# Problem Of Identity And The Difference Between A Black Man And A White Man: If He Hollers Versus Black Like Me

The problem of identity and the difference between a black man and a white man can be interpreted with many tensions depending on the time in history, however we still see it in the world that we live in today. According to Maurice Apprey he writes “I have come to understand that on matters of race, identity, and difference, the conception of the other as fixed and absolute leads to the dangerous penchant to demonize the Other. On the other hand, the facile notion that “we are one blood” threatens a group's sense of self-continuity, identity, and stability.” (Maurrice Apprey) This suggests that ‘If He Hollers.’ a novel published in 1945 by the author Chester Himes. Due to the novel being published during 1945; this was during the Second World War in which many black Americans would be enlisted and sign up. They did this as a way of having some sort of freedom; more freedom than what they most probably had in their hometown. The novel is based in Los Angeles which saw a huge influx of white southerners mixed with African Americans joining forces in major defence industries such as shipyards due to the ongoing war. This ultimately would ramp up the tension between blacks and whites as it is one of the first times in history that they would be classed as working together. The story ultimately unveils the ever so prominent racism that occurs during wartime America. Although the protagonist Robert Bob Jones seemingly has improved his way of life by having a job where he can work along white men, he still suffers at the hands of everyday racism. More prominently he is largely resented by his white co-workers. Jones cannot help but suffer from paranoia as he goes through his everyday life, experiencing horrific dreams of the ever so evident baiting from the white skinned males that are around him. Bob lives in fear during his life just because of the colour of his skin. This is why we see in many chapters he stands tall as much as he can when coming face to face with the other race.

There are so many symbolic meanings throughout the novel that Bob sustains to prove to himself and others that he has worth. For example Bob would rather lose his job than his car. This is hugely symbolic of the car being something of value to Bob; he has rights over this car that belongs to him, therefore, he will not give it up to anyone. It is something he has worked for and owns. We also have a great sense of the fear and pressure a white man could [place upon a balck man as Chester Himes writes about the fear the protagonist wakes up with everyday as his fear began to creep into his “conciousness” he explains that the fear “came into my head first, somewhere back of my closed eyes, moves slowly underneath my skull to the base of my brain, cold and hollow. I felt torn all loose inside, shrivelled, paralysed. As if after a while I’d have to get up and die.” (2) this shows how the fear that Bob holds feels like a nightmare, although it carries on into his concious being.

Griffin was a white male journalist from Texas, he held such a sympathetic view towards blacks therefore wanted to support their movement through equality. He did this by taking pills that would change his skin from white to black. He then travelled through the deep south where he would experience events through the perspective of a black male in juxtaposition to being white; he was able to compare his experience with the mind of a white male who was ultimately privileged just because of his skin colour. This meant that Griffin could not possibly be biased in regards to a certain race. His observations resulted from his interactions with both white and black people.

I believe the autobiographical account ‘Black Like me’ by John Howard Griffin (1961) can be seen as a complete juxtaposition in experience to that of Bob Jones. This is because it is ultimately a white reporter going undercover therefore he can gain experience as a black male during the late 1950’s in the south. This supports the view that as a white male John Howard Griffin is aware that due to his skin colour he in society will not face the everyday problems that a black male may face, therefore being consciously aware that skin colour does mean something in everyday life. We can relate this to times of today where even though black and white people are very much integrated and mixed during everyday life there is still the conscious view of us recognising the colour of our skin therefore knowing it means something; in other words what it means to be black. Shelley Fisher Fishkin argues this point stating “American culture. For in the early 1990’s, our ideas of “whiteness” were interrogated, our ideas of “blackness” were complicated, and the terrain we call “Americah culture” began to be remapped.” (Fishskin Shelley). I believe this is showing that obviously Amrican culture especially during the 20th century is seen more or less as white culture as the quote states the obvious perverse. “Blackness” during the novel ‘If He Hollers’ and ‘Black Like me’ is widely discussed, the question of “what it means to be black.” is clearly answered in that it means a black individual is classed as less worthy than the white man he sits next to, therefore should suffer racial abuse for the majority of their lifetime. Whether this abuse is during their freetime, worktime or even home life. However as Fishkin argues the question of what “whiteness” means doesn’t seem to come to light as a question until the 1990’s. This is why seemingly during these two pieces of text witness is just seemed as completely normal with blackness being the abnormality. Which leads to the fact that this still happens in todays society “How precisely does the issue of color remain so detemlil/a-tive of everything from life circumstances to manner of death, ill a world that is, large, color-blind what hierarchies that make racial domination seem so natural, so invisible, indeed so attractive? How does racism continue to evolve, post slavery and post equal legislation, across geographic, temporal and political distance?” (Williams) This shows that even though the world has adapted so much through the years up to modern day it would be thought that we could move past something such as racism however it still happens in everyday life. The book by Claudia Rankine ‘An American Lyric’ highlights these for example everyday looks and comments that can be passed.

It seems that the character of Bob Jones puts up a front in front of white men, meaning that he put up an exterior of politeness to a certain extent just to be accepted in some sort of way. This exterior was in my opinion exactly what Griffin took initiative to get under and reveal how it truly felt to be a black man, as a white man could never understand how it would feel. Griffin writes “the atmosphere of a place is entirely different for Negro and white. The Negro sees and reacts differently not because he is Negro, but because he is suppressed. Fear dims even in the sunlight.” (pg 101). This shows that the difference between both races is the fact that whites will lay their superiority so much on blacks that they would make their everyday lives a misery in refusing them of basic everyday needs such as going to a public bathroom or eating food in the same room as a white person. We can gather from this that whites believe during this time they had aan overall right to life. Griffin then goes on to write “I was the same man, whether black or white. Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly love and smiles and the privileges from whites and the hate stares or obsequiousness from the Negros. And when I was a Negro, the white judged me fit for the junk heap, while Negros treated me with great warmth.” (page 124). We see here that if you had skin other than white, you were automatically degraded and put in a certain bracket of life. I believe this shows just how painfully sad discrimination was in the deep south.

There is ultimately a huge difference between the two texts in the fact that ‘Black Like me’ Is seemingly full of realistic opinions rather than being an artistic piece of text like ‘If He Hollers’. But these opinions are argued today whether they have the same effect today as they did the age of Jim Crow and The Jim Crow laws, meaning although some people may see how times have changed from the time these texts were written; therefore see this as a triumph others may disagree. Michael Tanner said “You cannot have a race in which one runner is loaded down with weights and chains for half the race, remove them, and suggest that from then on it’s a fair contest” (Michael Tanner, Cato institute senior) This clearly suggest that the experiences the black race have had to face during the past for example the unfair lynchings, slavery, racism and many more, still can effect them today