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The Struggle for Recognition in Regards to David Bradley's 'The Chaneysville Incident'

John struggles to identify his history, to ascertain what Moses Washington's actions meant, and to label the people around him in regards to himself. This may be the story of how one man struggles to find himself but it is also the story of how certain people in that one man's life struggle to be acknowledged by him. His mother, Old Jack, Moses, Judith- they are all a key player in his life but he denies their worth. His denial of his own social identity leads to a denial of having connections with people. He severs distinction and will not admit to himself or to anyone else that a particular someone is important. He acts like he was forged by his own will, but that is not the case. Each person has left an imprint upon his soul, and in his struggle to discover the past he recognizes that each person has had a profound impact on his psyche. He denies his own identity as he denies anyone's existence relative to him, but there is a sense of redemption at the end of his denial.

John is a historian, he "specialize[s] in the study of atrocities" (Bradley 186) and everything must be known before he can relate the story. He puts so much stock into facts and figures, he forgets that humans cannot be so easily quantified. The relationships he has are messy and complicated, with no discernible physical cause and effect, but he does not have it within him to reach down to the emotional actions and reactions. "Emotional norms...emphasize the importance of maintaining control" and when there is no control for John, it becomes a "threat to individual and collective senses of identity." (Norgaard 374-375) John is struggling to find his

identity, yes, but even if he wishes he cannot approach it head on because without realizing it he avoids information. “Emotions play a key role in denial, providing much of the reason why people prefer to avoid information,” but if one avoids information and emotions there is sure to be a conflict that cannot be reconciled. John has been deflecting emotions for so long he does not realize it is even there as a hindrance towards his goal of unearthing his heritage.

He says he ‘has no imagination’, that in history “there’s no imagination in it. You can’t create facts.” (Bradley 268) It is only what is on the index cards but I wonder if he forgets that history is the story of man. He forgets “it is not history for the sake of history,” he is missing a crucial element in his “searching for one’s self, searching for one’s identity, searching for one’s origin in order to understand oneself.” (Wilson 97) Men have thoughts and feelings that lead to those facts in the back of his textbook and sometimes it seems that John forgets emotions are what are causing his data. He closes himself off from the people around him because he can never fully know the person, so why bother knowing anything then; the little he gleaned would only frustrate him. It is this frustration, the desire to know all that keeps him cold at night. The need burns so hot it is cold, that is why coffee and toddies only satiate him for so long- he is on fire, but there is no warmth in his obsession. He wants to know all only because he fears the unknown. The “base of [his] belly that somehow never seem[s] to get enough warmth” (Bradley 5) is just his fear in the pit of his stomach, a fear he has denied for so long that it is coalescing within him. Many have tried to understand John, but his constant refusal stems from his fear of intimacy, “[he] had been angry. No; furious” (Bradley 132) since the day he was born. Maybe angry at the world for presenting him with someone he could not understand; himself. “[He] wants to figure everything out, goes crazy when [he] can’t” (Bradley 195) and he almost drives himself to madness when he tries to tear himself apart.

John denies his parents the innate position to be his mother and father. His refusal of them just manifests in different ways. His wary indifference towards one and begrudging hatred toward the other showcase what he fears from both. His mother tries to burrow into his mind, tries to push him to accept her and be the way he should be, he cannot condone that. “She regarded space as territory ripe for conquest, and she proceeded to take it in the same way she conquered the minds of those who opposed her; she piled things in it” (Bradley 125) is a representation of her trying to leave her mark on her family. In placing objects of hers around the house, she is constantly reminding her family that she does exist and no matter what they do she will not go away. This tenacity is too much for John, he does not know where it stems from so he denies all her efforts to be a part of him. In a nightmare he dreams that “she had kept on bathing [him], and [he] realized that she was trying to kill [him]” (Bradley 147) represents reality and delusion. His mother is a part of him, she is in his DNA, and in her trying to bring the fever down shows she has always been trying to care for him. John takes this action as her trying to kill him, demonstrating his denial of her love; he twists it into something he can understand. Yes, John can only understand rage and death. Being chased from the house by her is him being chased by the memories of his childhood. That is what home represents to us all, and he cannot deal with the truth that she tried to do right by him when he was growing up so he just runs away from it. He cannot handle closeness, the give and share of letting people in. “The desire to avoid unpleasant emotions and the need for emotion management can prevent social movement participation,” (Norgaard 372) this desire is evident in John’s personal withdrawal.

Now his father did not try to be liked, he had his own agenda and did not care that the boy thought ill of him, he was there for a greater purpose. “He liked the way you hated him” is a remark made to John, and it did very little to move him. After thinking the hate was mutual he

finds out his dad was actually proud of his defiance, and he just “didn’t say anything.” (Bradley 35) There was always antagonism between the two, but also the sense that one was facing a worthy opponent. John never refers to Moses Washington as his father, not once, and it is not until he acknowledges that Moses marries Yvette Johnson does one fully realize that he is John’s dad. It is believed that a person can convince himself that a traumatic event or past experience did not happen, “That if the delusion lasts long enough, you’ll trick yourself into really *believing* that it did not occur,” (McCafferty 20) so this not naming of him is a careful-selective amnesia technique to deny the fact that Moses is his father. He would rather not assign the label because of all of its glorious connotations of ‘caregiver’ and ‘provider,’ things Moses was not but also what John does not want from him. The both of them deny the father-son relationship, rather choosing to see the man one was and one could become, “in which they determined each other by negation and self-recognition in part *through the eyes of the other.*” (Mills 58) Moses knows what he looks like to his son, but John could not understand what his father saw in him, through him; “[John] was too busy hating him to really see him.” (Bradley 391)

He does not want to accept Moses as a link to his heritage because he could never fully understand the man. John may have the tools to understand history, but he is very bad at applying them to human nature and his denial of what he lacks impacts all of his relationships. “He hadn’t know anything” (Bradley 190) about his father, he tried when he was a teenager to know why that man did what he did, but to no avail. He could not cross the distance he had built up between himself and the world, so he could not understand the clues his dad had left. There is a denial of self attached to his denial of his father because he focuses on the horrors of history. The dark things he is attune with, but does not accept any of the good parts of him, any of the parts that are not fueled with hate. John rapes a girl when his brother dies; he denies himself true

emotions by delving into his familiar territory of anger and devastation. He never liked his father as he did his brother, and when Moses dies he wraps himself up in indifference “[he] had no idea how [he] should feel, what [he] should do...[once] he began to figure out what [he] needed to do...could go about more pressing business” (Bradley 23), even at the age of nine he denies that his father had any effect on him. In the same nightmare of his mother, he dreams he chases a buck that later becomes his father, symbolizing a longing to reach him even though he will never fully be within his grasp. You can only chase a buck or kill it, there is no in between of keeping it alive yet having full possession of it; you may own it but its essence is missing. John denies the correct way to attain knowledge, which is by understanding rather than by possession. He ends up owning all of Moses worldly goods, hoarding numbers and events, but it does not get him any closer to what he seeks. That cynicism and detachment, weapons of denial, bar John from closure.

Old Jack is considered to be the person who John loved best, and he might have, but he still tried to deny those feelings or at least he gave the pretense of it. Jack made sure he “learned how to be a man.” (Bradley 35) John leaves for college though, leaving behind the hill and Jack, only leaving the memory of “somebody who doesn’t know how to do anything but go for the throat.” (Bradley 136) This denial of everything Jack taught him, of his time native, reflects more on how John views himself than any other one thing. He turns Jack into an urban legend, denies the importance of the lessons learned at the knee of the man. John considers Jack a father figure, but John never liked his father so what is he likening Jack to then. Within John there is a sense of not wanting to trace his roots yet also wanting to devour his past so it can fuel his antagonism. He does not understand his own actions though; the denial of all his inner turmoil just creates more of the wrong feelings, more of the cold. He leads himself astray, down the devil’s path of

enlightenment where there is no real truth. Only through Judith does he begin to crawl out from his years-worth of hardened denial for any and all relationships. Initially, John denies Judith by not really telling her that Jack was real, it is an unnecessary deception unless one is trying to forget the past and to avoid emotional connection. This sort of fictionalizing the past so as it not to be real is technique used for and applied to both Jack and Judith, to push both away.

Judith is the one person that gets through his defenses, she sees through his emotional denial and helps lead him towards the truth of what he feels. It was a hard struggle, she had to push and pry and demand that sheath of denial off. Originally he would not let her in, his denial of coffee while he is back at the Hill is a representation of his denial of her intentions. She could not warm the coldness within him, and he blamed her for it, not realizing it is his own mental blockade causing the shivers. “I don’t need you, you know, I could get along without you just fine” (Bradley 257) is a statement made by Judith that shows her willingness to talk about her emotions, her misgivings and wants. These acts of refusing to give in to his denial, of not bowing to him and act indifferent as he does, help to strip away his use of hate as a protective shield. It is her obstinacy, that fact that she loves him and will not allow anything less from him that causes her to succeed where everyone else failed. He lets her in. Not right away, and not even that well, but in the end “[he] realized that something strange was happening...[he] was no longer cold...the heat...came from her.” (Bradley 413) She knows what he needs, flat out states it when he does not want to listen, “you need it. And you want it. That’s part of what you’re afraid of, needing me to help.” (Bradley 262) This is at the crux of his denial of accepting anything from others; he also denies that small part of himself that does not want to be like this. Out of all else, Judith makes him realize what are the falsehoods he has been preaching to himself.

There have been moments where he has regretted his actions, wishing he could go back

to apologize, but he denies that self because he believes it does him no good on his chosen path of life. John's biggest denial is that he denies his higher emotions; he just drowns himself in history thinking it soothes his agitation but it only numbs his feelings. He focuses on atrocities, wishes to discover his heritage and the truth of Moses' death, but in reality he just wants to stop denying the meaning of people in his life and feel warm. The mystery that is Moses is just a means to an end, because it actually helps John to discover what he has been denying for so long. "Past ideas are not replaced with new ones, and the apparent contradictions need not be resolved," this inner conflict has always been a part of John, the wanting to be understood and not have to dwell on the negative. It is just that the denial mechanism that was obscuring this has been removed. The return to the Hill, and all the associated people, is a struggle-filled yet cleansing journey for John. All his ignored wants, his forgotten sensibilities, break free from the wreckage of his unknown ignorance. The self that was denied and the self that had been denying, are now seen by the other and acknowledged for what they are. "Intergenerational and contemporaneous relationships do not always interact toward consensus unities, but exist in relation to each other, producing a complex mix of past and present," (Pavlic 169) means that John is not at unity, but he is finally aware. Finally willing to recognize and be recognized, and that is something. He broke past all that denial of true self/imagined self, and is able to finally want someone, "not just someone; Judith" to understand. (Bradley 432)

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