

Akin Akinwumi

The influential impact of setting on Ta-Nehisi Coates' life

According to psychology, environmental determinism is being able to change who people become by manipulating the circumstances in which they develop. In storytelling, the setting contributes to the character in a substantial way in terms of conflict, character development, and beliefs. This is extremely evident in the book "Between the World and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates. This book is written in the form of a memoir, addressed to the author's son Samori, telling of Coates' life growing up black in America and how it shaped him into the man he is today.

The city of Baltimore is the primary setting in this book, and it is where the author is born; this city teaches the author fear and survival and is also where he developed his hate for school. Growing up in Baltimore fear was all around him; fear was in the "boys of [his] neighborhood." Fear was "in the first music [he] ever knew" and he even felt fear while visiting his grandmother; Coates felt fear from his parents, saying, "[his] father was so very afraid" (Coates 15). This fear was so strong not only because he was black, but also because of his location. "To be black in Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world," Coates writes "before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease" (Coates 17). This shows that he was not safe in Baltimore; he was exposed to danger which was why it was necessary for him to be afraid and fear seemed to always be around him. This fear also leads into the idea of constant survival. In order to escape "[he] had to survive" and in order to survive he had to be scared. School led into this survival, Coates writes that if people "fail[ed] to comprehend the school and [they] gave up [their] body" (Coates 25). However, the structure of the school system provoked his hate for school and fostered his love for books. Coates states that "no one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction. But a great number of educators spoke of 'personal responsibility' in a country authorized and sustained by criminal responsibility" (Coates 33). The author continues to say that "I devoured the books because they were the light rays of light peeking out from the doorframe, and perhaps past that door there was another world" (Coates 34). Through these pieces of text Coates expresses that schools, in his opinion, were a pathway to failure and destruction; however, through books he saw opportunities to get access into another world. The setting of Baltimore introduced fear to Coates and in this fear, he gained a sense of survival; the schools were his pathway to survival, yet he learned hate for the education system because it never taught him what he truly needed to know, the information he found in books. This hate and love followed him into his college years at the prestigious Howard University.

Howard University in Washington DC is the school Coates attended; this school introduced Coates to love, made him crave for a better education and showed him not all black people are the same. Howard, often referred to by Coates as "The Mecca," was the "crossroads of the black diaspora." In his time at Howard, he saw "everything [he] knew of [his] black self multiplied out into seemingly endless variation" (Coates 40). He met many notable people at Howard: Prince Jones, a scholarly responsible young black man who was killed by a police officer; girl he fell for from California who was part Indian; a bisexual, white Jewish girl from

Pennsylvania who “taught him love in new ways”; and his last love at Howard, a girl from Chicago who grew up without a father, his son’s mother. In meeting these people he formulated new ideas about love, about being black, and about responsibility. Being at Howard not only introduced him to new people, but new passions and works of many influential black writers. At the university he met editors, he saw a teacher who introduced him to journalism, who gave him “another tool of exploration, another way of unveiling the laws that bound [his] body.” He goes on to say that “with journalism, I could directly ask people about..anything else I might wonder. So much of my life was defined by not knowing” (Coates 63). Growing up he never really got the education he desired and had to resort to his books which followed him into Howard as he went to the library most of the time to study. He expresses that, “I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people’s interests. The library was open, unending, free. Slowly I was discovering myself.” (Coates 48). The library was where Coates discovered himself through books and writings of great authors. The setting of Howard, the Mecca, the classroom, and the library influenced Coates to love. It showed him so many different people who had the same skin tone as him and were successful in their pursuit of knowledge. Finally, it showed him how to investigate the world around him, who he was and what he wanted to do with his life.

In conclusion, the setting of a story contributes to the character in a significant way in terms of conflict, character development, and beliefs that are forged. In the book “Between the World and Me” this is extremely evident, as Coates feeds off the energy of his surroundings. Ta-Nehisi Coates, grew up in Baltimore, a city which taught him fear and survival and developed his hate for school. He attended Howard University in which he was introduced to love, the difference in the black race, and craved for a different and informal type of education. This made him the great writer, father, and influential man he is today. Environmental determinism, how we view where we are, determines who we ultimately become.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015. Print.