

Janani Virinchipuram Narayan

August 14, 2015

Book Read Response

### A Universal Struggle

*A Beautiful Struggle* by Ta-Nehisi Coates cannot be more relatable, and at the same time, more distant to the typical prospective college student. There is a poetic current that pulls the audience forward through the memoir; this poetry creates a closeness so that the reader feels connected to Coates' life by understanding the underlying similarity to his or her own experiences. When reading the novel I was continually surprised that I could identify with an individual that I felt lived in a completely different universe. In fact, just as rap music threw Coates' life into sharp resolution, the book helped me understand myself; for example, my inability to hold grudges was mirrored in Coates as he describes the "claws of rage" (58), which he is able to so easily release. I came to understand that this quality, which I had originally believed a hindrance, is actually an asset in understanding and communicating with others. While minor similarities like these drew my attention, I also realized that there is a wider parallel in the book. *The Beautiful Struggle* exemplifies the universal struggle of finding oneself, a universal journey in its similar origins, iconoclastic encounters, and eventually, in its pivotal epiphanies.

With his deft language, Coates is able to easily capture the origins of every life journey. He describes childhood as being "drunk on ourselves" (Coates 12). The author perfectly defines

the feeling of infinite power and possibility that is an indicator of the early years - the beauty of knowing nothing so knowing everything. The resultant endless imagination is reflected in the daily activities of Coates and his siblings. "The rules were organic. Breaks in the alley and cement were foul lines and boundaries" (Coates 50). The hard world that surrounds Coates seems to allow and even encourage this imagination during a game of basketball. These lines allow the reader to recall perhaps similar experiences of playing badminton on shifting boundaries (depending on where the birdie happened to fall) - an observation that connects the two opposite worlds. The struggle that the author goes through does not seem to be so alien despite the disparities between the reader's world and his. This universal innocence is essential to the struggle of realizing one's true purpose. Only when the walls that are a child's beliefs are set up can they be broken down and rebuilt.

The struggle that Ta-Nehisi Coates enters is universal due to the presence of iconoclastic encounters. The molding of the young Coates, as with any individual that trips upon life, occurs through the struggle to maintain oneself while assaulted by outside forces; at the same time, growing up is about changing one's perspective to fit the new view of the world. This change, although different for every individual, is the preparatory step to finding oneself. Having been born into such an environment, Coates held a unique perspective. Very early on, his soft nature was tested when he realized that his mother would not prevent herself from teaching her son a lesson with a shoe (Coates 58). Although seemingly inconsequential, this experience is the impetus of the destruction of an old wall. Coates begins to understand the danger of his perspective on life. The Knowledge begins to become increasingly necessary. It is dangerous to assume ignorance in a world where one must stay alert at home, originally a place of safety.

Likewise, Coates begins to soak in what it means to live in his neighborhood, in his world. The sudden importance of emulating Big Bill is later denounced as the importance of education rises. As each wall shatters the new walls are born stronger. They are able to hold more weight. Every child goes through wall-shattering experiences - realizing parents' imperfections, for example. The new walls are built with more understanding when the child realizes his or her parents' strengths. Before Coates could hit the other extreme, however, another wall came crumbling down. "But then he smiled. I looked down and saw his open hand, universal and at peace. I reached out and gave him a pound" (Coates 126). Coates assumed a hardness through his experiences that was only cracked with the friendly gesture of group 8-07. Like every individual, battered from outside forces that dictate who we should and should not be, Coates closed himself. Now there was an open window. Perhaps the purpose of life was not just to survive.

The final ingredient to finding a purpose is an epiphany. As Coates states "all the truly living, at least once, are born again" (Coates 74). At some point, every individual understands what the world is but not his or her purpose in it. Coates is born again when he understands his purpose, when he has an epiphany. Epiphanies are pivotal in that they define the individual and include every solid wall, every core belief. "I'd replaced one pantheon for another, Spider-Man and Goose for Robert Williams and Huey...I could not escape who I was, but now didn't want to. My new heroes and narrative gave meaning to everything I'd once hated about my life..." (Coates 122). Coates' titles his epiphanies as "Knowledge" and "Consciousness". These revelations are stark contrasts from the younger, sleepwalking Coates without a purpose. There is a new drive and sense of self. From the point that Coates refuses to have his father cut his

hair, he understands the new leader of his life. He has strength and self-realization. He has found himself. Every complete journey has this step, although the journey is not complete with this step alone. Coates goes through this journey. He is broken and rebuilt just as every individual is, no matter the circumstances.

*The Beautiful Struggle* exemplifies the impersonal struggle of finding oneself, a universal journey in its similar beginnings, transformative experiences, and eventually, in its essential rebirths. The memoir highlights the struggle shared by many to find the meaning of a life in context. While shedding light on the many conflicts of his world, Ta-Nehisi Coates leads the reader through his own unique but understandable rebirth. The relatable quality of this book is notable for its ability to unify people from across universes. This novel has given me a new perspective on the world that I will take with me on my journey to find my epiphany at Johns Hopkins University.