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Journey from a White to Sioux

Finding one’s identity and purpose in life could be very important for an individual, especially if the person seeks motivation for living. This is true for the protagonist John Dunbar in Kevin Costner’s film, *Dances with Wolves.*  Initially a Union soldier, John Dunbar goes to the Western frontier, meets people from the Sioux tribe, gradually learns and enjoys their lifestyle and customs, and finally assimilates into their tribe. During this process, he slowly realizes the life that he wants to live. Dunbar illustrates that identity is not necessarily inherited, as identity can be a choice and lead to a discovery of greater purpose and meaning in life.

John Dunbar is introduced as a hopeless soldier who gives up on his life when he finds out that his leg is about to be amputated. He realizes that if he loses his leg he will be of no use to anybody. Therefore, he chooses to die rather than live without a purpose and rides a horse alongside the Confederates front lines, daring them to end his life. However, his suicidal act distracts the Confederates and leads the Union soldiers to victory. His actions and decisions temporarily define him as a war hero. However, the status of a hero does not enforce his sense of duty as a Union soldier. Instead, he chooses to go to the army’s furthest and abandoned post, Fort Sedgwick. His desire to experience the western frontier in its uncolonized, natural state further complicates his purpose and identity as a Union soldier.

John Dunbar is a man who does not let anything, or anybody control his life. He does whatever he wants to do, accepting fully the consequences of his actions. For instance, when Dunbar notices some Sioux near his post, he becomes scared at first because of the fearful stories he has heard about the Indians. However, he does not let his fear control him and decides to visit their village, knowing all too well that they could immediately kill him. He communicates with the Sioux and slowly starts to enjoy their company. Although his identity as a Union soldier does not allow him to have friendly relationship with the Indians, he ignores what is expected of him and gets closer to the Sioux. This shows Dunbar as a man who lives for himself. Dunbar’s closeness to the Sioux demonstrates that he is slowly disregarding his original identity of a Union soldier and appreciating the Sioux culture.

Dunbar’s acceptance into the Sioux community can be noticed when Kicking Bird gives him a new Sioux name that reflects his character and a significantly intimate encounter with nature. John Dunbar is a man who enjoys nature and its creation. He even befriends a wolf at his post which he dubs Two Socks. Kicking Bird sees the relationship between the two and gives Dunbar a new name, Dances with Wolves. Dunbar got his original name when he was just a baby and had no say in it. However, he loves his new name and chooses to be recognized by that name, as he can perceive and embody a meaning in it. Dunbar says, “I had never really known who John Dunbar was. Perhaps because the name itself had no meaning. But as I heard my Sioux name being called over and over, I knew for the first time who I really was.” (Blake 100) The fact that he refers to himself in third person illustrates a disconnect from his former self. In addition, at one point in the movie, when Dunbar was being interrogated by the Union soldiers, he chooses to reply to them in Lakota: “I am Dances with Wolves…I have nothing to say to you. You are not worth talking to.” (Blake 118) This shows a drastic change in Dunbar’s language, to the extent that he chooses to no longer communicate in his native tongue. In the beginning, he was a Union soldier Lieutenant, John Dunbar, who considered Indians as savages and below white people. However, by this point he has transformed into a Sioux tribal member, Dances with Wolves, who is saying that whites are the ones not worth talking to because he has completely rejected his white identity

John Dunbar is a man who lives his life in his own way. For instance, one’s identity is closely related to one’s name, how one communicates, and one’s lifestyle, and it’s difficult for an ordinary person to disregard these aspects. However, Dunbar doesn’t care about those things and immediately accepts his new Sioux name and starts a new life. Therefore, John Dunbar shows that identity is not stable and proves that people do not need to live an identity they are born with. They can be whoever they choose to be and find purpose and meaning in their new lives.

Works Cited

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