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Essay One, Prompt 4
October 10, 2024

Navigating Duality: Marrant's Journey with Identity and Faith

John Marrant was born free. As a Black man growing up in the northeast of the United States, he was steeped in privileges of the time; education, apprenticeship, and literacy. Marrant's upbringing acquainted him with Northern ideals and cultural norms, which fostered a unique perspective on identity and community. However, his environment was also marked by the reality of racial discrimination and the complexities of being a free Black man in a predominantly white society. Marrant's *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* reflects the intricacy of his existence in America, as he simultaneously benefited from certain freedoms while being oppressed by institutional racial boundaries. From this tension, a dualistic worldview grew and molded Marrant's interactions with his own identity, as well as the cultural groups around him. His sense of right and wrong became entirely dominated by this worldview, resulting in his character-defining motivation to convert others to Christianity. Through anecdotal brushes with divine power, Marrant details the story of his life in service to his faith, not only providing a historical account but also a meticulously crafted appeal for his audience to seek salvation in Christianity. In John Marrant's narrative, Marrant's perception of sin is guided by binary oppositions, creating deep divisions in his understanding of familial relationships, civilization versus wilderness, and the need for faith.

Marrant's tenuous relationship with his family serves as the catalyst for his strong sense of right and wrong. While "Satan began to stir up [his] two sisters and brother", Marrant entrenched himself deeper in faith, resolving that it would be better "to die than to live among such people" (80). The persecution he endured from his family drove him closer and closer to

God, as he considered his siblings' actions to be larger than personal attacks; from his perspective, they were sinful and an insult to Christianity. In Marrant's eyes, his faith is the moral truth, thus the denial of this faith from members of his family is perceived by him to be objectively wrong. Rather than compromise his beliefs, Marrant decides to leave his home so he will no longer have to live with "such people". Distancing himself from his family marks a pivotal moment in Marrant's spiritual journey, as it affirms his binary understanding of morality. The more his family rejected his beliefs, the more Marrant took that rejection as validation of his righteousness. Ultimately, the existence of resistance proves to Marrant that the binary opposite choice, faith, is the objective moral truth. His departure from his family symbolizes a vow of unwavering piety and loyalty to the Christian faith. The choice to prioritize spiritual allegiance over familial ties created a sense of moral clarity that would guide his decisions and actions for years to come.

Emphasizing the importance of living a pious life, Marrant also draws contrasts between different members of his family, particularly his youngest sister. She is characterized as his only kind and understanding relation, as she realizes the abuse from their siblings to be wrong and unfair. Additionally, upon Marrant's return home, no one in his family recognizes him except his younger sister; their eldest sister "called her a foolish girl, and threatened to beat her" (90) for claiming Marrant to be their long-lost brother. The violent threats from their eldest sister contrasted with the younger sister's tearful insistence sets the contrast between the uneducated and cruel older sister, and the younger sister, who "came in from school, with a book under her arm" (90). This implication of the younger sister being educated contributes to the contrast between Marrant's two sisters: the gentle, considerate, and well-mannered sister is educated, while the cruel, disinterested sister is shown to lie and threaten her siblings. For the younger

sister, the “book under her arm” signifies her level of education, thus implying a more sophisticated level of thought. Her openness to Marrant’s exploration into Christianity is derived from her educational experience, and by setting her apart from their other siblings, Marrant conveys that rejecting Christianity is a quality of those who are uneducated and improper.

During his journey away from home, Marrant’s interactions with Native Americans motivate him to convert those who are wild or uncivilized to Christianity. His conversation with the king of their community allows him to read excerpts of the Bible, “and when [he] pronounced the name of Jesus, the particular effect it had upon [him] was observed by the king” (86). Marrant benefits from the king’s observation, as it offers him a chance to explain his reverence for the Lord. He sees the Native people as wild and uneducated about the word of God, but through sharing the teachings of the Bible, he hopes to bring them to civilization and piety. Marrant believes that by introducing Christianity, he can lead the Native Americans away from what he perceives as spiritual ignorance and guide them toward salvation. His efforts to convert the Natives are rooted in a sense of cultural superiority, as he considers Christianity, a hallmark of European influence on America, to be the correct form of worship. Ultimately, Marrant hopes to civilize the Natives by exposing them to Christianity, in the hopes that they will meet the European standards of civilization. This attempt to modify the Natives reflects the prevalent colonial mindset of Marrant’s time, which often conflated religious conversion with moral and social improvement.

Marrant’s efforts to convert the Native Americans prove to be victorious as he details the spiritual awakening that ripples through the community. When entreated to pray over the king’s daughter, he recounts that “the Lord appeared most lovely and glorious; the king himself was awakened, and the others set at liberty” (87). As a result of Marrant’s prayer, the king of the

Natives and the others in his community are all “set at liberty”, implying that exposure to Christianity is a way of liberating them from their traditional, uncivilized ways of life. After being “awakened”, the king treats Marrant with reverence, welcoming him as an important individual to their people. Whereas Marrant previously focused on the violent and wild aspects of the Native Americans, he suddenly depicts the Natives as his friends, kind and respectful beings who act in the service of God. His internalized binary opposition is blatant as he regards the Natives after their conversion; “the Lord made all my enemies to become my great friends” (87). In this admission, Marrant conveys his view that when the Natives were not Christian, they were inherently enemies, and his potential execution was simply an effect of their lack of faith. Once he has converted them, the Natives treat Marrant “like a prince” (87), offering him the high regard that he believes he is owed for providing them salvation.

Marrant attributes everything in his life to his unwavering faith, thanking God for life’s kindness, and simultaneously putting trust in Him to deliver him from pain. He asserts that faith is the only path to salvation, urging a man who owned slaves that if the enslaved had souls to be saved, they could not be saved “whilst they were ignorant of that God who made and preserved them” (92). This appeal to the man is rooted in Marrant’s belief that one cannot be saved if one does not have faith in God; salvation is a specific condition of belief, and from his perspective, a soul is damned if it does not believe. Those who do not follow Christianity are “ignorant” of the importance of committing oneself to religion, and Marrant aims to clear the enslaved people of this ignorance because of the need for them to have faith in order to be saved. Additionally, Marrant reacts strongly to signs of such ignorance. When his family “sat down to eat without asking the Lord’s blessing...” he “burst out into tears” (80). Openly weeping, Marrant entreats his family to pray before eating. His significant emotional reaction signifies how deeply he

believes that prayer is the only virtuous right; In failing to pray, his family rejects God's provision of food, which he views as sinful.

In *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black*, Marrant presents a worldview defined by sharp binaries, particularly moral right versus wrong. These oppositions shape his perception of identity, community, and purpose, ultimately determining how he navigates the complexities of the American social landscape. Marrant's decision to distance himself from his family, his efforts to civilize Native Americans through religious conversion, and his unwavering belief that faith is the path to salvation reveal his deep commitment to this dichotomous worldview. Marrant's narrative ultimately reflects not only his spiritual belief but also the broader colonial and religious mindset of the time, where Christian faith and cultural superiority were intertwined. Through his firm dedication to his faith, Marrant reveals how influential religion can be in defining a person's moral and personal convictions.

Marrant, John, and W. Aldridge. *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John*

Marrant: A Black ... Printed by Gilbert and Plummer, 1785.