

Black skin what masks: a description of insanity



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Dambudzo Marechera writes of the insanity he feels as a result of his own desperate racial confusion and accompanying self hatred in *Black Skin What Masks*. In this story Marechera begins by placing the overall notion of discomfort that accompanies one's skin being black on the same level as an unnamed friend. The description of the friend points very clearly to different levels of insanity while simultaneously, the reader's attention is constantly being brought back to the point at hand, the issue of race. Ultimately, the main character's (author's) discomfort regarding his racial identity and his efforts to change that are displayed as a completely separate persona from himself. In the end, the split in psyche proves to be debilitating and Marechera's "friend" is no longer in the picture and he remains as he always was, a black man.

The primary assessment of Marechera's friend is a direct comparison to his own skin, deeming them both to be, "moody, assertive, possessive, [and] callous" (page 230) all of which indicate unpleasantness in themselves, more so all together. When further describing the friend, the author makes it clear that his mental capacity is in question, describing his obsessive bathing and grooming rituals "he did not so much as scrub himself until he bled" (page 230), manic money spending, promiscuity and rampant alcoholism. It is clear from the very beginning of the story that the lunacy Marechera is describing exists within his own mind. The friend buys closets and closets of clothing and yet the narrator is the one without money, the friend accuses him of drinking too much but is the one to lose consciousness where he sits and above all, no one ever speaks to both of them; only one or the other. On page 231, a confrontation is described between the friend, the author and a

tramp, " A black tramp accost him one night as we walked to the University Literary Society".

With careful analysis of the passage, it is clear that the two men must exist as one person; for no other reason would only one of them be accosted if they were walking together. It also states further on, " He literally cringed away from the man, who incidentally knew me" (page 231) which may lead the reader to believe that perhaps the " accost" on the friend was nothing more than the tramp making an attempt at friendly contact with someone he recognized but was not interpreted as such on account of the friend being the present persona that night. On page 230 this is again, shown rather blatantly; a conversation begins with the friend and ends with the author. The ending, when the writer realizes that he is actually the speaker in the conversation he is commenting on gives the most intimate view into the insanity that Marechera lives with and that lives within him.

The degree of dissonance described in the story escalates as the friend's views of black people become more pronounced. In the beginning, the author describes his friend as dressing " to make the man" (page 230) and wearing shoes that would make " even an elephant lightfooted and elegant" (page 230) but states shortly after that he wanted " every other African" (page 230) to do this as well, leading the reader to believe that the reason for such finery was to do what Africans do not; to be something other than what he was. In this same passage he compares the aforementioned Africans to Chimpanzees, symbolic of the friend's view of Africans as comparable to animals with the accompanying savagery. These negative connotations escalate steadily, causing increased agitation; first comparing the narrator to <https://assignbuster.com/black-skin-what-masks-a-description-of-insanity/>

a monkey when he is not dressed correctly, later to his open revulsion and contempt that “ A black man in Africa let himself become a bum”(page 231) and even more being approached by such a man. Closer to the end the escalation continues as the friend makes an attempt at complete disassociation from the author (impossible as they are one in the same). Near its climax, his frustration with being denied by black girls because ““ black men are not good enough for them”” (page 233) he insists, “ from now on its white girls or nothing” (page 233) suggesting, in less than subtle terms that white girls are better and finally, the friend voices Marechera’s true, most basic feelings about himself stating, ““ You are full of filth, do you know that? ””(page 233).

The disagreements described between the friend and the author, embody their distain for one another as well as distain for what the other represents while presenting their inability to gain independence from one another. The friend accuses the author of being a monkey in terms of how he is dressed and offers him one of his many suits, symbolizing the author’s own self distain and attempted rectification of the defect. The author returns this criticism by describing the friend as “ really [making] himself look like a monkey” when he was dancing. Other arguments continue to display the struggle between the part of the author that wants to assimilate and fit in with the predominantly white culture and the side that wishes to be exactly who he is and do as he likes. One such altercation arises from the shame the friend feels when in the company of the author because of his bad behavior and requests he deny their friendship if asked.

The excuse of bad behavior in conjunction with the friend's previously stated views of Africans or black people indicate that he thinks that such behavior is African and he does not wish to be associated with it as a result. Throughout the story, as the conflict between the two personas increases, the author states multiple times, " I knew I was losing a friend" (page 232). Through this statement the reader learns that the attempt at assimilation or the attempt to be less black and less African began as something positive. Originally, the part of him that wanted to try to conform was a protective mechanism set in place by the discomfort the narrator feels as a result of his skin, " My skin sticks out a mile here.

Every time I go out I feel it tensing up, hardening, torturing itself" (page 229). In this statement, the self loathing (self torture) is clear and shows that this " friend" was a desperately needed piece of self preservation. The rest of the story signifies that it was no longer serving its purpose as the conflict between them increased and was becoming debilitating instead. At this point, the author is becoming more self-accepting and tending more towards his natural tendencies. The dissonance between them increases exponentially when the author begins to stand up for himself, telling his friend, " Don't let them stuff bullshit into you. Or spew it out right in their faces" (page 232).

Throughout the entire story, the narrator marks his attempt at severing his ties with this symbolic friend with the repetitive phrase, " and that's how it was, until he slashed his wrists" (pages 231, 232 and 233). This phrase appears after each notable conflict between them and is symbolic of each time the narrator slashed his own wrists in an attempt to free himself from the chaos and torment of the competing ideals. After the noted display of

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defiance is when the two personas begin to collide and blur. The roles almost reverse as the narrator begins to comment on some of the friend's questionable decisions, such as how he is handling his love life, " I hear you've been hanging around the kitchen every day" (page 233) and at the same time, the friend begins to drink more.

At the very end of the story, during their last conversation, the writer tells the friend that he is being ' sent down' or forcefully admitted to a mental institution. In a sense this confirms the reader's intuition that the two men are one in the same as the third paragraph of the very first page, when the friend is being described, it is stated, " He is now in a lunatic asylum. " (page 229). Even as the two personalities are shown to be a part of one person, they remain at odds, each maintaining his firm stance, the friend informing the writer that he is a, " nigger-tramp" (page 234) just like the one he was accosted by.

Dambudzo Marechera's *Black Skin What Masks* describes two conflicting thought processes or personas symbolized by the two different men described and characterized throughout. The entire story is a rather clear description of a man whose mind and thoughts are very conflicted and in resulting chaos. The narrator is the man within whom the two, conflicting versions of self reside. The two personas are so conflicted and dissonant that they cannot coexist and must, therefore exist separately. The descriptions at the beginning and end of the story both indicate that the narrator vindicated himself from his " friend". In the beginning he talks of his friend being gone, in an asylum for the mentally ill and at the end of the last paragraph on the final page he describes walking away from him.

Marechera describes the two personalities as both being insane but in the end he signifies that the narrator was insane and being sent down only so long as he was with the friend; symbolic of his own feelings toward his race identity. This is very important as it supports his overall message that race confusion is not only a specific type of disruption in mental stability but will lead to notable insanity, ultimately tearing the sufferer apart. From the beginning, the writer was careful to allow both personalities to be present to the reader while detailing a solo body. Through the arguments, distain and discordance of the personas the image of a war of ideals was painted and the conclusion can be easily reached that the friend described existed and caused chaos solely in the mind of the narrator, built on a foundation of self loathing and hatred, medicated with drugs and alcohol and cured only by self acceptance.