life story, when it is in fact a fiction. Do you think so? What does this strategy achieve for the story?
WORKS CITED


McIntosh, Peggy. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”


Further Reading


6. EXPLORING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

OBJECTIVE

- To discuss ECM as a Bildungsroman
- To examine the function of humor in ECM
- To explore characterization in the novel

HANDOUTS

- Character Traits
  This list presents character traits that students may choose from in their analyses of characters.
- **Worksheet**: Story Organizer
- **Worksheet**: ECM as a Bildungsroman

PREPARATORY AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Mark Whalan’s “The Bildungsroman in the Harlem Renaissance”
- Simon Crichley’s On Humour (Routledge, 2002; chapters 1 and 2 are particularly relevant)
- Brittney Michelle Edmonds’ “A Fugitive Strain: Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist and the Joke of Race” (retrievable at https://post45.org/2021/06/a-fugitive-strain-colson-whiteheads-the-intuitionist-and-the-joke-of-race/)

UNIT ORGANIZATION

This unit presents some formal characteristics of ECM, unlike earlier units that have examined some of the thematic issues raised in the novel. This unit has five sections: “ECM as a Bildungsroman,” “The Journey Motif,” “Humor in ECM,” and “What’s in a Name: Notes on Characterization.” The last section does not analyze characters but offers a few general notes about characterization in ECM. Feel free to introduce into the discussion some of the narrative characteristics mentioned before now such as the use of anagnorisis, or the construction of the narrator as an antihero and an unreliable narrator. In all, this unit is to provide opportunities to examine how James Weldon Johnson constructed his story.
OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Is there any major character named in ECM?
2. Why do you think the narrator does not mention any character’s name?
3. What is the effect of the namelessness of characters on you?
4. Do you think that the novel might have had a different effect, were the characters named? Why or why not?
5. People joke sometimes to ridicule others or to defend themselves. Can you think of other reasons why people joke?
6. What instances or incidents do you find funny in the story and why do you think they are included?

ECM AS A BILDUNGSROMAN

A Bildungsroman, also known as an Erziehungsroman, refers to a novel that revolves around the psychological and moral development of its protagonist. The word “Bildungsroman”, which has its roots in German, translates as “novel of education.” At the beginning of a Bildungsroman, the protagonist is naive, but as the story progresses the protagonist demonstrates a considerable measure of maturity that guides them to a happy ending. Certain features are common to novels classified as Bildungsroman. First, the story is narrated by the protagonist. This narrator is limited because they present events from their own perspective. Their naivete is exposed by how they portray events. Early in the novel, the protagonist experiences a deep loss. This loss occurs in the protagonist’s formative years and spurs them on a journey. The journey sets off the education of the narrator, who is at this time left to their own devices. There are moments of conflict that gradually lead the protagonist to maturity and bring about a happy ending.

These features are recognizable in ECM. The protagonist starts life oblivious of a social system that categorizes him as Black. The absence of a father figure and the death of his mother propels him on a journey to the South, which will be the beginning of many journeys for him. Through the journeys, he learns about the plight of Black people in the US and the privilege of being classified as white. He, therefore, decides to pass for white. Unlike many other Bildungsroman novels, ECM does not end on a happy note. On the contrary, it leaves a sour taste in the mouth, for despite the protagonist’s success in business and his blissful life after passing for white, he is dejected by the fact that he fails to fulfill his ambition of documenting Black music. Since a Bildungsroman is traditionally a story of the journey of a person towards maturity, it would seem that the Ex-Colored Man fully matures when he begins to identify himself as white. But, of course, that would be to take the story literally. And to forestall such a thoroughly reductive reading of the novel, the narrator plays out his dejection even in his more comfortable life as a white man. He looks back on his past and decries that he does not identify as Black. What is more important in ECM is therefore not whether the narrator attains maturity but that he identifies the sometimes invisible limiting social structure that he has to contend with.
It should be noted that ECM does not stand alone in African American literature as an example of the Bildungsroman. Literary scholars, such as Mark Whalan, have observed that the Bildungsroman is a common mode of African American prose, especially before and during the Harlem Renaissance. It structures African American novels such as W.E.B. Du Bois’s The Quest of the Golden Fleece, Jessie Redmon Fauset’s Plum Bun, and certainly James Weldon Johnson’s ECM. Apart from the fact that many early African American novels are told from the first-person point of view, which easily plays out the maturity of the narrator, another reason for the deployment of the Bildungsroman is that it mirrors the African American search for social integration in a country that denies them the privileges of citizenship. The Bildungsroman protagonist starts off as a social outlier, one who is not in any stable social circle partly because they are struggling to understand the nature of society and their own roles in it. This was the plight of the African American after the Civil War, not merely because they could not rise to become citizens but because the social system was organized to keep them from integrating as citizens. In such a situation, African Americans had to find ways of presenting the problem.

Furthermore, the Bildungsroman offers many scenes of instruction. The phrase “scenes of instruction” comes from the title of the memoir of Michael Awkward, an African American literary scholar. It denotes events that are pivotal to the education and social awareness of a person. This feature of Bildungsroman novels usefully demonstrates that African American thinkers and writers understand that education is vital for recognizing and fighting the racism built into social systems. This is the result of the scenes of instruction in ECM. When, for instance, the protagonist learns of his social categorization as Black, it shocks him and spurs him to want to begin to learn about people like himself. Care should be made to clarify that “education” as used here does not merely refer to school education, but to broad social education.

The central problem that the African American Bildungsroman poses is that of navigating a hostile social space. This is the question that plagues the Ex-Colored Man: how does one live as Black amidst both blatant and subtle manifestations of white supremacy? This question cannot be easily answered, but it can be played out in the form of a Bildungsroman.

Discussion and Close Reading Activities

1. What two or three important scenes of instruction shape the Ex-Colored Man? How?
2. On the worksheet titled “ECM as a Bildungsroman” complete the table by choosing events from the novel to exemplify features provided.
3. By the end of the novel, what has the narrator learned about himself and his society?

THE JOURNEY MOTIF

A motif is a recurrent element in a literary work. It can be an event, literary device, a reference, or an idea. Through repetition, a motif is held up to readers’ attention because it helps to uncover the deeper meanings of a literary work. Journeys recur in ECM. The Ex-Colored Man travels with his mother from Georgia to Connecticut for reasons unknown but related to the
fact that his Black mother’s relationship with his white father is prohibited. This South-North movement is repeated two more times in the novel. When his mother dies, he journeys back to Georgia to attend Atlanta University, and from there he goes to Florida after his money is stolen. He begins to work in a cigar factory in Florida but when the factory is shut down, he travels back to the North and settles in New York. Good fortunes bring him in contact with a millionaire who takes him on trips across Europe. In Germany he decides to document Black music and returns to the US South. He travels through several cities in the South until he witnesses the lynching of a Black man. Once again, he journeys North and finally settles in New York where he lives as a successful white businessman.

Gratifying as it is to portray the Ex-Colored Man as a peripatetic person, one who moves restlessly from place to place, it is more edifying to identify the function of the Ex-Colored Man’s journeys. There are at least three ways of interpreting his journeys. First, they mirror the instability of the logic of defining people as white or not. Second, they poignantly demonstrate the internal struggles of a mixed-race person in America in the period after the Civil War. And third, they intensify ECM’s counter-narrative move.

One of the chief aims of ECM is to undermine the logic by which people are categorized as white or not. The Ex-Colored Man’s movements help to unsettle that logic, for it is difficult to classify a body that glides in and out assigned classes. On his many journeys, his identity is not stable, as his movements enable him to move in and out of social circles. Note that the two times that that idea of passing is suggested to him, he is on a journey. Europe being a neutral space, the notion of his racial classification does not arise, because his body defies any easy racial categorization. On his trip across the South, he is taken for white by the very people who define people like him as colored. So, if racial classification is according to skin color, the difficulty of classifying the Ex-Colored Man proves that the basis of racial categorization according to skin color is faulty.

The narrator’s journeys also suggest his psychological turmoil. Just as he travels Northward and Southward incessantly, so does he identify with being white and being colored continuously until he decides to pass. He starts off thinking that he is white. But once he learns that he is not considered white in his society, he begins to make efforts to learn about being Black. When he travels to Atlanta after his mother’s death, he is exposed to the plight of Black people, and he finds them repulsive. His withdrawal manifests as class consciousness in Florida, so that his acquaintance with wealthy Black people masks it. He travels Europe, comfortable to be seen as white, until he decides to return to the US to identify with Black people symbolically through music. He glides back to being white when he realizes how much limit is placed on Black people. This inconstancy is as imposed on him by a racist social system as his racial classification.

James Weldon Johnson uses the journey motif to further undercut expectations about African American novels in his time. At a time that the blatantly brutal racist social system in the South had begun to drive many African Americans Northward, it might have been expected that ECM would stage the migration narrative neatly: a Black person comes North in search of better life, struggles integrating in the urban space, finds that social arrangements in the North are racist as they are in the South only less obviously so, comes to terms with Northern urban life and
moves on with life. On the contrary, the Ex-Colored Man’s own journey (unlike his mother’s, which implicates him) begins Southward, not Northward. The reason for this is that narrating the varied experiences of people considered colored across the United States during the period Johnson wrote could not be told without such structural upsets. To understand that the plight of Black people in the US persisted no matter their location, the narrator must not only undercut expectations but also constantly move. The novel itself journeys back and forth: it starts off as the story of Black boy who thinks himself white and ends as the story of a white man who used to identify as Black. Literary critic Brittney Michelle Edmonds considers this a master stroke of humor by a genius author. The next section explores this humorous quality of the novel.

**HUMOR IN ECM**

When the narrator announces that his narrative is about the practical joke he is playing on society, he is not kidding. The joke that *ECM* presents is not a laugh-out-loud type of joke, but an intellectual one which is supported by a network of subtle ironies that may be missed by an unsuspecting reader. Uncovering this requires first a few words about how humor works. Theorists of humor identify three ways of understanding humor. The first holds that humor arises from a feeling of superiority. The notion is that we laugh when we feel that we are better than the people that a joke is about. Most ethnic jokes—jokes about people of a different ethnic group than one’s own—emanate from feelings of superiority. A particularly apt example is the minstrel show, a performance in which white actors paint their face black and mimic what they consider the manneirstics of Black people to the delight of a white audience. A second explanation of how humor works is that we joke or laugh at jokes when we feel the need to relieve ourselves of pent-up emotions. By laughing for relief, we therefore spend the energy we would otherwise have used to repress unwanted feelings. This second idea about humor can exist cheek by jowl with the first. For example, cultural critics have noted that white performers did minstrel shows in order to relieve themselves of their fear of and hatred for Black people. The third notion about how humor works holds that humor occurs when reality contradicts our expectations in a given situation. Comedians expertly demonstrate this theory of humor by playing on well-known maxims. If, for instance, someone says with exaggerated pauses, “I came. I saw. And, I cowered,” they have upset common reception of a maxim and they elicit laughter when the audience realizes that they have been played. In other words, this third theory of humor points out that what makes us laugh is a recognition that a rite or ritual has been interrupted.

In this case, a ritual refers to the expected manner of doing things, and *ECM* does interrupt the expected structure of African American literature. The humor in *ECM* operates on three levels: the authorial, the textual, and the societal. At the authorial level, James Weldon Johnson makes a practical joke of his own by initially publishing the text anonymously. He intended for this move to draw interest to the text and cause his readers to pay attention. As mentioned in an earlier unit, he wrote to his wife about his suspicion that once people knew that it was written by a Black man, they would not be interested in it. Johnson was gratified that several reviewers thought it to be a life story.
At the textual level, *ECM* parades itself as an autobiography when it is really a novel. After setting up the reader to expect features associated with Black autobiographies, the text turns around and takes a path of its own. Brittney Michelle Edmonds points out that by doing so, the novel “challenges the ideological demand for Black narratives of escape and self-revelation.” In other words, whereas *ECM* starts with the “I was born” formula of slave narratives and the other autobiographies that immediately followed slave narratives, it progresses to tell an unexpected story of escape. This escape is not from Slavery but from anti-black oppression, not to freedom but to a world of white privilege. By undercutting reader’s expectations thus, the text draws attention to the vagueness of the definition of freedom for Black people in the period after the Civil War. At the time, *ECM* humorously challenged the thought that to be free was to no longer be counted as someone else’s slave and that Black people should be grateful that they were no longer slaves.

At the societal level, the Ex-Colored Man’s passing reveals the laughability of racial categorization. This has been explained sufficiently earlier. But Edmonds calls attention to a much deeper work of the joke in the narrator’s passing: the Ex-Colored Man’s prank reorders the biography of whiteness. Edmonds notes that the act reveals a symbolic biography of whiteness that portrays whiteness, not Blackness, as a tragedy. Here is what that means. When the narrator passes for and is taken for white, he proves that contrary to societal belief, white people are not born white. Instead, they become white by societal classification and therefore their true self, who they really are, is not known. Clearly put by Edmonds, “the only way to escape anti-black violence is to become white,” therefore whiteness is a result of the impulse to escape, whiteness is being constantly on the run from oppression. To quote Edmonds again, “the white man’s origin story cannot but emerge from Blackness.” And if whiteness is unstable, if it can be entered into as easily as the Ex-Colored Man does, it can be lost just as well. Therefore, although whiteness promises safety from oppression, it cannot keep the promise. Now, this is a complex argument that cannot be made in the format expected by readers of African American literature at the time. There is more to this, and it manifests in the characters portrayed in the novel.

**WHAT’S IN A NAME: NOTES ON CHARACTERIZATION**

This section is intended to supplement class discussion of characterization in *ECM*. Rather than offer a character-by-character analysis, this section focuses on two aspects of characterization in the novel. The first is the namelessness of characters and the second is the construction and significance of certain characters, chiefly Shiny and Red Head.

All of the major characters in *ECM* are nameless. The obvious explanation for this is that leaving characters nameless helps to protect the identity of the Ex-Colored Man. The narrator betrays this anxiety when he declines to mention the town in which he was born: “I was born in a little town of Georgia a few years after the close of the Civil War. I shall not mention the name of the town, because there are people still living there who could be connected to this narrative” (5). A less obvious explanation is that this move portrays the novel’s concerns about identity. Names are the quintessential markers of identity, so ridding characters of them helps to protect
the narrator’s identity. In spite of that, the characters are memorable, and the story is neatly told.

Several scholars have pointed out that the namelessness of characters in ECM further demonstrates Johnson’s ambition to break through the confines of competing literary and cultural traditions. There is the tradition of Slavery in which enslaved Black people were called by the names of slaveholders. There are records of enslaved people who refused to be named after slave owners, and here one thinks of the example of Kunta Kinte, in Alex Haley’s Roots, who famously rejects the name imposed on him by the white slaveholder who bought him. To reject the name reflects, in some measure, a rejection of the system of naming in Slavery. But ECM further underplays a common move by authors of slave narratives to change their names when they gained freedom. By refusing to name at all, Johnson remains non-committal to both traditions because it is more important to point out the instability of the methods by which society imposes identities on people.

When characters are not identified by their socio-biological roles such as mother and father, or their jobs (Pullman porter), or their wealth (the Millionaire), they are known by a description. This last strategy of identifying characters is the most humorous. Shiny and Red Head stand out here. In another ironic move of the novel, Shiny enables a criticism of blackface minstrelsy. He is introduced as if the blackness of his skin has an exaggerated quality to it: “One of the boys strongly attracted my attention from the first day I saw him. 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. It struck me at once to call him ‘Shiny face,’ or ‘Shiny eyes,’ or ‘Shiny teeth,’ and I spoke of him often by one of these names to the other boys” (10). This characterization of Shiny recycles blackface minstrelsy characters only to, again, disappoint readers at the time of ECM’s publication who associate such a characterization with the supposed buffoonery of Black people. On the contrary, Shiny turns out to be admirably intelligent and articulate. He does go on to become successful in his own right.

Red Head is, on the other hand, a big, clumsy white boy with “a head full of very red hair” (9). He is not intelligent, unlike Shiny, but his strength makes him a desirable friend to the narrator. Between them, they work out a symbiotic system for surviving school: the narrator helps Red Head with his schoolwork, and Red Head in turn defends him against bullies. By the time they leave high school, the three form a cluster of friendship that one may read as a social spectrum that puts the narrator in the middle. In terms of intelligence, Shiny shines brightest and Red Head is the dullest. The narrator declares himself intelligent enough. In terms of racial classification, Shiny obviously fits his classification as “black”, and Red Head fits his as “white.” The narrator, on the other hand, is racially ambiguous—again, located in the middle of both of them. Red Head’s whiteness plays out itself in its totality when as their time in high school ends, the three friends talk about their future. The narrator considers going to Atlanta University and Shiny plans to attend Amherst College. Red Head declares that he wants to be a banker rather than go to college, and he is sure to get a job in a bank through a family member of his.
Discussion and Close Reading Exercises

1. In what other texts have you observed humor? What function does humor serve in those texts?

2. On his way back to the US from his travels around Europe, the narrator strikes up a conversation with a Black doctor. The narrator declares the doctor as an open-minded colored man. As they talk, the narrator asks him why he seems hopeful that the plight of Black people will change. At a point in his response on page 79, he becomes ironic.
   - Carefully read the doctor’s response and identify the irony in it.
   - Note the purpose of the use of irony in the response.
   - Rewrite the response in plain English.
   - Exchange your draft response with a classmate.
   - Compare the draft you got with the doctor’s response and note the different effect each has.
   - Which of both forms of responses do you think more effectively serves the doctor’s purpose and why?

3. Complete the worksheet “Story Organizer.” Exchange your sheet with a classmate and discuss the difference in your responses.

ACTIVITIES AND PROJECT IDEAS

1. Ask students to write a short story about themselves in which they decide which characters to name and which not to name. Then have them read out their stories and explain to the class why they choose to name certain characters and leave others nameless.

2. Have students, in groups, develop a character-description chart. The chart features any five characters from ECM. For each character they should list five adjectives that describe them, based on what they know about them. The entire class will review characters and adjectives ascribed to them and ask each group to defend their choices of adjectives. Have them use the handout titled “Character Traits” for this task.

3. Divide the class into three groups and ask them to come up with examples of jokes that respectively exemplify the three approaches to humor: the superiority model, the relief theory, and the contradiction model. Their examples should come from films and other novels. Then have each group identify the aim of each example and discuss how each joke fulfills its function. The aim of this activity is to get students to begin to think more critically about the social function of jokes.

WORKS CITED


Edmonds, Brittney Michelle. “A Fugitive Strain: Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist and the Joke of Race.” African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Danielle

7. PREPARING TO MEET THE WRITER

Objectives

- To prepare students to make the most of the Annual Student Conference through active engagement
- To provide strategies for building student confidence, addressing concerns, and setting expectations for conference participation.

Conference Keynote Speaker: Jacqueline Goldsby

This year, the Great World Texts program will welcome scholar and editor of the Norton Critical Edition of James Weldon Johnson’s novel Jacqueline Goldsby to the Annual Student Conference. Students from across the state will have the opportunity to engage him in a conversation about thoughts on concerns that engaged them while reading his novel. This interaction is the core component of the Annual Student Conference.

On Meeting a Writer

Meeting the scholar of the text will be a thrilling experience for some of your students, but it might also prove a nerve-wracking one for some. To prepare students for this event, consider the following in advance of the conference: What are the expectations for students’ behavior? What kinds of questions should they ask and how will they present their work to the keynote speaker? How can they best prepare for this meeting? What should teachers do if students are nervous, disruptive or unprepared? The preparatory materials listed below will help you and your students to develop a deeper sense of Jacqueline Goldsby, as well as what to expect at the Annual Student Conference and how to prepare for it.

Points for Lecture:

- Prepare your students for meeting Jacqueline Goldsby
  Emphasize that, like all people, our keynote speaker could be nervous, excited, happy, sad, shy, in a good or bad mood, etc. Show clips of her doing interviews, and show the class her photograph so they can think of her as an individual from the start.

- Emphasize being courteous and respectful.
  Those students designated to ask questions during the keynote should always greet and thank Professor Goldsby, introduce themselves by name and school affiliation, and then ask a question. Encourage students to make eye contact, and to be polite and confident!
• **Help students avoid feelings of anxiety.**
Focus on the experience, not the “performance” or act of talking to Jacqueline Goldsby. Emphasize that she is coming to the conference precisely because she is interested in and excited about the ideas that students have developed as they’ve read ECM. Know that she thinks students have something to say that is worth hearing. Emphasize that this is a dialogue, meaning that student voices matter. She wants to hear from students as much as they want to hear from her. One of the reasons why she edited the Norton Edition was to affect the lives of students just like them!

• **Encourage them to be specific.**
Don’t just say: “I love this book!” or “I hate this book!” Students should be prepared to articulate what they loved most about it. In preparation, ask students to consider what was most inspiring, thought-provoking or challenging about the text.

• **Tips for asking questions.**
Avoid yes or no questions. Instead, ask questions that allow room for thought and interpretation. Consider, too, the “lead in” to the question. Students should give a little context to let the author know where they’re coming from. For example: “Why did you think Johnson wrote [X] this way?” would be a much more interesting question if the student first explained what about [X] is interesting or confusing to him or her.

• **Be prepared.**
Ask students to think about how Jacqueline Goldsby might react to a given question. Once you’ve chosen which questions to ask the keynote speaker, role-play possible answers as a class. Prepare a list of follow-up questions, too.

• **On decorum.**
Whether or not we meet in person, this conference will be a serious academic affair and a lot of planning has gone into this event by teachers, students, UW faculty and staff, etc. The people in attendance have spent months preparing for this event. Disruptive, discourteous or disrespectful behavior is unacceptable. Teachers whose students do not follow the decorum guidelines are expected to remove students immediately.

**Discussion Questions**

• How would you like to be treated (or not) if you were the keynote speaker? If you were a student from another school?

• What questions do you most want answered? What do you want to know about ECM and its relevancy today?
Assignments, Activities, and Project Ideas

- Hold a conference dress rehearsal. If your group of participating students is small, this might consist of each student giving a brief but formal presentation of her project, followed by a question and answer session. If your group of participating students is large, split them into two groups. Have one group present their projects first and the other second. Students will alternate between presenting and viewing, just as they will on the day of the official conference.

- Role-play meeting Jacqueline Goldsby. Have students prepared with questions, and practice asking and answering them. What questions got the best (or worst) answers? Why?

- Brainstorm productive questions. In small groups, students should write down as many questions as they can think of to ask Professor Goldsby. Then switch questions with other groups and select those which seem best and those which seem least effective. Use this as the basis for a discussion about how we decide if a question is “good” or “bad”? (Hint: the least effective questions are those that are too easy to answer, produce obvious answers, or could easily be answered by anyone reading the book.) You might have students revise with this discussion in mind, practicing how to construct a clear, direct and interesting question.