



The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

James Weldon Johnson

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The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man by James Weldon Johnson is the fictional account of a young biracial man, referred to only as the “Ex-Colored Man”, living in post-Reconstruction era America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He lives through a variety of experiences, including witnessing a lynching, that convince him to “pass” as white to secure his safety and advancement, but he feels as if he has given up his dream of “glorifying” the black race by composing ragtime music.

The Ex-Colored Man’s mother protected him as a child and teenager. Because of the money provided by his father, she had the means to raise him in an environment more middle-class than many blacks could enjoy at the time. After the boy’s mother dies, he is a poor orphan and subject to harsh conditions.

He adapted very well to life with lower-class blacks, and was able to move easily among the classes of black society. During this carefree period, he taught music and attended church, where he came in contact with upper-class blacks. Living in an all black community, he discovers and describes three classes of blacks: the desperate, domestic service, and the independent workman or professional.

The Ex-Colored Man believed the desperate class consists of poor blacks who loathe the whites. The domestic worker class work as servants to whites. Artisans and skilled workers, as well as black professionals, had little interaction with the whites. Many white readers, who viewed all blacks as a stereotype of a single class, were unfamiliar with class distinctions described among blacks.

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