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ENGL 379

Professor Jefferess

Critical Engagement Assignment

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Re-Righting *Black Orpheus*

I would like to begin this essay by first acknowledging my place as a twenty-three-year-old white male from the United States. My goal among fulfilling the prompt of this essay is to elevate the voice of Frantz Fanon and deconstruct the struggle he speaks about in this text. Before I summarize the Fanon’s critical reclamation of black existence and experience, I would like to highlight this excerpt from the text:

There is nothing more disagreeable than to hear: ‘You’ll change, my boy; I was like that too when I was young…You’ll see, you’ll get over it’ (Fanon 114).

The chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” from *Black Skin, White Masks* by Franz Fanon contains within its intricate exposé of black subjectivity a reclamation of the racialized black experience and the meaning of black existence. In this vein, Fanon reclaims what it means to be racialized as black by criticizing Sartre’s Black Orpheus and establishes important groundwork for deconstructing racist ideologies.

The moment in the narrative where Fanon announces, “I put the white man back in his place… and hurled in his face: accommodate me as I am; I’m not accommodating anyone… The white man was visibly growling. His reaction was a long time coming. I had won…”, is where Fanon’s reclamation begins (110-111). This announcement follows the speaker’s realization that he is not subhuman because of his race and that his race had a rich history and culture and—using the white man’s rhetoric— “had already been working silver and gold 2,000 years ago” (Fanon 109). The chapter continues to reveal that this perceived victory is but a mirage when another speaker interjects and counters this declaring, “Lay aside your history, your research into the past, and try to get in step with our rhythm” where the speaker’s rhythm is “mastering integrals and atoms to industrialize and dominate with science” (Fanon 111). At this point, Fanon has been robbed of his previous victory of intellect to which he says, “they were countering my rationality with the ‘true rationality’… when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me” (Fanon 111). This prompts a reveal of section from *Black Orpheus* where Sartre claims, “The Negro creates an anti-racist racism… without a doubt the most ardent of apostles of Negritude are at the same time militant Marxists” and that “Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction as a transition or a means not the result or the ultimate goal” (Fanon 111-112). Fanon then expresses his dismay, “...they had robbed me of my last chance” and he divulges a criticism of Sartre’s *Black Orpheus*, highlighting how its marginalize people by means of “sapping the intellectual wellspring of intellectualized black existence dry” (Franz 113). The narrative then ricochets between a metaphysical representation of the back-and-forth argument between Sartre’s faction and Fanon’s, “they argue our assertions do not take into consideration the historical process… we will reply; the black experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro—there are *many* black men” (114-115). Fanon continues sparring with Sartre’s ideology, emphasizing that it ultimately dehumanizes him for being a black man, “Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man…A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those white men, fingering their guns, can’t be wrong. I am guilty. I don’t know what of, but I know I’m a wretch” (117-118). The chapter solemnly concludes with Fanon weeping, knowing that he is not responsible for his actions, but still held accountable for them.

“So here I was poet of the world. The white man had discovered poetry that had nothing poetic about it. The soul of the white man was corrupted, and as a friend who taught in the United States told me: “The Blacks represent a kind of insurance for humanity in the eyes of the Whites. When the Whites feel they have become too mechanized, they turn to the Coloreds and request a little human sustenance.” At last I had been recognized; I was

no longer a nonentity” (108).

“I felt they had robbed me of my last chance… ‘The generation of young black poets has just been dealt a final blow’” (112).

“Black Orpheus marks a date in the intellectualization of black existence. And Sartre’s mistake was not only to seek the source of the spring, but in a certain way to drain the

spring dry” (113).

“Still regarding consciousness, black consciousness is immanent in itself. I am not a potentiality of something; I am fully what I am… My black consciousness does not claim to be a loss. It *is*. It merges with itself” (114).

“But they will argue, our assertions do not take into consideration the historical process” (114).

“Precisely, we will reply; the black experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro—there are *many* black men” (115).

“From time to time you feel like giving up. Expressing the real is an arduous job. But when you take it into your head to express existence, you will very likely encounter nothing but the nonexistent… when I endeavored to grasp my being, Sartre, who remains ‘the Other,’ by naming me shattered my last illusion. While I was telling him:

My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral

It reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil

It reaches deep int o the blazing flesh of the sky

It pierces opaque prostration with its patience (116).

“[Sartre] reminded me that my negritude was nothing but a weak stage” (116).

“Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned. Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man (117).

“My shout rings out more violently: I am a nigger, I am a nigger, *I am a nigger*” (117).

“A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing. Sin is black as virtue is white. All those white men, fingering their guns, can’t be wrong. I am guilty. I don’t know what of, but I know I’m a wretch” (118).

“Like this old woman who begs us on her knees to tie her to the bed:

‘I just know, Doctor. Any minute that thing will take hold of me.’

‘What thing?’

‘Wanting to kill myself. Tie me down, I’m scared.’” (118).

“The black man is a toy in the hands of the white man. So in order to break the vicious circle, he explodes” (119).

“Not responsible for my acts, at the crossroads between Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep” (119).

1. **Analyze and Assess the idea/argument you identified in the reading in relation to other ideas or arguments in the course,** including concepts, theories, class discussions, and cultural texts/examples (e.g. poems, films, stories, novel, etc.)

**Reclaiming what it means to exist as a black person.**

**Re-righting white assessments of black existence.**

Displaying what it means to exist as a black man as a result of white categorizations.

Advocating for understanding group existence.

Colonialism as an Event, Structure, Experience, and Relation.

Outside overdetermination

Fanon, Frantz “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin, White Masks*