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23 May 2017

The Unforgettable Literature of *Between the World and Me*

A work of literature is considered as an art form that contains artistic or intellectual value, leaving a superior or lasting artistic merit in the world. Throughout human history, millions of literatures, with different genres and written in different languages, have been publically published, distributed, and read by the world’s population. Not only the books provide readers with knowledge in politics, social structure, history, and religion, some of those literatures have also left a profound impact upon the readers and the society. The books prompt individuals to reflect and think, and eventually, those unforgettable works on literature have become ingrained in part of the world’s culture. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, written in the form of a letter to his teenaged son, is an exemplar of an unforgettable work of literature. *Between the World and Me*, though narrates in first-person perspective, is an unforgettable literature conveys a brutal and poignant message which has converged the readers to reflect on the black history, racism, and their personal beliefs and life choices. *Between the World and Me* has drew readers to reflect on the history of African Americans through the integration of the struggle of the black population, history of slavery, the conception of race in American culture, and the contribution of the African Americans to America’s prosperity. Additionally, the book brings upon issues associated with racism through thorough explanation about relationship between race and racism, as well as vivid depiction of brutal policing, social ignorance against the black population, social distance between white and black, and black parent wisdom teaching. Coates’ book has also impacted readers, regardless of race, through the numerous life lessons regarding human rights and equality, and the meaning and purpose of human lives. *Between the World and Me*, through its incorporation of historical, social, and personal contexts, is an utmost unforgettable work of literature that has elicited numerous impacts upon the readers, the American society, and the American culture.

*Between the World and Me* proceeds chronologically through the author’s own experiences and development. Ta-Nehisi Coates incorporates a variety of historical aspects and influences while telling his personal stories.

Throughout the book, Coates recalls the past struggles that the black population had faced. Half way through the book, Coates explains the origin of the name of his son, and reflects on the history behind the name:

The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body. He died in captivity, but the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp…. We are, as Derrick Bell once wrote, the “faces at the bottom of the well.” (Coates 68).

As Coates mentions, his son is named after Samori Touré, a military leader who founded a powerful kingdom in West Africa and resisted French colonial expansion in the late 19th century. (*Britannica*). Although Samori died in captivity, his struggle freed many other Africans from combating against western civilizations and white power. The meaning behind Coates’ son not only reveals the struggle that hero Samori went through, but also memorizes the struggle of the black population throughout the 19th century. Admittedly, a series of civil right movements that aimed to free the Africans has taken place over time. However, the past struggle should always be remembered because black suffrage continues due to the conceptual ideology that the black population “faces the bottom of the well”.

Additionally, Coates references to a number of historical accounts of slavery. More than halfway through the book, Coates exemplifies how African Americans were being treated as slaves and material interests by the early president, by the vast American population, by the rich white men in the Mississippi River Valley. Coates states that:

At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies—cotton—was America’s primary export. The richest men in America lived in the Mississippi River Valley, and they made their riches off our stolen bodies. Our bodies were held in bondage by the early presidents. Our bodies were traded from the White House by James K. Polk. Our bodies built the Capitol and the National Mall… “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery,” declared Mississippi as it left the Union, “the greatest material interest of the world.” (Coates 101).

After America became independent from the Great Britain, the country’s early presidents, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James K. Polk, all traded and sold slaves for other goods and prosperities. Furthermore, those presidents even located the national capital in a slave territory. (“Slaveholding President”). During the early age of America, the prosperity of the society and economy was built upon the torture and death of the black bodies. In the latter part of this quotation, Coates’ use of repetitive clause “our bodies” highlights the series of events that involve humiliation and discrimination against the black bodies. The white Americans traded the African American slaves to make profits, render services, and build roads and cities. It is clear that slavery has been woven into the American culture since the 1800s. More severely, the farmers in the Southwest used African Americans as cheap labor to achieve their American Dreams.

By 1839 the Mississippi slave-worked cotton plantation had demonstrated its superiority as a unit for producing the great southern people. To be sure, thousands of farmers were raising cotton in Mississippi as their principal cash crop on a small scale and were doing so profitably…Whenever the circumstances permitted, farmers purchased slaves in order to enlarge the scope of their farming operations…A planation ranging in size from 1,000 to 1,500 acres and worked by a crew numbering from 75 to 100 able-bodied field hands was generally regarded as ideal. (Moore 17).

As Moore and Coates mentioned, the privileged white Americans in the Mississippi River Valley were selling and purchasing the black population to plant cottons in order to make money. The black population were slaves. They were treated as a type of cheap labor, an equipment to generate profits, and a way to enlarge the scope of cotton operations. Moore’s application of logos, “75 to 100 able-bodied field hands was generally regarded as ideal”, reveals the significant amount of African American population being mistreated. Clearly, in the eyes of the white Americans, the African Americans were slaves, useful resources, and “the greatest material interest of the world”.

The catalyst for slavery is the ideology of race. Coates asserts that the white Americans’ notion in white supremacy stimulates slavery and racism, as explained by Grizzle: “With regard to the history of race in America and its impact on whites, Coates maintains that, for whites to comfortably enjoy their ill-begotten gains, they must believe that they are deserving of their current prosperity in ways that others, especially blacks, are not.” (Grizzle). Coates strongly believes that there is a notion of race that persists in white Americans’ minds. This conception of race has urged the white Americans to believe that they deserve their gains and prosperity in ways that the African Americans are not. Gradually, this ideology of race triggers white supremacy. As white supremacy dominates white Americans’ notions, the belief that the white population ranks higher than the black population begins to ingrain in the American culture. Because of this popular belief, oppression and segregation against the black citizens starts to occur. What is more unfortunate is that the white Americans never realize that they are violating social justice when they are utilizing the bodies of the African Americans.

Another aspect of *Between the World and Me* is that Coates frequently emphasizes on the African Americans’ contribution towards America’s grandeur and power, and how the American society is incapable of recognizing the nation’s loss while embracing the nation’s gain. Towards the end of the book, Coates visits the mother of his African American friend, Prince Jones, who was killed in a manslaughter. As Coates recalls, “She compared America to Rome. She said she though the glory days of this country had long ago passed, and even those glory days were sullied: They had been built on the bodies of others. ‘And we can’t get the message,’ she said. ‘We don’t understand that we are embracing our death.’” (Coates 144). As Jones’ mother mentions, since the beginning of the nation’s independence, the glory and economic prosperity of the country has been achieved through slavery, as well as the exploitation and oppression of the black bodies. Unfortunately, the white population cannot imagine the struggle of the black population or recognize the perpetrators of the destruction of the black bodies are themselves.

As explained in the aforementioned paragraphs, *Between the World and Me* manifests multiple aspects of historical context, specifically relating to the struggle of the black Americans, the history and catalyst of slavery, and the black population’s contribution to the nation’s development. By referencing a number of historical context, Coates vividly portrays how white Americans exploited the African Americans to make money and build their society. Through the revelation of his perspective on white Americans’ notion, Coates analyzes the impact of ideology on slavery. Overall, Coates has encompassed a range of historical aspects throughout his book, encouraging the readers to reflect on the history relates to the African Americans.

Although classified as a series written for young adults, the Harry Potter series explores a number of significant social themes that have profoundly left a social impact on the entire world, regardless of age. Racism is one of the main social issues that Rowling combats throughout the Harry Potter series – she underlines two forms of anti-racism that are used to help eradicate the social issue: multicultural anti-racism and social justice anti-racism. Rowling also artistically communicates a number of important life messages through her writing that left a significant impact on people’s lives and lifestyle. From the act of confession to the reality behind dreams, Rowling shows readers what it is like to live a life with integrity.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samory>

<http://hauensteincenter.org/slaveholding/>