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Disillusioned Identity—Not so Funny: The Influence of Other Selves in “Funnyhouse of a Negro”

Amanda ReCupido

Living in a country that prides itself on its citizens' rich blend of cultural backgrounds, one may underestimate the uneasiness some have fitting into the greater society—an idea that is explored in “Funnyhouse of a Negro.” The play depicts a damaged relationship between Negro-Sarah and the broader society; she becomes isolated through her other selves and enters into an altered state of reality that is established by her self-hatred generated from denial of her heritage and an inability to reach her aspiration of whiteness. Her self-hatred accumulates in direct relation to the surmounting influence of her self-created identities, causing her to suffer from insanity and leading inevitably to her suicide.

Negro-Sarah develops a hatred towards herself and her background from realizing the differences that set her apart from the white world. In the very beginning of the play, the fact is established that Negro-Sarah's mother is so fair-skinned that she could pass for a white woman, while her dad is contrastingly dark, “the blackest one of them all” (3). This immediately establishes the conflict between light and dark and suggests thought in terms of polarities: white and black, good and evil, life and death. Falling at neither extreme—neither white nor black—Negro-Sarah looks to her mother, who is also neither white nor black, to form her opinions about race. Having more exposure to her mother's opinions and biases, Negro-Sarah feels greater sympathy for her and comes to idolize her, causing her to reject her father and his blackness. This dismissal taints her opinion of Africa as she views this place in terms of the reason for her parents' failed marriage and as the site of her mother's rape—an act from which Negro-Sarah is conceived and that eventually leads her mother to a mental institution. Africa, the origin of black culture, then becomes a haunted place where people are born into evil—blackness. Negro-Sarah explains how she and Queen Victoria, one of her selves, view blackness: “For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning” (5). Africa, being associated with the jungle, is seen as a place where the people are animal-like, inhuman, and fearful. This is marked by

the frightened demands of the Duchess, one of Negro-Sarah's selves: "Hide me here so the jungle will not find me. Hide me" (10). Association with Africa becomes a shameful quality of Negro-Sarah's blood; she dreads the disgrace of being considered one of the "unfortunate black ones" (5). The means through which she tries to purge this perceived toxin of blackness is through the manifestation of other selves. She discusses how she "want[s] not to be" (5), and lives through her imagined reality of characters that encompass the qualities of whiteness of which she can only dream. The inability to separate these generated personalities from reality, however, leads Negro-Sarah into a state of insanity similar to that of her mother: "suffering so till her hair has fallen out" (8), as described by the landlady. The mentally unstable condition she enters through the creation of her other selves allows Negro-Sarah's self-hatred to fester until she makes a final attempt to cleanse herself of blackness by committing suicide.

Negro-Sarah's self-hatred prominently discerns itself through her aggressively loathsome attitudes and behaviors towards her hair, which she describes as her "one defect" (6). Equating her mother's whiteness and all encompassing qualities, such as naturally straight hair, with good, Negro-Sarah is unable to associate her own kinky, African hair with the beauty she so easily grants to her mother. Rejecting this significant aspect of her African heritage, Negro-Sarah denies a part of herself, leading to the creation of her other selves and therefore contributing to her loss of sanity. As her self-hatred intensifies, she begins to lose her hair, and in turn, an essential part of the African identity that makes up her sense of being. The speech of one of Negro-Sarah's selves illustrates her inability to embrace her black culture, and therefore, accept and love herself: "I will despise [my white friends] as I do myself. For if I did not despise myself then my hair would not have fallen" (13). The stage direction describes this hair loss as "hideous" (17), which is suggestive of the message that the misconception, denial, and hatred of one's own cultural identity are the truly ugly flaws, and not the quality of blackness like Negro-Sarah perceives. The different selves try to retain some form of identity through their fruitless efforts to keep their hair; however, Negro-Sarah's self-hatred is so overwhelming that the other selves are left completely bald-headed and stripped of any hint of identity. Without the individuality from her other

selves to feed her disillusioned reality, Negro-Sarah too becomes stripped of any trace of identity. This overpowering feeling of emptiness, caused initially as a result of denying her true self, ultimately leads Negro-Sarah to hang herself.

The formation of other selves as a result of Negro-Sarah's self-loathing keeps her from functioning positively within the spectrum of the broader society. This is evident in her description of her ideal life:

It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friends' apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. My friends will be white. (6)

In surrounding herself wholly with white culture, she abandons her black heritage and denies her identity, making positive interaction with others in society nearly impossible. Even though she speaks of white friends, she admits that these friendships function mainly as "an embankment to keep [her] from reflecting upon the fact that [she is] a Negro" (6) and to "maintain a stark fortress against recognition of [herself]" (6). This mindset leads her into unhealthy relations with other people of society. One person is Raymond, a white man who lives above her—a detail suggestive of white power. Within the funnyhouse, Raymond "walks about the place opening the blinds and laughing" (9), demonstrating his control over Negro-Sarah and her dependency on him. The fact that only one of Negro-Sarah's selves is intimate with Raymond illustrates the fragmented relationship she has with the broader society; Negro-Sarah's own experience is separated through these split personalities. This disjointedness is characteristic of her overall relationship with society as she constantly separates and isolates herself from the rest of the world.

Negro-Sarah's unbalanced connection with society is also made apparent in her opinion of religion. Negro-Sarah separates herself from her initial religious beliefs, explaining how she no longer finds the sanctuary in relationships that she once did: "A loving relationship exists between myself and Queen Victoria, a love between myself and Jesus but they are lies" (7). She recognizes that while these relationships are still a part of her life,

they do not hold the same influence over her, as she has learned not to trust others. She then loses confidence in relationships with people, along with institutionalized faith: "For relationships was one of my last religions" (7). Without these relationships to build a sense of self, Negro-Sarah becomes dependent on the characters of her funnyhouse, isolating herself from the rest of society. Her other selves cannot exist outside of herself, and similarly, Negro-Sarah cannot interact with others if she is constantly jumping back and forth between her identities.

Her mistrust of religion comes also as a result of her relationship with her father. Doing missionary work in Africa and being pressured by his mother to "heal the race" (14), Negro-Sarah's father comes to represent everything from which his daughter tries to separate herself: blackness, Africa, and Christianity. Hating her father for being black, Negro-Sarah turns him into her own sacrificial Jesus, "nailing him on the cross" (14) with her hatred for the heritage that he is trying to save and which she is trying to deny. The distrust she has for Christianity surfaces simultaneously as she starts to recognize blackness as an unwanted quality and rejects her father. This idea comes across through the speech of her other selves: "They told me my Father was God but my father is black" (21). Unable to associate blackness with Christianity, Negro-Sarah comes to reject both. No longer able to trust her father or religion, Negro-Sarah backs away from society and turns to her other selves, who in the last scene "have nimbuses atop their heads in a manner to suggest that they are saviours" (20). Negro-Sarah's other selves become her own form of religion and her only sanction from blackness. Dependence on these characters, however, enables the unstable quality of her relationship with society to escalate. Created to save her from herself, the other personas only lead Negro-Sarah into disillusionment and insanity, pulling her away from the broader society and eventually leading her to commit suicide.

While Negro-Sarah's other selves are created as a defense against blackness and an effort to become accepted in white society, they push her into an altered state of reality, caused by her rejection of true identity and intense self-hatred. Negro-Sarah's loathing towards the African part of her heritage is made apparent in her attitude towards her hair; loss of this feature equates itself with a loss of identity and, consequentially, reality. Negro-Sarah's

relationship with the broader society is in turn damaged as she isolates herself from any real connection with other people, and instead, seeks solace in her self-created identities—an isolation clearly illustrated by her feelings towards religion. This separation from society feeds Negro-Sarah's mental demise and eventually leads to her suicide. While her fate is unfortunate, Negro-Sarah serves as merely one example of several who feel isolated from the broader society on an account of their heritage—a feeling that exists even among our own country's diverse population.

Work Cited

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