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The Unforgettable Literature of *Between the World and Me*

A work of literature is a literary form that features universal values that can leave a superior or lasting influence in the world. Throughout human history, millions of pieces of literature, in differing genres and languages, have been published, distributed, and comprehended across the world. Literature not only provides readers with knowledge in politics, social structure, history, and religion, but also leaves a profound impact upon readers and society. An unforgettable work of literature prompts individuals to ponder and reflect, and eventually, the literature itself becomes ingrained into the world’s culture. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, written in the form of a letter to Coates’ teenaged son, is an example of an unforgettable piece of literature. *Between the World and Me*, narrated in first-person perspective, conveys a brutal and poignant message that challenges readers to think about black history, social issues surrounding racism, and their personal beliefs and life choices. *Between the World and Me* guides readers to reflect on African American history through the integration of black struggles, the history of slavery, the notion of race in American culture, and African Americans’ contributions to society. Additionally, the book introduces issues associated with racism through exploring the relationship between race and racism, as well as the vivid depiction of police brutality, parenting in the black community, social ignorance about the black population, and the social distance between white and black communities. Coates’ book also impacts readers, regardless of race, on a personal level through numerous life lessons regarding human rights and the meaning of human lives. Through its incorporation of historical, social, and personal contexts, *Between the World and Me* is an utterly unforgettable work of literature that impacts readers, society, and the world’s culture in numerous ways.

**Historical Context**

*Between the World and Me* proceeds chronologically through the author’s own life story. Ta-Nehisi Coates incorporates a variety of historical aspects while unfolding his personal experience and development, and this makes the nature of the book unforgettable.

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates recalls past struggles the black population had faced. During the 19th century, European countries realized that Africa had mineral and agricultural wealth that Europe could exploit. The European powers made incursions into Africa, and they brought their vast military, including newly developed machine guns, along with them. The black population resisted the European colonization; they fought for their land, their freedom, and their kingdoms (Davies 2010). Halfway through *Between the World and Me*, Coates explains the origin of the name of his son, and discloses the period of struggle 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 explained, 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 (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Although Samori died in captivity, his struggle freed many other Africans in the combat against western civilization and white power. The meaning behind Coates’ son’s name not only reveals the struggle that Samori went through, but also personifies the black population’s struggles throughout history. The black population’s past struggles should always be remembered, as there is not likely to be an end to black suffering in the near future, predominately due to the influence of white-dominated society and the racial discrimination instilled in white culture.

Additionally, Coates refers to a number of historical accounts of slavery. Just over halfway through the book, Coates explains how African Americans were treated as slaves and material possessions by the early Presidents, the government, and 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 gained independence, the country’s early presidents, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James K. Polk, all traded and sold slaves for goods, lands and prosperities. Furthermore, those presidents located the national capital in a slave territory and hired slaves to build the capital. (*Presidential & Leadership Studies*). During the early years of America, the prosperity of society and the economy was built upon the torture and death of black bodies. In the latter part of this quotation, Coates uses repetition of the clause “our bodies” to highlight the list of events that involved humiliation and discrimination of the black population. White Americans used African American slaves to make profits, render services, and build roads and cities. It is clear that slavery has been woven into American culture since America’s inception. More severely, the farmers in the Old Southwest used African Americans as cheap labor to achieve their American Dream, as John Hebron Moore declares in his book “The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770-1860”:

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 mention, in order to make money, privileged white Americans who lived in the Mississippi River Valley during the 19th century were selling and purchasing African American slaves to plant cotton. The black population was treated as a source of cheap labor, equipment to generate profits, and a way to enlarge the scope of cotton operations. Moore’s application of the statistics, “75 to 100 able-bodied field hands was generally regarded as ideal”, reveals the miserable fact that an immense amount of African Americans was mistreated and enslaved. Clearly, in the eyes of white Americans, the African Americans were nothing more than a form of useful resources and “the greatest material interest of the world”.

The catalyst for slavery is the notion or belief system the white society has about the black race. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates asserts that white Americans’ notion of white supremacy stimulates slavery and racism. Coates’ proposition is well explained by Gary Grizzle in his review of the book: “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 2). Coates strongly believes that there is a negative perception of the black race that persists in the minds of white Americans. This concept is a form of white supremacy that was developed at the onset of slavery; it has urged white Americans to believe that they deserve their gains and success in ways that African Americans do not. As white supremacy dominated society’s belief system, the idea that white Americans ranks higher than black Americans became instilled within American culture. Due to this belief system, oppression and segregation against black citizens continue to occur. The most horrifying thought is that even in modern society, some white Americans are hardly ever ashamed of violating social justice and utilizing black Americans.

Another historical aspect of *Between the World and Me* is the reference to African Americans’ contributions toward America’s grandeur and power. While Americans embrace their financial gains and success, they seem incapable of recognizing the black contributions and sacrifices which made their gains possible. Towards the end of the book, Coates recounts his visit to the mother of his past African American friend Prince Jones. As Coates recalls, “She compared America to Rome. She said she thought 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 mentioned, America’s glory and economic prosperity has been achieved through slavery, and the exploitation and oppression of black Americans. Unfortunately, some of the white population cannot imagine, or recognize themselves as the perpetrators of the black population’s struggle.

*Between the World and Me* references multiple aspects of historical context, especially context relating to the struggles of the black population, the history of slavery, the catalyst for slavery, and African American contributions to the nation’s development. By referencing a number of historical contexts, Coates vividly portrays how society exploited the black population to generate resources and wealth. Through revealing his perspective on white supremacy, Coates analyzes society’s impact on slavery. Coates encompasses a wide range of historical aspects throughout *Between the World and Me*, challenging the readers to reflect on black history and making the book an unforgettable piece of literature.

**Social Impact**

*Between the World and Me* discusses topics surrounding numerous social themes that profoundly impact readers and society. Racism is one of the most significant social issues that Coates addresses within the book. Coates details his personal account of social behaviors and societal concepts associated with racism, such as black-on-black crime, black-parent wisdom teaching, social ignorance about the black population, social distance between whites and blacks, and the relationship between race and racism.

Scattered through the 20th century, several civil rights movements[[1]](#footnote-1) that aimed to secure freedoms for African Americans took place in America. However, racism still remains a prominent issue in American society. Racism has elicited many societal phenomena, and one of these phenomena is black-on-black crime[[2]](#footnote-2). After Coates graduated from Howard University, he received tragic news about the death of his African American friend Prince Jones. Prince Jones was a charismatic, wealthy, accomplished Christian and a young father. Jones was killed by a black police officer, who believed Jones to be a drug-dealing suspect. Towards the middle of the book, Coates illustrates that the murder of Prince Jones is a result of black-on-black crime:

There is a great deception in this. To yell “black-on-black crime” is to shoot a man

and then shame him for bleed. And the premise that allows for these killing fields—the reduction of the black body—is no different than the premise that allowed for the murder of Prince Jones. The Dream of acting white, of talking white, of being white, murdered Prince Jones as sure as it murders black people in Chicago with frightening regularity. Do not accept the lie. Do not drink from poison. The same hands that drew red lines around the life of Prince Jones drew red lines around the ghetto (Coates 111).

Coates argues that Prince Jones was killed by a police officer because the police thought Jones’ appearance was suspicious. However, the police who killed Jones was also an African American. The death of Prince Jones reveals society’s bias towards white culture. The dream of becoming white is one of the most vital factors that leads to the death of African Americans. Most Americans of all races judge black people based on common stereotypes imposed upon the black population. The stereotypical belief that black people are poor and suspicious has become a part of the American culture. This belief is influential and dangerous; it impacts the judgements of all Americans and even the entire world’s population. More terribly, Americans try to protect affluent and predominantly black communities through oppressive policing. In Judith Andrews’ article about black-on-black crime, Andrews echoes Coates’ opinions regarding the societal influence of brutal policing and black-on-black crime:

Most of the conferees agreed that the least acceptable method of combatting crime in Black communities is the cry for more repressive police measures. This is left to the advocacy of the "law-and-order" types, both Black and white. The Black community has had its fill of police shooting down bicycle thieves and arbitrarily stopping Black men as robbery suspects. On the other hand, it seems that many Black residents are tired of sleepless nights and triple-locked doors (Andrews 4).

Andrews’ words “black residents are tired of sleepless nights and triple-locked doors” reveal the fear among the African Americans themselves. Because of the dream of becoming white and acting white, black suburbanites who reside in black neighborhoods are concerned with their possessions and safety. The black population is known for their high homicide rate (Andrews 3). The concern towards the black population’s safety has led to notoriously repressive police measures that are enforced to combat crime in black communities. From “arbitrarily stopping black men as robbery suspects” to “shooting down bicycle thieves”, many black residents are killed by black police officers due to their suspicious demeanor. The dream of being part of white society has made African Americans become afraid of people of their own race. Implicitly, this dream is the intrinsic motivation for black-on-black crime.

Black-on-black crime uncovers the underlying danger associated with being a part

of the black population. In *Between the World and Me*, the author underlines the harsh conditions the black population is facing to fully display the unique style of parenting in black communities. The illustration of black parenting resonates well with black communities. In fact, as stated by Thabiti Lewis, not only Coates and his parents, but also many black parents explain the danger of being destroyed by the white-dominated society with their children. “The emotional tone in print is what he has shared with his own son; it is what I have shared with my own daughters, my parents with me, and Coates’s own father with him. This, and the familiar coming-of-age truth that every black child receives from sane parents” (Lewis 2). As racism develops with the American culture, the deconstruction of black bodies has grown into a heritage. Under the influence of racism, it is the norm for the African-American parents to warn their children of the dangers of society with the aim of teaching their kids to protect themselves from social injustice. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates discloses his personal experience with black parenting. Since Coates was young, his father told him that if Coates wasn’t beaten by his father then Coates would be beaten by the police. After Coates became a father, Coates conveys the same message to his son. The racial parenting divide is a consequence of the deep-rooted racism that exists within American society. Coates’ depiction of black parenting provokes readers to reflect on the harm and risk that racism has brought to the black Americans.

In *Between the World and Me*, the author also discusses society’s ignorance towards the difficulties encumbering African Americans. Towards the middle of the book, the author tells his son that “You would be a man one day, and I could not save you from the unbridgeable distance between you and your future peers and colleagues, who might try to convince you that everything I know, all the things I’m sharing with you here, are an illusion, or a fact of a distant past that need not be discussed” (Coates 90). According to Coates, white Americans live in their own dream where everyone is equal and happy. However, white Americans barely realize that millions of African Americans have sacrificed their lives to build that dream. Only a few white Americans have experienced or acknowledged the struggles of African Americans. Many of the white population believe that their country is peaceful and equal, and they refuse to accept the existence of any form of injustice within their country. To an extent, some white Americans are not even ashamed of neglecting the harsh conditions that other races are facing; they are willfully blind to the hardship plaguing African Americans (Coates 10-11).

In addition to the social behavior surrounding racism, Coates narrates a variety of the black population’s experiences to reveal the social distance between the black population and the white population. Near the end of the book, Coates narrates an account of an event that happened to Prince Jones’ mother:

My mother and I were going into the city. We got on the Greyhound bus. I was behind my mother. She wasn’t holding my hand at the time and I plopped down in the first seat I found. A few minutes later my mother was looking for me and she took me to the back of the bus and explained why I couldn’t sit there. We were very poor… and the images I had of white America were from going into the city and seeing who was behind the counter in the stores and seeing who my mother worked for (Coates 137).

This personal experience uncovers the latent social distance between the black population and the white population. Though there isn’t any sign on the bus that allocates the seating by passenger’s race, African Americans naturally draw themselves away from white Americans because they believe the white Americans hold more rights and power. The bus is a representation of American society. The white Americans sitting in the front of the bus are the elites of America who belong to top category of the social class hierarchy. Meanwhile, the African Americans, who sit at the back of the bus, are at the bottom of the social class structure. Like a pyramid, the top of the social class hierarchy wouldn’t exist without the foundation at the bottom. Similarly, the prosperity held by white Americans would only be a fantasy without the devotion and sacrifice of African Americans.

In *Between the World and Me*, the authoralso explores the relationship between race and racism. As explained by Joseph Wood in his academic journal “Reading Baltimore in the Breach”, “For Coates, ‘race is a child of racism, not the father’ (p.9), and creating race by whites [is] a means of creating a separate identity for themselves and in so doing denying the right to nonwhites to secure and govern one's own, dark-skinned body” (Wood 2). In the beginning of the book, Coates states that racism has led to racial segregation. Coates believes that the process of naming “white Americans” and “black Americans” has been a matter of hierarchy. Because society believed in the preeminence of a certain skin color, racial differences were created (Coates 9). Throughout the rest of the book, Coates explains how racism pressures people to view each race differently, prompts people to distinguish themselves by their skin color, and triggers inhumane and unfair actions between races such as lynching and redlining.

*Between the World and Me* incorporates a range of social issues surrounding race and racism, such as black-on-black crime, black-parent wisdom teaching, social ignorance against the black population, social distance between whites and blacks, and the relationship between race and racism. The author tells unpopular and unconventional truths through his unfiltered voice, leading the readers to reflect on what he says and contributing to the book’s unforgettable nature.

**Personal Impact**

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates emphasizes the foolishness of believing that a black person can end racism and assimilate into the white society. Coates incorporates numerous life lessons regarding human rights and the meaning of human lives. Coates conveys that instead of hoping that others will treat us equally, we should live and fight for ourselves, our ancestors, and the future of our race. *Between the World and Me* has impacted me on a personal level, pushing me to think about the rights and freedoms I hold as well as the purpose of my life.

One of the most vital lessons that the author conveys is the value of each human being and the rights each human being holds. More than halfway through his book, Coates instructs his son that “You existed. You matter. You have value. You have every right to wear your hoodie, to play your music as loud as you want. You have every right to be you. And no one should deter you from being you. You have to be you. And you can never be afraid to be you” (Coates 113). In modern days, many people doubt the value of their existence to the society. In elementary school, I often questioned what my existence meant to other people and how I mattered. Coates tells me that all human beings have their precious value due to the rights and freedoms they possess. All humans, regardless of race, generation, or nationality, are equal. All humans have the right to be themselves and should never be afraid of being themselves. Coates’ message with respect to human value encourages me to cherish my existence. Although I am as small as a piece of dust in the vast universe, my rights matter, my freedoms matter, and my future matters. As Coates mentioned to his son, no one should deter me from finding my path, and from my voyage into the future. When I was in middle school, I never thought about my career aspirations. I simply wanted to follow the mainstream, be whoever my parents asked me to be. Fortunately, I came across the opportunity to discover my passion when I joined the robotics team. Once I used physics to determine gear ratios, held a drill for the first time, and jumped into the pit to fix a robot, I was hooked with the marvel of science, engineering, and technology. Less than a year ago, I had to make a tough decision. Standing at an intersection in my life, I had to pick between being the person my parents wanted me to be and being the person I wanted to be. Ultimately, I didn’t let my parents intervene in my future decision, and I am so glad that I chose to pursue a field I enjoy exploring. Coates’ life suggestion to his son resonates with my own beliefs, and I can find shadows of myself in the pages of the book.

Coates also taught me what I should fight for and the meaning and purpose of my life. At the end of his book, Coates concludes his view on racism and guides his son, as well as me, to struggle for our ancestors, ourselves, and our future:

Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all (Coates 151).

For Coates, his son, and the rest of the African American population, “Dreamer” symbolizes the white population, who live in their own bubble, willfully blind to the discrimination that exists within the modern society. Coates compares the white population with the black population, and highlights that African Americans shouldn’t hope for an end to racism because racism has been woven into American culture. Coates intends to tell his son and all African American readers that they should struggle for themselves and the black population instead of the extinction of racial injustice. For white American readers, Coates tries to deliver the message that they are building a society upon the deconstruction of black bodies, and that they need to realize that they are embracing the deaths of others while they are enjoying their own happiness, success, and prosperity. On a personal level, Coates inspires me to fight for my dreams and my future. While doing so, I should learn from the past: the struggles of my ancestors and the struggle of my family. Instead of hoping for others to change their view of me, I should focus on my own self-development, my acquisition of knowledge and skills, and my integrity, morality and beliefs.

Although I don’t belong to the African American society, the life lessons carried throughout *Between the World and Me* have driven me to hold on my values, rights, success, and dreams. It is undeniable that this personal impact contributes to the book’s unforgettable nature.

*Between the World and Me* is an extraordinary work of unforgettable literature that has left a profound impact upon its readers and society. As Coates narrates his experience chronologically, he emphasizes historical context, including the struggles of the black population, the history of slavery, the notion of race, and African Americans’ contribution to America’s development. *Between the World and Me* also embodies discussions about longstanding issues that have shaped society. In particular, the social behaviors associated with racism, such as black parenting, black-on-black crime, are portrayed in the book. Additionally, the book explores the relationship between race and racism, and displays the social distance between the white and the black. Lastly, a number of Coates’ life messages communicated through the text provoke readers, including myself, to reflect on their own values, dreams, and future aspirations. The objective of this essay was to analyze the remarkable impact of *Between the World and Me*, specifically the book’s incorporation of historical and social context and its historical, social, and personal impact. Ta-Nehisi Coates’ intent in *Between the World and Me* was to convey the message that the white population is endowed with the authority to destroy the black population. Additionally, Coates strived to convince his son that racism has already been woven into American culture, and therefore, it is futile to believe that a black person can end racism and assimilate into the white society. *Between the World and Me* provides the readers with a pessimistic but realistic assessment of contemporary society. Flipping through the pages and pondering, criticizing, and feeling the historical, social, and personal context which the book addresses, one can conclude that *Between the World and Me* is a piece of phenomenally unforgettable literature.

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1. In December, 1955, African Americans refused to ride buses in Montgomery, Alabama, to protest segregated seating. This event is regarded as America’s first large-scale demonstration against segregation (“Montgomery Bus Boycott.” *History.com*). In 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed to mobilize local communities in nonviolent protests to expose injustice and demand federal action (*Khan Academy*). And in 1961, a group of African American and white civil rights activists launched the Freedom Rides to protest segregation in interstate bus terminals (“Freedom Rides.” *History.com*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Black-on-black crime is a type of crime where the perpetrator and victim of homicides are both black (Tan 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)