

# Whitney Terrell's The King of King's County Essay



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From the start, Whitney Terrell's *The King of King's County* seems to be a book about the American Dream; more specifically, it's a book about the progression of society in a particular city and suburb in Missouri. And on the surface, that is in fact the theme. But delve a bit deeper, and there are a wealth of secondary plots to be found; the author's opinions about the foundations for the American Dream, the checks and balances that are put in place to keep American society in its rigid fabric, the inability of people to change, and a stunning narrator around whom fantastic and momentous occurrences seem to be continually happening. Under the surface, *The King of King's County* seems to be a book about the futility of it all, its main theme being the fact that no matter how quickly life is passing the characters by, or how much progress is being made, they themselves are incapable of changing anything. As each man (or woman) is born, so shall they die. The obvious subject of the novel can be found in a rather generic story of progress, in which the rural farmland around Kansas City is transformed to a maze of housing tracts and highways during the middle and end of the century.

Farmers are conned out of their land, millionaires who lack inconvenient morals throw up development after development, and ghettos are formed in an attempt to 'scare' white people out of the city. These already depressing side effects of progress are exaggerated by disturbing passages that list the damage being done to the land and historical sites; passages that are easily comparable to the destruction caused by wars. Royce MacVess, the last farmer standing, bases his argument on 'the Negro Question,' and the fact that the developers will use the new highway - symbolic of the infringement

of modern life on this rural area – as a way to bus the African Americans in, creating a ghetto of their beloved city. Following this theme, the book makes an easy case for itself as a description of the high price the local people have to pay for the progress their ‘betters’ insist on bringing into their midst. What makes the novel far more intriguing is the stories of the characters.

First there is the assumption by the author that the American Dream is actually based on people who have somehow managed to claw their way up from poverty, to accomplish a position of wealth and security, and then do their best to pretend they were never anywhere else. Almost without fail, these people ignore their past, doing their best to believe that they have always been what they are, and that nothing else has ever mattered. This theme is actually a modernization of the evolutionary idea of survival of the fittest. To achieve the American Dream, people do what they need to do, selectively believing what they needed to believe to fit reality around themselves. The best example of this is obviously the Bowen family who, having climbed out of poverty and disgrace with Prudential, then depend on everyone under them, and their own money, to shelter them from the unpleasant facts of what their survival cost.

But almost every character in the book turns the same blind eye, in one way or another. There are many examples of “stories,” as Alton would say, being created to shelter someone or make things more convenient. Jack’s mother and father, Alton and Allie Acheson, both perform complicated “moral calculations” to do whatever is necessary to help the family. Jack’s grandfather, Big Alton, went so far as to change his name and create a new

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persona for himself, after which he ignored his father, pretending that he had no past other than the one he had created for himself. The children in the book – Jack, Nikki, Lonnie, and Geanie – all perform incredible social gymnastics to build their own world and deny that any reality outside of it exists. Although it might be realistic, this bare portrayal of trickery, cheating, and selective belief presents a somewhat harsh view of the American man and woman.

Surely survival doesn't mean that one must ignore reality and bend the morals to fit the situation, as these characters unfailingly do. The second harsh reality presented in the book is that of the characters themselves. It seems that each and every character is incapable of changing themselves or the world around them, no matter how large their dream. There is of course Prudential Bowen as the antithesis to this statement, but since his emergence from poverty happened before the novel begins, it doesn't seem to be included in the theme.

Instead we are faced with a cast of characters who might imagine great changes, but who are instead pulled back into their assigned places time and time again. Alton Acheson, the most dynamic character in the novel, spends his entire life dreaming of what he might be able to do, basing his life around his childhood hero, Tom Durant. Although he seems to come close time and time again, with his real estate, "his" highway, a new mansion, and his dealings with the Bowen Company, he never makes the step to the next level. In the end, though he has spent his life chasing this dream, he dies in the same position in which he lived: as a man who has touched many lives,

but never moved up to the class he wanted. There are other examples throughout the novel.

Lonnie Garaciello allows himself to think big, and attempts to move up in the world, using Geanie Bowen. Instead, he plummets to his death. Geanie Bowen herself, looking to break her own mold and that of her family, develops friendships with the 'third heat,' in Jack, Nikki and Lonnie. Instead of being allowed to make her own place in the world, she is sent to boarding school. Even later, when she and Jack are given the chance to have a relationship, she returns to her fiancé and her upscale life.

Regardless of her wealth and position, she is unable to change how she was born, or who she was raised to be. Jack Acheson escapes to New York City for a time, but ends up back home in Kansas City, playing wingman for his father. There are examples of this inability to move or change even in sociological terms throughout the book. Though the Achesons do improve their situation and move with 'the rich,' they are never admitted into anything other than their own class. The African Americans of Kansas City are given the chance to move from their slums into nicer neighborhoods and houses, only to find that these new neighborhoods were 'rigged' to become the new ghettos, and that they were no better off than they had been. Even in the conclusion of the book, Jack has returned to Big Alton's roots, and become a lawyer.

Geanie is being set up to return to her roots, as the manager for Jack's real estate. No one is allowed to change, no matter how far they run. Perhaps the sad commentary there is that no one is actually capable of change,

regardless of their idealistic speeches and dreams. In finishing the book, there is a feeling of having been part of a lifetime that was wasted. There are relationships that never happened, dreams that were never fulfilled, and promises that went ignored.

The American Dream of *The King of King's County* does require hard work, but it seems to be based almost as much on denial and self-imposed ignorance. The fabric of this novel's society seems to be static, with no change allowed. People work for their entire lives, and yet never achieve what they have hoped for. In completing the book, the reader is presented with a supremely empty sensation: if this is what the American Dream truly is, then what's the point?