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AP Language and Composition Period 7

26 August 2018

The Beautiful Struggle

The concept of manhood has been one of interest and misconception for centuries. The connection of dominance and masculinity has resulted in toxicity to those who desire it.

Ta-Nehisi Coates was not spared from this reality, as his memoir The Beautiful Struggle aims to tell the tale of his hardships in coming to manhood. Coates, while reliving one of the most difficult times in his life, encourages readers to break free from the crowd and the stereotypical definition of “a real man”. His lyrical storytelling, poignant retelling of emotional events, and historical allusion of times in which true manhood was exuded, all eloquently combine to create a colorful portrait of Coates’ adolescence and a meaningful message for future generations.

The focus upon Coates and his eldest brother, Big Bill, show the perspectives of two adolescents who walk life in two different tunes. In his youth, Coates was seen as weak by others due to his unwillingness to participate in violence. His different views often caused him to feel out of tune with his peers; “Everyone moved as though the same song were playing in their heads. It was a song I'd never heard.” (37). On the other hand, Coates’ brother, “Big Bill was seldom scared. He had a bop that moved with the crowd, and preempted beef.” (9). Despite the brothers’ many differences, they were both on the path to adulthood. Coates’ telling of their growth shows that despite his brother’s perceived advantage in life, his “street smarts” would only cause more turmoil. He shows their progressive growth in many ways, one of the final ways

being Coates' ability to distance himself from toxic examples of masculinity; "That was the year, the only year of my childhood, that I took a break from hip-hop... They were hard where it mattered least - attacking whole genders, claiming to run the street, and then fleeing in the wake of the beast." (199). This, and his brother's eventual success coming from cutting out his past relationships that reinforced violence (195), support Coates' desire for youth to separate themselves from society's portrayal of a man.

Emotion plays an essential role in the memoir of Coates' as the journey through adolescence proves to be an arduous one. The lessons Coates learns through his youth on what being a man truly entails are expertly shared in Coates' writing as he successfully evokes emotion in his readers. For example, after Coates foolishly engages in a fight, wrongfully perceiving it as something he must participate in, he realizes the magnitude of his mistake during his confrontation with his father; "My father was superman... the cat who was dealt a hand of seven kids by four women, and did his best to carry it, and I had completely let him down." (180). This event was exceptionally impactful as the readers get a full sense of Coates' emotion in that moment. By retelling this lesson in his life in such an impactful manner, Coates dissuades future youth from making the same mistake as he did. This encourages youth to break apart from the violent expectations society may push upon them and act in a way that is respectable, not letting the ones you love down.

Coates' enigmatic and authoritarian father played a massive role in his youth. He fought tirelessly for the freedom and rights of his African American community, filling his children's lives with knowledge of incredible black leaders. Coates makes note of his father's lessons through historical allusion, bringing attention to the different views his father held when he was

young. “Martin Luther King was just the beginning of his tour of the South. Dad had never seen a water fountain or a toilet reserved by race and could not access the Other Knowledge that called on young men to sing while barbarians swung clubs and unleashed dogs.” (71) While it may have not been apparent to Coates’ father in the moment, Martin Luther King’s actions of peaceful protest exemplified the workings of a true man. His father’s desire to fight violence with violence and King’s work of promoting peace, show similarity to the mindsets of Coates and his brother. King’s example of manhood would ultimately be the one Coates follows in his life, leading him on a path to success and encouraging others to break away from what is expected upon them in society.

The concept of manhood is no mystery to Coates. His thoughtful illustration of his coming of age story, appeal to pathos, and historical allusion to influential figures of his past, all collectively show his eventual understanding of what it means to be a man. Coates proves that to be a true man one must distance themselves of stereotypes and encourages youth to learn from his past and do what is right, avoiding the toxic definition of a man that society has created. Now, in the hands of the upcoming youth, is the ability to redefine masculinity, utilizing the lessons learned by past generations.