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Lyndon Kacick
College of DuPage

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Rebellion is a Vital Element in the Human Experience

by Lyndon Kacick

(English 1102)

Rebellion is defined by *The Encarta Dictionary* as, “The opposition or defiance of authority, accepted moral codes, or social conventions.” Traditionally rebellion is regarded as something negative, however, when appropriate, it can be beneficial. While conforming to the status quo is generally more accepted, rebellion is a vital element in the human experience.

“On the Road,” a story written by Langston Hughes provides proof that rebellion is suitable under certain circumstances. The story is about a homeless, African American man named “Sergeant.” Sergeant comes to a small town in the middle of a snowstorm to seek food and shelter and unfortunately, receives no help from anyone. The protagonist tries to break into the church as a final desperate attempt to get out of the cold. Instead he is arrested and brought to the local police station. During which time he has a dream sequence which includes a conversation with Christ. When asked where he is going Christ responds by saying, “God knows, but I’m leavin’ here” (Hughes 566).

This story paints a portrait of the discrimination felt by people of color in that time period. However, it does not stop at the unfair treatment from white folks in general; it shows discrimination from the white Christian people. Symbolically, Mr. Dorset, the town minister, encompasses this unfortunate truth. Joe Benson, a gentleman who wrote a critical essay on this story said, “Although Sergeant is technically guilty of attempted breaking and entering, the Reverend Mr. Dorset is fully guilty of prejudice, racism and hypocrisy.” Christ was the only person to treat him with equality; in god’s eyes we are all people regardless of skin color. Mr. Dorset should especially be familiar with this since he supposedly preaches the word of god.

This was not the only symbolism in the story. I found that doors were constantly mentioned. Perhaps this represented the metaphorical “doors” which were constantly slammed in the faces of or closed to the African American Community. In order to overcome the terrible injustice of racism that was so heavily present in that era was to, you guessed it – rebel. In the end of the story Sergeant says, “You wait,” mumbled the Sergeant, black against the jail wall. “I’m gonna break down this door too.” “Shut up-or I’ll paste you one,” said the cop. “I’m gonna break down this door,” yelled the Sergeant as he stood up in his cell (Hughes 567). What a profound way to wrap up this story; it’s almost as if Sergeant is speaking for all the poorly treated black people in the country. It is a foretelling of how blacks will collectively rise up against the unfair treatment of their people and rebel against the prejudice that was so common-place in that time period.

Langston Hughes wrote this story originally in September of 1934 after a visit to Reno, Nevada. It was inspired by his experience during the Great Depression in the 1930s. This was a particularly difficult time for the country and more specifically, for the African American Community. Writing this story was a rebellious act in and of itself. Langston Hughes wrote this story during a time period that was simply a precursor to the Civil Rights Movement era. In order to gain equality, rebellion was not just an option-it was a necessity.

Another short story that was written by Langston Hughes, which pertains to my topic of: rebellion and conformity, is called “Salvation.” This story is about a young boy who is going to be saved by god in church. He is told about how incredible the moment will be when it actually happens. Unfortunately, he ends up with confusion and sadness when he doesn’t see what he expects.

Langston Hughes wrote this story about an experience he had as a child. There was a specific day when all the youth of the church was to be “saved” by god. His aunt described to him an almost unbelievable set of events that were to occur the moment he was saved. Unfortunately, his aunt never told him she was speaking solely metaphorically, not literally. Soon, the day the youth were to be saved arrives and young Langston sits with the rest of the children in the front pew. The pastor began inviting the children to come and stand with him the second they are saved by Christ. Most of the children clear out pretty fast, leaving Langston and his friend Westley. Eventually his friend (unable to take the pressure from all of the adults) gets up and goes forward. Poor Langston was left all alone in the pew waiting to see what he assumes all the other children have seen. He was waiting for a majestic light accompanied by the appearance of Christ, which never came. Reluctantly, he approached the front of the church to stand with the others; both disappointed and frustrated. Later, at home alone in his bed, he cried because he felt like he lied to everyone and let god down by not seeing what he should have seen. The church members put him in a position to not only question his faith, but his integrity as well.

To all the people in the church this appeared to be a form of rebellion. Young Langston may not have been rebelling; however, he would have been completely justified in doing so. It is unfair to force somebody into something that they cannot completely grasp at such a young age. Education is the cure for this problem, the youngster should be taught about what it means to step forward and then make a decision based on his understanding and belief. Don Alexander, a writer for an online magazine called *Ezine Articles* said it best when he said, “Salvation is an awesome portrayal of what true salvation is all about. It is a heart decision, not just walking down an aisle” (Alexander). More power to those who rebel against force fed religion. That decision is to be made when he or she in question understands the concept of god and whether or not the calling to “step forward” is present.

This is a perfect example of a young boy whose faith was actually damaged by this experience. Linda Sue Grimes is an online author who wrote “Hughes and Salvation: When the Religious Metaphor Fails.” She said, “The unexplained metaphors of ‘light’ and ‘seeing Jesus’ resulted in confusion to the child, who then suffered a loss of faith in the existence of Christ and lost a trust in his own good nature” (Grimes). Langston as a boy should have been taught about what it is to give your life to god. He should have been told that there is no bright white, blinding light that appears when this is occurs. The real change is one that takes place on the inside, not a grand production of sorts seen literally by the eyes.

The final story is one written by a man named Richard Wright, called “The Man Who Was Almost a Man.” It is a story about a young man who is stuck in the awkward part of life between manhood and boyhood. He wishes to receive the dignity and respect that accompanies manhood.

Dave is a seventeen year old boy who works out in the fields during the summer. One day, Dave, feeling particularly resentful about being regarded as a boy, decides that he needs a gun to help force his way into manhood. He goes to the General Store to look through the Sears Roebuck Catalogue to pick out a gun to purchase. Joe, the owner of the store, tells him that he has a pistol for sale and he is willing to sell it to Dave for two dollars. The boy runs home to see if he can get the money from his mother to purchase the gun and after a little arm twisting she reluctantly allows him to take the money. The only stipulation is that he must bring the gun home the next day right away. He takes the money and the next day he purchases the gun; however, instead of bringing his new pistol right to his mother like earlier agreed, he hides it. The next day he gets up early and runs off to work in order to avoid questioning from his mother. Once he is there he hitches up the old mule Jenny and goes out to the fields to plow. He traveled out into the field just far enough to be out of site of anyone near-by, took out the gun and fired off one round. To his surprise, he ended up killing Jenny the mule by accident. When everyone found out about what had happened, Dave was humiliated. He looked even more like a child then before. That night, Dave runs out with his gun, and feeling angry, frustrated and upset, decides to show everyone just how much of a man he really

is. He jumps a Northbound train to freedom from all those who regard him as just a foolish child.

Young Dave was quite a rebellious youth; he was tired of being viewed as a boy and needed to be accepted as a man. He felt the only way to do it was to become completely independent of all those who looked at him in that way. Because he is constantly treated like a kid, he harbors resentment and contempt towards those who view him as such. He works for money that is not his, he lives at home where he is taken care of like a child, his father, mother, boss and coworkers all treat him like a boy.

What is interesting is that in order to purchase the gun he so desires, he has to beg his mother for the money. Once he has the gun, he hides it from his mother and runs off to work without allowing his mother to question him about its whereabouts. All of this is very childish, which is proof that Dave still has some growing up to do. This is generally how it is though, when we are young we desire to grow up as quickly as possible and the opposite is true the older we get.

Dave was so certain that a gun was the only thing more he needed to become an adult. This unfortunately “backfires” on him when he accidentally kills the work mule and looks even more childish than he did before he purchased the gun. Marjorie Smelstor in a critical essay on this story wrote, “Almost a man, however, is a dangerous age to be, for David is neither child nor adult; he is in that painful transition between the two” (3).

In Dave’s position, there is only the one option if he ever wanted to be regarded a man. He must make some kind of radical move to prove his independence. Being independent is the ultimate showing of manhood. When one can support themselves fully without the help of an adult, than one can truly be thought of as a man. That is why jumping that North-bound train, leaving the comfortable behind and setting off on an exciting adventure into the unknown, is incredibly exciting and quite rebellious.

In my own life I have seen the good that rebellion can cause. When I was younger I often wanted to be accepted or part of the crowd. This is dangerous because I was willing to do whatever it would take to be “one of the guys.” This was true all the way up through high-school and even afterwards in the work-a-day world we live in. After barely graduating, I got a job as a truck driver and found myself desperately seeking acceptance again. Drugs and alcohol were common and I was essentially on the road to nowhere. My future did not look bright; it was more and more upsetting as time went on. It’s no fun going to work every day to a job you dislike and being exhausted on top of it.

It was only by rebelling against that desire to be part of the crowd that I could actually begin to focus on what was important. After recognizing exactly what it was that held me back, I was able to move on and pursue happiness. I began caring less about the opinion of my peers and focusing on the improvement of my own life. I decided to quit the dead end job I worked in Montana and move to Illinois for training in the automotive industry. I attended school for one year and it sparked my intense desire to pursue a career in that field. Right now I am attending C.O.D. working on a transfer to attain a Bachelor of Science Degree in Automotive Engineering. I have never been more focused.

It took the rebellion against what was the norm to be where I am today. As unorthodox as this type of rebellion is, I attribute my newfound path in life entirely to the decision. Without it, I would probably be stuck in the same old melancholy that was my life prior. Rebellion is truly misunderstood. When placed in the appropriate context, it can result in exceptional change for the better.

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