Black Skin, White Masks

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANTZ FANON

Frantz Fanon was born to a middle-class family in Fort-de-France, Martinique, in 1925. He attended the most competitive secondary school in Martinique, where he was taught by the Martinican anti-imperialist scholar, poet, and politician Aimé Césaire. During the Second World War, Fanon traveled to Dominica to join the Free French Forces and fight the fascist Vichy regime. He was awarded the *Croix de guerre*, a French military honor. Fanon returned to Martinique and supported Césaire's run for office on the communist party ticket. He then traveled to Lyon to finish his education, qualifying as a psychiatrist in 1951. While completing his residency in psychiatry in Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole, he wrote his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, which was published in 1952. Fanon then moved to Algeria, where he worked in a psychiatric hospital, treating both the French soldiers who had been traumatized by torturing Algerians as well as the Algerian torture victims. This experience had a profound impact on Fanon, and he gradually began to focus more on supporting the Algerian liberation efforts, eventually resigning from the French hospital, and shortly afterwards he was expelled from Algeria by the French government. Fanon married a white French woman named Josie and had two children, one from a previous relationship. His most well-known book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, was published just before his death from leukemia in 1961 at the age of 36.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* during a time of dramatic change in world history. In the West at the beginning of the 20th century, Victorian social norms had given way to more progressive and experimental modes of behavior. This social shift is closely related to the advent of psychoanalysis, which began in the 19th century and soared in popularity during the early 20th century. Pioneering psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung encouraged people to think differently about issues such as sex, the family, morality, and what constitutes "normal" behavior, paving the way for writers like Fanon to use psychoanalytic theory to examine broader social phenomena. As a backdrop to all of this, of course, the first and second World Wars had caused global upheaval. The immense suffering they caused, combined with developments in science, led many people to lose their religious faith and turn to systems like psychoanalysis to explain human behavior instead. These wars were also significant in weakening the European empires that had for so long been tyrannizing the world through the practice of colonialism. France's occupation by the fascist Vichy regime brought the issues of racism and colonialism into the spotlight, and in 1946, Martinique was officially made a "department" of France rather than a colony, giving Martinique a more independent status while still maintaining a significant level of economic and political dependence on France.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Fanon was a student of major Martinician postcolonial author Aimé Césaire, whose long essay, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), Fanon quotes at the beginning of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon also quotes extensively from Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), a book-length poem which explores Césaire's relationship to Martinique and which is one of the most important texts in the Négritude movement. Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* during an explosion of anti-imperialist writing inspired by radical shifts in global politics. Other important anti-racist and anti-colonial works from this period include W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938), and Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957). Although *Black Skin, White Masks* is widely read, Fanon's most famous book is *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which also examines the psychological aspects of colonialism.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Black Skin, White Masks* (French: *Peau noire, masques blancs*)
- **When Written:** 1951-52
- **Where Written:** Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole, France
- **When Published:** 1952 (English translation 1967)
- **Literary Period:** Midcentury postcolonial theory
- **Genre:** Postcolonial and psychoanalytic theory
- **Setting:** The book passes through a variety of different regions of the world, but is mainly focused on France and the French Antilles (colonies in the Caribbean), including Fanon's homeland of Martinique.
- **Climax:** When Fanon describes a young white boy shouting on the train: "Look, a negro!"
- **Antagonist:** White colonial society
- **Point of View:** Fanon writes in the first person from his perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Secret spying. Fanon was one of many 20th century black

radicals who was secretly kept under surveillance by the FBI because they saw him as a potential threat to national security—which should serve to illustrate how radical some of his ideas were at the time.

An ongoing legacy. Fanon is one of the earliest and most important influences in the development of the radical theoretical framework known as Afro-pessimism, which theorizes that existing conceptions of blackness and humanity are essentially irreconcilable.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the introduction, Fanon reflects on why he chose to write *Black Skin, White Masks*. He argues that in order to understand racism, we must ask what "man" wants and what "the black man" wants. Fanon seeks to understand the relationship between white and black people, and argues that both groups are trapped within their own racial identities. He argues that psychoanalysis is a useful tool for understanding the black experience, and that, through analysis, it is possible to "destroy" the enormous psychological complex that has developed as a result of colonialism. He gives an overview of each chapter and ends by emphasizing that it is difficult to understand the true nature of black experience because white society has created so many harmful myths about black people.

In Chapter 1, Fanon describes the experience of black Antilleans who travel to France and become "whiter" by assimilating into the colonial culture and language. Fanon explains that when these Antilleans return to their homeland they and are treated as superior, which encourages them to act in a haughty manner. Many black people try desperately hard to "prove" their intelligence to whites, but Fanon warns this is pointless, arguing that intelligence alone "never saved anybody." When a white person speaks to a black person in pidgin, the black person feels their entire sense of self disappearing, since speaking pidgin is a subtle—if unintentional—way that whites remind black people of their inferior status in the colonial order. White people fear well-educated black people, especially those who read revolutionary writing such as the work of Karl Marx. Fanon concludes the chapter by pointing out that some say Aimé Césaire has a more skillful command of the French language than any white Frenchman. Fanon sates that, if this is true, it shouldn't be surprising, since the people of French colonies have just as much of a claim to being French as a white Frenchman does.

Chapter 2 examines Mayotte Capécia's autobiographical novel *I Am a Martinican Woman*, about a black woman obsessed with marrying a white man even though she knows that white men will always see her as inferior to them. The novel is very popular, but Fanon disapproves of it because it advocates "unhealthy behavior." In colonial culture, whiteness is associated with virtue and beauty, and Martinican women like Mayotte have been taught to believe that they can "save" their race by making themselves whiter. They come to feel desperate for white approval, which leads them to act in irrational and self-sabotaging ways. Fanon then turns to a novel called *Nini* by Abdoulaye Sadji. The titular character of this book is a biracial Senegalese woman who rejects the advances of a black man even though he is devoted to her, because she wants to marry a white person. Fanon argues that *Nini* shows how black women internalize racist ideas which they direct at black men and ultimately also at themselves.

In Chapter 3, Fanon looks at the reverse situation: black men who want to sleep with white women. This time he uses René Maran's autobiographical novel *A Man Like Any Other*, about a black Antillean named Jean Veneuse who lives in Bordeaux, France. Jean is talented but neurotic, desperate to prove himself to others. He is in love with a white woman, and although he has white friends who accept him, they do so on the condition of him renouncing his blackness—which only causes him further psychological torment. Fanon considers the fact that many black men desire white women because they want to engage in the vengeful act of "dominating a European woman." Fanon argues that Jean suffers from an abandonment neurosis, which is described by the psychoanalyst Germaine Guex. However, Fanon clarifies that Jean experiences this neurosis differently than a white person would, and that understandings of the abandonment neurosis have to be adapted given this context.

In Chapter 4, Fanon discusses Octave Mannoni's book *The Psychology of Colonization*, in which Mannoni analyzes the psychological relationship between the colonizer and colonized. Fanon criticizes Mannoni's argument that the inferiority complex of colonized people originates naturally in early childhood, arguing instead that the inferiority complex is a direct consequence of colonization. Fanon then examines the ways in which, even among people of color, different ethnicities, nationalities, and religions are encouraged to feel superior to one another. This ultimately helps to maintain the power structure of white supremacy. He rejects Mannoni's argument that the best sides of European culture are not responsible for colonialism, arguing instead that all of Europe is complicit in colonial violence. He also rejects Mannoni's claim that Malagasy people did not have a sense of their own identity prior to colonization, pointing out that instead colonization destroyed Malagasy people's existing culture and identity. He concludes that Mannoni does not truly understand Malagasy culture or have any sense of what this culture could be like if liberated from colonial oppression.

Chapter 5 begins with the most famous passage in the book, in which Fanon describes sitting on the train and hearing a white child fearfully exclaim: "Look! A Negro!". This interaction is deeply painful for Fanon, who feels an enormous sense of anger

in response to the child's fear of him. He describes how racism can engender a feeling of alienation from one's own body. Quoting from Jean-Paul Sartre's argument about the corrosive impact of anti-Semitic stereotypes on Jewish people, Fanon points out that while Jewish people can downplay or renounce their Jewishness, black people can never escape their blackness. Fanon examines the history of how science was used to justify racism, arguing that "science should be ashamed of itself." He moves on to critique the artistic movement known as Négritude, stating that the attempt to reimagine a mystical, precolonial black culture ultimately won't help black people in the present—and that certain aspects of Négritude also ironically confirm racist stereotypes about black people.

In Chapter 6 Fanon evaluates whether psychoanalytic concepts can be usefully applied to the black experience. He argues that the family lives and early childhoods of white people are different from those of black people simply by virtue of racism and colonialism, and therefore many of the predominant psychoanalytic theories developed by white Europeans don't hold true for many people of color. Fanon affirms the existence of a "collective unconscious" of black people and argues that the only way for black people to be healed from the psychological damage of colonialism is through "collective catharsis." Fanon critiques the psychoanalytic idea that all phobias are necessarily caused by childhood traumas. In the case of negrophobia––fear or hatred of black people––the problem is actually rooted in racist colonial culture. At the same time, psychoanalytic theory states that phobias are ultimately sexual in nature, and Fanon believes this to be true in the case of anti-black racism, pointing out that anti-black violence is often sexual in nature. Fanon hopes that over time, the black "collective unconscious" will heal and black people will not feel so profoundly alienated. He concludes the chapter with a case study of a white woman who suffered from tics, which—through psychiatric treatment—were diagnosed as a symptom of her fear of black people.

Chapter 7 considers the work of the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler. Fanon supports certain aspects of Adler's writing while noting that Adler views psychology too much in individual terms, without considering societal issues like racism. Fanon argues that the whole of the Antilles is a "neurotic society" as a direct result of colonialism. He considers the ways in which the psychological dynamic of master and slave still lingers today, even after slavery has been abolished.

In the concluding chapter, Fanon admits that different colonized populations from around the world will need their own, specific solutions to the problems he has identified. He points out that appealing to dignity and reason alone will never change the world—and in some cases, conflict will be necessary. He resolves not to become obsessed with the past but instead focus on the present, and he dedicates himself to ensuring that no one will ever be enslaved again. He concludes with an appeal to true open-mindedness and a prayer that he will always be "a man who questions."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Frantz Fanon – Frantz Fanon is the author and the narrator of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Born in Fort-de-France, Martinique, Fanon was the student of Aimé Césaire, whose work he both praises and critiques in the book. Fanon moves to France during the Second World War, during which he fights to liberate France from the fascist Vichy Regime. He writes *Black Skin, White Masks* while in France, though he spends most of the rest of his life in North Africa. Fanon is a psychiatrist and draws on his own psychiatric research in writing the book. However, much of the evidence he provides about people's psychology does not actually come from official case studies but rather his own anecdotal observations and his readings of works of literature. Furthermore, Fanon's most important "case study" in *Black Skin, White Masks* is arguably himself. Fanon writes about his own psychological and emotional life in starkly honest terms, describing his searing anger at racial injustice and the sense of alienation he feels as a result of colonialism. Although he refuses to provide any sort of artificial resolution to the book or the problems he outlines in it, Fanon does show that by refusing the racist demand to desire whiteness and by embracing his own blackness, he is able to feel less estranged from himself and gain a vision of a better world.

Aimé Césaire – Aimé Césaire is a Martinician poet, critic, and politician. He is also the founder of Négritude, an artistic-political movement influenced by surrealism that celebrates the black diaspora. Césaire's most well-known works are *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (first published in 1939) and *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), both of which Fanon quotes extensively in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Like Fanon, Césaire is a harsh critic of the colonial violence that he argues cannot be separated from European culture, but at the same time, both he and Fanon emphasize the right of colonized people to "claim" the culture of the colonizers as their own.

Mayotte Capécia (Lucette Ceranus) – Mayotte Capécia is the pen name of Lucette Ceranus, author of the 1948 semi-autobiographical novel *I Am a Martinican Woman*. Fanon refers to this book to describe the feelings of self-hatred that colonialism instils in black women, which encourages them to pursue white men at any cost, even when this leads to unhealthy relationships and eventual abandonment.

Sigmund Freud – Known as "the father of psychoanalysis," Sigmund Freud is one of the most important intellectuals of the modern era. Born to a Jewish family in the Freiburg in the Austrian Empire (now the Czech Republic), Freud studied medicine at the University of Vienna. It is difficult to overstate

Freud's impact on the way we understand the human mind today. Fanon's discussion of repressed traumas and desires, dreams, the Oedipus complex, and many other psychic phenomena can all be directly linked back to Freud. However, as Fanon points out, there are major limitations in applying Freud's work to the context of black experience, and Freud therefore remains both an essential interlocutor in Fanon's thinking and an emblem of the ways in which white society is incapable of theorizing black experience.

Karl Marx – Karl Marx is a German philosopher who is widely recognized as the most important theorist of socialism in history. Born in Prussia, Marx is the author of *Capital* (1867-1883) and (with Friedrich Engels) *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Fanon is significantly influenced by Marx's revolutionary vision, but remains critical of many aspects of Marxist thought.

Octave Mannoni – Octave Mannoni is a French psychoanalyst. The entire fourth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* is dedicated to Fanon's critique of Mannoni's book, *The Psychology of Colonization* (1956). Fanon argues that Mannoni accurately observes certain aspects of the psychological dynamic produced by colonialism, but that his argument is also filled with falsehoods and ultimately perpetuates colonial ideology.

Jean-Paul Sartre – Jean-Paul Sartre is a French writer and philosopher, famous for his association with existentialism. Fanon and Sartre mutually influence one another; however, Fanon is also critical of some of Sartre's ideas. For example, he argues that Sartre's point that black people should support Négritude despite its profound flaws is patronizing.

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel – G.W.F. Hegel is an 18th-19th century German philosopher whose work exerts a major influence on both Marxism and psychoanalysis. Hegel is the inventor of the master-slave dialectic, a concept describing how people become conscious of themselves through their recognition by another, which factors into Fanon's argument in several places throughout the book.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Anna Freud – Anna Freud is Sigmund Freud's daughter and a major psychoanalytic theorist in her own right. She is particularly influential in the field of child psychology.

Abdoulaye Sadji – Adboulaye Sadji is a Senegalese writer and educator. He is the author of the novel *Nini* (1954), the tragic story of a biracial woman. Fanon analyzes *Nini* in his discussion of the relationship between racism and romantic love. Sadji is closely associated with Négritude.

René Maran – René Maran is a French Guayanese author who grew up at first in Martinique, then Gabon, before moving to France to attend boarding school. Fanon analyzes Maran's autobiographical novel, *A Man Like Any Other* (1947), which describes the life of a gifted yet troubled black man in France.

Germaine Guex – Germaine Guex is a Swiss psychologist. Fanon uses her book, *The Abandonment Neurosis* (1950), to analyze René Maran's novel *A Man Like Any Other*. Fanon expands on Guex's ideas to include issues of race and racism.

Alfred Adler – Alfred Adler is an Austrian psychologist who is most closely associated with his work on the inferiority complex. Fanon makes use of some of Adler's ideas, but critiques Adler's focus on the individual and his failure to examine psychological phenomena in their wider sociopolitical context.

TERMS

Antilles/Antillean The Antilles is a group of islands in the Caribbean that includes Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. However, **Fanon's** usage of the term refers specifically to the French Antilles, which are the French-colonized Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. The term "Antilleans" here refers to the black population of these islands, whose ancestors originally arrived to the islands as slaves from Africa to work for French colonists.

Narcissism Narcissism is a psychological condition wherein the sufferer's egotistical and self-obsessive qualities are so extreme that they are considered pathological. The term can be used to describe many different types of behavior, but **Fanon** discusses the condition in relation to the phenomenon of Antilleans who spend time in France and come to think they are better than their countrymen as a result.

Pidgin Pidgin languages are simplified, hybrid languages designed to allow speakers of two different languages to communicate with one another. In colonial contexts, pidgin is often used by colonizers to communicate with native people.

Agrégation The *agrégation* is a French civil service examination, which is part of the higher education system in France. It is highly competitive: only the very best students in France take it, and only a portion of those who take it are able to pass. The *agrégation* qualifies people to teach at the lycée level––the final and most competitive stage of French secondary education.

Id, Ego, Superego The terms "id," "ego," and "superego" were invented by **Sigmund Freud** to describe what he understood to be the structure of the psyche. The "id" refers to a person's primal impulses and instincts, the "superego" is the critical, ethical part of the mind, and the ego is the part in the middle that manages the competing aims of the id and the superego.

Neurosis A neurosis is a mental disorder that is mild enough not to be considered a form of illness or psychosis. Psychoanalysts believe that neuroses are the result of childhood traumas which people repress in order to avoid

dealing with pain, and which then surface in the form of seemingly unrelated thoughts and behaviors.

Alienation Alienation refers to the condition of being estranged from oneself and one's surroundings. Its meaning varies in the Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions, but **Fanon** uses it to describe the ways in which black people are made to exist in *relation* to others and to identify with whiteness rather than their own blackness.

Négritude *Négritude* is an artistic and political movement founded by **Aimé Césaire**. *Négritude* writers embrace blackness as a single, global, diasporic identity (rather than aligning themselves with a particular ethnic or national black identity). They reject colonialism and use both Marxism and surrealism to show how art and literature can be used for revolutionary purposes.

Catharsis Catharsis is a concept that comes from Ancient Greek tragedy, and originally meant "cleansing." In psychoanalysis it refers to the release of negative psychic energy, a process which allows people to resolve their unconscious conflicts and recover from past traumas.

Oedipus Complex The Oedipus complex is an important psychoanalytic theory created by **Sigmund Freud** to describe people's repressed desire for their opposite-sex parent, which in turn leads to conflict with their same-sex parent. It is inspired by the Ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King*, about a king who accidentally marries his mother and kills his father.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM, DIASPORA, AND ALIENATION

In the broadest sense, *Black Skin, White Masks* is a book about the powerful effects of colonialism on life in the 20th century. Fanon examines colonialism's impact on black as well as white people in both colonized (or formerly colonized) regions such as the Caribbean, and in the countries of the colonizers, such as France. While the 20th century saw the official end of most of the Western empires that controlled vast stretches of the world, Fanon shows that the legacy of colonialism continues to determine the way that people experience reality in the present. In particular, he focuses on the experience of diaspora and the feelings of alienation that colonialism engenders within colonized peoples, including both those who stay in their homeland or those who, like Fanon, live in the country of the colonizers.

Fanon argues that colonization strips colonized people of their culture, identity, and oftentimes even a sense of their own existence, leaving them in a state of profound *alienation*. Throughout the book, he emphasizes that black people are forced to exist "in relation" or "in comparison" to whiteness. Fanon writes that the crippling effect is that this makes it nearly impossible for anyone to define what blackness means in and of itself. As a result, many black people spend their lives trying to prove themselves "less black" than other black people, and to prove themselves "basically white" to white people—all of which further confuses their sense of self and troubles their relationships to black and white people alike.

Fanon expresses his own struggle to feel a sense of home and belonging, pointing out the ways in which colonialism is to blame for his sense of alienation. As a child educated in the French Caribbean colony of Martinique, he was taught to identify with French culture and to reject the parts of him that make him "other"—in essence, to dis-identify with his blackness and his history as a member of the African diaspora. Fanon illustrates this point by making the incendiary claim them that "subjectively and intellectually the Antillean behaves like a white man. But in fact he is a black man. He'll realize that once he gets to Europe."

As an adult in France, Fanon is faced with constant reminders that he is not "really" French—and he takes a fierce stand against this idea in the book. He insists: "I am interested in French culture, French civilization, and the French. We refuse to be treated as outsiders; we are well and truly part of French history and its drama." Fanon does not advocate a "post-racial" denial that non-white people from French colonies are the exact same as white French people. Rather, he argues that their existence is just as much part of France as that of French whites. France's colonial history and the lives of its colonized peoples are not a minor footnote. Rather, they are a central, intrinsic part of French culture. Fanon has just as much right to identify as French as any white person.

Fanon also explores the ways in which colonialism prevents people from the African diaspora from feeling a sense of community, kinship, and belonging with one another. He admits: "The truth is that the black race is dispersed and is no longer unified." For this reason, black people outside of Africa are alienated from one another and from a sense of their own history, ancestry, and identity. Furthermore, colonial racism discourages black people from colonized nations to identify with Africans. In this way, Fanon shows that colonialism leaves its subjects bereft of a sense of belonging—either in their own culture or in that of the colonizing country—and therefore the most enduring legacy of colonialism is perhaps psychological in its dimensions, resulting in the complete alienation of the colonized people.

MATERIAL VS. PSYCHOLOGICAL OPPRESSION

Fanon, a psychiatrist, is concerned with understanding both the psychological and material (i.e., physical and economic) dimensions of colonialism. This approach to thinking about colonialism was revolutionary at the time of Fanon's writing, when Western beliefs about the psychology of people of color tended to be crude, dehumanizing, and false. Indeed, Fanon points out repeatedly that white Western culture cannot begin to understand or describe black experience. Therefore, Fanon's major achievement in *Black Skin, White Masks* is delineating how the already well-documented material realities of colonialism have shaped the psychological experiences of black people.

Fanon examines the impact of racism on black consciousness, arguing that black people internalize racist beliefs about themselves. The most famous example of this given in *Black Skin, White Masks* is Fanon's description of witnessing a white child seeing him and exclaiming: "*Maman*, look, a Negro! I'm scared!" Fanon explores how repeated experiences such as this inflict lasting damage on black people's self-image, distorting their understanding of themselves in the world. Specifically, he argues that the experience of racism has a *disembodying* effect on black people—meaning that it causes them to feel alienated from their own bodies. He contrasts the experience of anti-black racism with the experience of anti-Semitic racism, making the claim that race, for Jews, is not visible on their skin in the same way it is for black people. He notes that when Jewish people are oppressed it is more on account of racist ideas about Jewish history, ancestry, customs, and religious practices than it is on the actual bodies of Jewish people. Black people, by contrast, are subject to a uniquely *embodied* experience of oppression, and that one of the gravest psychological dimensions of oppression under colonialism is that black people experience themselves as if from outside their own bodies, and even begin to think about themselves in the third-person. This deeply embodied sense of oppression is particularly acute because white people tend to associate black people with the body and with the animalistic side of human existence. Fanon compares the fear of black people to the fear of biology itself, pointing out that black men in particular are associated with their penises within the white imagination. In this sense, Fanon emphasizes the powerful interconnection of psychological and bodily oppression.

Fanon also examines the ways in which the science of psychology has been constructed around white people, cultures, and norms. He argues that the study of psychopathology (neurosis and abnormality within the psyche) does not take into account black experience, arguing: "We too often tend to forget that neurosis is not a basic component of human reality. Whether you like it or not the Oedipus complex is far from being a black complex." Fanon uses his training as a psychiatrist to extend psychological principles to black people while highlighting the ways in which black people have starkly different psychological experiences than whites.

Finally, Fanon writes about the racism of white people through the framework of psychopathology. He discusses white people's "phobic" fear of black people and explains how this irrational fear can itself be seen as an adverse psychological effect of colonialism. He gives an example of a woman whose fear of black people has affected her so deeply that she suffers from debilitating physical tics. By addressing the adverse psychological impact of colonialism on not only black people but on their white oppressors, Fanon suggests that colonialism is not simply a zero-sum game in which white people win and black people lose: rather, it's a lose-lose situation in which both parties are haunted by the violence of colonialism, albeit in very different ways. It's worth noting that the psychological lens through which Fanon examines colonialism is what enables him to craft an argument that colonialism is bad for everybody—portraying racism as a psychological malady that afflicts both the oppressor and the oppressed.

KNOWLEDGE VS. IGNORANCE

Black Skin, White Masks is an academic text, written at the intersection of psychology, philosophy, history, and literary studies. Fanon is forthcoming about his own status as a highly-educated intellectual, but remains critical of the ways in which academic knowledge is entangled with the history of colonialism, not just because the academic worldview tended to be white- and Euro-centric, but because the work of academics has historically been used as justification for racism. On the other hand, Fanon argues that ignorance and misinformation are to blame for many of the problems that exist within the colonial (and postcolonial) world. He criticizes the tendency to too easily accept simplistic or conventional understandings of the world and concludes the book with a "final prayer" against such intellectual complacency: "Always make me a man who questions!"

Indeed, Fanon credits his own curiosity as the reason he is able to see certain truths about human existence that others seem unable to access. He writes: "I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects." This sentence highlights Fanon's struggle as someone with an intensely curious, skeptical, and sharp mind who has been classified as an "object" within the colonial system, but who has leveraged this perspective to try to see *all* people as "objects" of history. According to the racist world order in which he is supposed to exist as a black man, Fanon should not harbor such an intellectual curiosity about the world around him: he is supposed to be the "object" of study rather than the person *doing* the studying.

Part of Fanon's insistence on his own subjectivity involves a

critique of *objectivity*. He admits: "I did not want to be objective… I found it impossible to be objective." Whereas Western thought traditionally prioritizes objectivity as the only way to access truth, Fanon questions whether it is actually possible for humans to be objective. White academics may believe themselves to be objective because their viewpoint is positioned as "universal" within the colonial mentality, but black intellectuals such as Fanon disprove the idea that the white, colonial framework is the objective and true way of viewing the world. Particularly when it comes to socially-constructed issues like race—which have no meaning outside the meaning humans invent for them—Fanon prioritizes subjective experience as an important way of accessing truth.

Fanon is also critical of fields of thought that have been used to justify colonial violence. He points out that much scientific knowledge is infused with racism and at one point exclaims: "Science should be ashamed of itself!" Fanon does not propose that the solution to the use of science to justify racism is to abandon science altogether in favor of irrationality or ignorance. Rather, he argues that knowledge must be developed and adapted to account for the complex realities of the world—particularly when it comes to the experience of people of color. He notes that sticking too rigidly to established forms of thought leads to "intellectual alienation," stagnation, error, and violence. He argues: "Intellectual alienation is a creation of bourgeois society. And for me bourgeois society is any society that becomes ossified in a predetermined mold, stifling any development, progress, or discovery." Although ignorance is dangerous, Fanon shows that certain forms of knowledge can be dangerous, too.

SELF-IMAGE AND SELF-HATRED

As noted in other themes, Fanon argues that colonialism has corrupted people's understanding of themselves. Black people have an image of themselves that is distorted—a negative image constructed by white colonizers. Black people experience the weight of being "hated, detested, and despised" by white society. This leads to feelings of shame and self-hatred. Many black people try to become "more white" as a result, which only induces further shame due to the hopelessness of that task. Fanon describes this experience in visceral terms: "Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea."

Fanon argues that black people's feelings of self-hatred are not only rooted in the internalization of negative stereotypes about their race—but that these feelings also stem from a general lack of recognition of black people as human. He writes: "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of not existing." Fanon implies that this sense of not existing is actually worse than the internalization of the negative ideas about black people created by the colonial mentality. One can try to overcome or disregard negative stereotypes, and even though this might not be fully successful, it can at least create a counter-discourse in opposition to the racist ideas that dominate society. By contrast, the ontological denial of black existence is a far more difficult phenomenon to address directly, and is therefore arguably even more deeply damaging. Approaching one's understanding of oneself from a place of nothingness provides no tools for forming a sense of self-worth or a positive self-image.

Fanon laments the negative impact of colonialism on the formation of black identity. As a result of the transatlantic slave trade, black people born in the Americas have no connection to Africa, their ancestral homeland. They do not know the history, language, and customs of their ancestors, or even the specific regions of the continent from which they originate. Black people from colonized countries are encouraged to identify as colonial subjects rather than members of the African diaspora, and are taught to feel disdain for African people, as Fanon indicates when he recalls how he once felt pride in being Antillean and disgust at the "savage" Senegalese. Of course, these feelings of pride and disgust are manipulated by colonial culture in the interests of the colonizers. When black people like Fanon feel shame and hatred toward Africans, this sows division among black people generally, and furthermore becomes a form of self-hatred. All of this helps to preserve the power of the colonizers and prevent black people from seeking power and revenge against the whites who have so gravely wronged them.

Even within black communities, colonized subjects are taught to hate their own blackness and to distance themselves from members of their race who they believe embody negative stereotypes about black people. Fanon recalls that at times when he misbehaved as a child, he would be scolded for behaving like a "nigger." Once again, Fanon argues that this kind of self-hatred fractures black people's sense of their own identity. Anyone who is taught to hate a fundamental part of themselves will not only be tormented by self-contempt, but will also feel confused about who they are. This is related to the theme of erasure of black existence and the feeling of alienation this causes in black people. Fanon argues that white Western culture has no true understanding of the experiences of black people, only lies. As a result, Fanon argues that it is difficult for black people to gain an understanding of themselves that is separate from conceptions of whiteness, and therefore also tainted by self-hatred.

DESIRE, ASPIRATION, AND COMPETITION

Early in the book, Fanon argues that two questions are central to understanding the world: "What does man want?" and "What does the black man want?" The separation of these two inquiries emphasizes Fanon's argument that black people are excluded from the category of humanity, and also conveys that there are important

distinctions between the desires of white people and desires of black people. Following the conventions of psychoanalysis, Fanon maintains that desire must be the primary subject of any inquiry into human behavior.

Fanon argues that black people are taught to desire whiteness, and it is for this reason that many black people (both women and men) also desire white romantic and sexual partners. However, in his examination of this phenomenon, Fanon highlights differences between the ways in which black women desire white men and the ways in which black men desire white women. Fanon proposes that black women choose to date and marry white men because they have been taught to feel disgust and disapproval of blackness. They have been conditioned to believe that black men are dirty, unintelligent, irresponsible, and inferior—and that white men represent the opposite of these characteristics. According to Fanon, black women's rejection of black men is thus a form of self-hatred, even if they themselves do not recognize it as such. As a result of internalized racism, black women wish to distance *themselves* from blackness, and this produces their desire for white men. Fanon suggests that black men's desire for white women is a little different. He argues that black men feel a sense of competition with other men, and that this makes them want to "win" the most prized object within the colonial sexual economy: white women. Fanon then asserts that black men's desire for white women can be almost vengeful in nature—a way of asserting their own power in the face of racist oppression.

Fanon also explores other ways in which black people are taught to aspire to whiteness. Just as lower classes are taught to aspire to bourgeois identity, black people are encouraged to "assimilate" and imitate white ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving. As a result, black people suppress the aspects of themselves associated with blackness and instead imitate whiteness in order to prove their own humanity to white people. However, this is a rigged game, since a black person can never truly make themselves white, and—no matter how convincingly they strive to *behave* like a white person—will never be fully accepted into white society. Aspiring to whiteness will only create a deeper sense of self-hatred within the black person.

Fanon also examines how nonwhite people compete with one another in their aspiration for whiteness, causing bitterness and lack of solidarity between and within non-white communities. He writes: "The Frenchman does not like the Jew, who does not like the Arab, who does not like the black man." The stark injustices of racism mean that black people are not even presented with the opportunity to compete with white people, and thus instead pit themselves against other non-white people. Once again, this competitiveness ultimately only serves to reinforce white supremacy.

Fanon also discusses the feelings of desire white people have for black people. He mentions the fetishizing of black athletes, white women's sexual fantasies about black men, and white men's fears about black men's supposed sexual superiority. Like other psychoanalysts, Fanon argues that sexual desire and competitiveness are deeply embedded into the racial order and are in fact one of the great causes of racial prejudice and oppression. Even as white people harbor deeply racist views about black people, they also feel desire toward them—however unconscious that desire may be. Fanon writes that in colonial and postcolonial culture, the black person "is yearned for; white men can't get along without him." Desire, aspiration, and competition are thus major elements of the psychic foundation of racism.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MASKS

The title of Fanon's book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, refers to the ways in which black Antilleans strive to be seen as white—by emulating the tastes and behaviors of white people, having white romantic partners, and generally distancing themselves from anything or anyone regarded as being stereotypically black. This phenomenon—in which black people embrace whiteness as the ultimate signifier of a person's basic value—is the main subject of Fanon's investigation in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The book's title provides an apt symbol for understanding the essence of Fanon's thesis: he argues that the white "masks" that black people have fashioned for themselves have resulted in a profound and totalizing sense of alienation. Black Antilleans wear these masks not only in front of white people in a hopeless gambit to secure acceptance, but also in front of black people *and themselves*, thereby creating unbridgeable distances between themselves and their own racial identities and cultural heritage. In this way, masks function above all as a symbol of what Fanon sees as the most significant psychological impact of colonialism on colonized people: their alienation from other black people, from a cohesive sense of themselves, and even from their own bodies.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *Black Skin, White Masks* published in 2008.

Introduction Quotes

All it needs is one simple answer and the black question would lose all relevance.
What does man want?
What does the black man want?
Running the risk of angering my black brothers, I shall say that a Black is not a man.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xii

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has reflected on the question of why he decided to write *Black Skin, White Masks*. He argues that current discussions of race and colonialism are not useful in solving "the black question." Instead, only two questions need to be asked: "What does man want?" and "What does the black man want?" This quotation exemplifies the rather exaggerated writing style that Fanon uses. In order to understand Fanon's writing, it is useful to bear in mind that this is a stylistic choice and doesn't mean that Fanon really believes that the complex questions he addresses can be answered in such broad, general terms.

For example, when Fanon writes that, if we ask what people in general want and what black people want, "the black question would lose all relevance," he does not mean that asking these questions would instantly solve the issue of racism. Furthermore, by suggesting that "one simple answer" would be sufficient, Fanon is not necessarily implying that a simple answer actually exists. As he will show in the book, the answer is in fact very complicated.

In writing "a Black is not a man," Fanon does not mean that black people are *actually* not human. Instead, he is evoking the idea that Western understandings of humanity have developed in such a way to exclude black people. When Western philosophers write about "man," they generally choose to ignore the issues of race and colonialism and to focus on the experiences of white people only. Moreover, colonialism, slavery, and genocide were rationalized through the fact that black people were considered less than human by the white colonizers who perpetrated these forms of violence. This view—that existing conceptions of blackness and humanity are essentially irreconcilable—is integral to Fanon's overall argument that both white and black people must develop new understandings of blackness and humanity.

Less commonly he [the "educated black man"] wants to feel part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that this wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xviii

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon argues that, because of racist stereotypes, well-educated black people can end up feeling estranged from their own race. Usually, they will embrace an image of themselves as different (and better) than other black people. However, in this passage Fanon describes another option: to embrace "the great black hole" of black culture, and particularly "mystical" ideas about precolonial African history. Although this may not be obvious at first glance, here Fanon is critiquing Négritude, the movement founded by Aimé Césaire and other black artists and intellectuals—a movement which sought to celebrate the black diaspora and reclaim precolonial black history.

As this quotation demonstrates, Fanon understands the desires that lead people to embrace Négritude. Black people face such an extreme erasure and denigration of their own history that they begin to feel "feverish" and "frenzied" at the possibility of regaining access to it. However, Fanon is critical of the way that Négritude encourages people to ignore "the present and future in the name of a mystical past." He believes that romanticizing precolonial Africa risks playing into harmful stereotypes about black people, such as the idea that black people are animalistic or hypersexual. He also argues that celebrating the past will not actually make a difference to those suffering the effects of racism in the present.

Chapter 1 Quotes

All colonized people--in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave--position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has argued that black people have two different modes of being: one for when they are around other black people and one for when they are around whites. He has explained that in Chapter 1 he will examine the problem of black Antilleans assimilating into French culture and thereby "whitening" themselves. Here, Fanon introduces two key ideas that will surface repeatedly in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The first of these is the "inferiority complex." Unlike many people at the time, Fanon doesn't believe that colonized populations are naturally predisposed to feeling inferior to whites. Rather, as he points out here, colonialism causes feelings of inferiority to "take root" in the oppressed.

The other important idea is the relationship between the colonized people and the colonizers' culture—particularly the colonizers' language. The issue of language is one of the major themes of postcolonial theory, with many writers asking if it is possible to possess a liberated, radical consciousness when one is expressing oneself in the language of the oppressor. Here, Fanon points out that adopting the language and culture of the colonizer makes the colonized person feel that they have to exist "in relation" to that culture, such that they are constantly comparing themselves to an external "ideal."

❝ When an Antillean with a degree in philosophy says he is not sitting for the *agrégation* because of his color, my response is that philosophy never saved anybody. When another desperately tries to prove to me that the black man is as intelligent as any white man, my response is that neither did intelligence save anybody, for if equality among men is proclaimed in the name of intelligence and philosophy, it is also true that these concepts have been used to justify the extermination of man.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has been considering the reasons why Antilleans are so intent on using the French language and how this is related to the inferiority complex instilled in colonized peoples. He has pointed out that Antilleans seek to prove themselves equal to whites, and that in school Antillean teachers forbid their students from speaking Creole. Here he considers ideas about intellectual superiority and inferiority in the colonial context. One of colonialism's biggest myths is that white Europeans are more intelligent than people of color. As a result, at the time Fanon is writing Antilleans find themselves trying to prove their intelligence to white French people.

However, as Fanon points out here, just because the lie that black people are unintelligent works in service of colonialism does *not* mean that proving the intelligence of certain black people to whites will end racist and colonial violence. Indeed, as he indicates, sometimes black people are killed because their intelligence makes them seem threatening to the colonial hierarchy. Furthermore, he argues that trying to prove one's intelligence in order to make a claim for equal treatment actually plays into colonial ideology, essentially reinforcing the power structure of white supremacy. Equality needs to be based on a recognition of everyone's common humanity, regardless of their level of intelligence. Only then will such hierarchies and injustice finally disappear.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Hatred is not a given; it is a struggle to acquire hatred, which has to be dragged into being, clashing with acknowledged guilt complexes. Hatred cries out to exist, and he who hates must prove his hatred through action and the appropriate behavior. In a sense he has to embody *hatred*.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has been discussing the novel *I Am a Martinican Woman*, which depicts the obsessive love that its black female narrator, Mayotte, feels for a white Frenchman, André. André abandons Mayotte and their child, whom he calls "superior" because of his white heritage. This leads Fanon to meditate on the nature of the feelings white Europeans have for black people. Fanon's view of hatred emerges from his experiences as a psychiatrist and psychoanalytic theorist. It is often assumed that racialized hatred arises naturally, particularly in the context of a colonial dynamic. However, Fanon rejects this idea, showing that there are multiple competing forces inside the mind that are opposed to hatred—such as the guilt white people

feel as the black person's oppressor.

Note that Fanon also describes hatred as something that a person "proves" to others. The implication here is that within racist society, white people demonstrate belief in their own superiority by embodying hatred as a kind of performance to one another and to people of color. There is something optimistic about Fanon's argument here, in the sense that if "it is a struggle to acquire hatred," perhaps that will make it easier for people to let go of feelings of hatred in the future.

❝ Both the black man, slave to his inferiority and the white man, slave to his superiority, behave along neurotic lines. As a consequence, we have been led to consider their alienation with reference to psychoanalytic descriptions.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Having discussed the representation of black women's love for white men in a number of novels, Fanon moves on to bring up his own psychoanalytic observations. Significantly, he argues that it is not just black people who suffer damaging psychological consequences due to race and racism. These consequences also affect white people, who are equally trapped within their own race and experience alienation as a result.

It might seem counterintuitive to argue that it is a bad thing to be "slave to [one's] superiority." Yet throughout the book, Fanon shows that the demand to live up to the idea that you are superior—and in doing so treat other people as inferior—has a deeply damaging effect on a person's psyche. In this sense, he is extending the argument made by Césaire that colonization dehumanizes the colonizer just as it dehumanizes the colonized. Fanon builds on this point by claiming that this mutual alienation requires us to look at colonization in psychoanalytic terms.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Out of the blackest part of my soul, through the zone of hachures, surges up this desire to be suddenly white.
I want to be recognized not as Black, but as White.
But––and this is the form of recognition that Hegel never described––who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man.
I am a white man.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 2, Fanon examined the desire black women feel for white men and the psychology behind this desire. This quotation is the opening of Chapter 3, in which Fanon switches to focus on the desire black men feel for white women. It is important to note that Fanon observes both similarities and differences between black men and women in their desire for whiteness. For black women, loving a white man is an opportunity to elevate themselves to the position of whiteness within society, theoretically opening up opportunities for them and allowing them to feel superior to other black women.

This is also true for black men, but as Fanon points out in Chapter 2, black women who love white men are often mistreated or abandoned by their partners. This quotation implies that the issues of mistreatment and abandonment are not as significant for black men, because of the way that sexism dictates the way men and women are expected to live. As soon as they are loved by a white woman, black men feel confirmed in their humanity. They do not necessarily need to remain in a relationship with this woman to experience this confirmation, and this is why, as Fanon will explain in the chapter to come, Antillean men who travel to France will often pay to sleep with white sex workers as soon as they get off the ship.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I did not want to be objective. Besides, that would have been dishonest: I found it impossible to be objective.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker), Octave Mannoni

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter 4 is a critique of the white French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni's book *The Psychological of Colonization*. Fanon has admitted that the book has some good insights, but laments the fact that Mannoni has aimed to write from an "objective" point of view. Fanon rejects the idea that writing objectively about colonialism is desirable or even possible. He claims that certain topics, including racism and colonialism, *require* a subjective view to be understood properly. As he will show, what passes for "objectivity" is usually just a repetition of colonial ideology. Because the colonial view is the dominant ideology, people tend to accept it as "objective" despite the fact that it reflects the subjectivity of the colonizer more than that of the colonized. Fanon's point here also explains why he chooses to write *Black Skin, White Masks* from a first-person perspective, including autobiographical detail and anecdotal evidence alongside more traditional scholarly methods.

> The Malagasy no longer exists… the Malagasy exists in relation to the European. When the white man arrived in Madagascar he disrupted the psychological horizon and mechanisms.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In his critique of Mannoni's *The Psychology of Colonization*, Fanon has argued that Mannoni fails to accurately describe "the situation" of colonialism. Fanon emphasizes that an important part of this "situation" is the erasure of the identity of the colonized. Colonial ideology claims that colonized populations did not really have a civilization or culture prior to colonialism. Therefore, when colonizers come in and impose their own way of life on the colonized, nothing is really being taken away. However, as Fanon argues, the reality is that colonized populations *did* have their own civilization and culture, as well as a sense of their own identity. Thus, when colonizers arrive and force the colonized to think of themselves only in relation to whiteness, the colonized person is left feeling like he or she "no longer exists."

> The Frenchman does not like the Jew, who does not like the Arab, who does not like the black man. The Arab is told: 'If you are poor it's because the Jew has cheated you and robbed you of everything." The Jew is told: 'You're not of the same caliber as the Arab because in fact you are white and you have Bergson and Einstein." The black man is told: 'You are the finest soldiers in the French empire; the Arabs think they're superior to you, but they are wrong." Moreover, it's not true; they don't say anything to the black man; they have nothing to say to him.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has described the seven dreams in Mannoni's *The Psychology of Colonization*, which demonstrate the irrationality of the fear of black people. Fanon admits that he was once shocked by the hatred North Africans feel for black people. However, he eventually came to understand that colonialism encourages a strict and complex hierarchy of races that pits people of color from different ethnicities, nations, and religions against one another. Ultimately, this strengthens white domination because if there is no solidarity between people of color, any challenges to white power will be divided, and hence weaker.

This passage also demonstrates the way that even so-called "positive stereotypes" always have the ultimate purpose of bolstering racism. If Jewish people are told that they are more "white" and "intelligent" than Arabs, then not only does this encourage discrimination against Arab people, it reinforces the association between white people and intelligence. Fanon also uses this passage to suggest that there is something unique and exceptional about anti-black racism. Although black people are at the bottom of the colonial hierarchy, they do not receive the same treatment as other non-white people. Fanon states that although other non-white people experience discrimination, they "don't have anything to say to the black man," suggesting that anti-black racism is so powerful that it cancels out the possibility of dialogue.

Chapter 5 Quotes

I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon opens Chapter 5 with two exclamations: "Dirty nigger!" and "Look! A Negro!" Here he explains that such phrases make black people feel like "objects" rather than people with their own consciousness and reason. This is particularly painful for Fanon given his desire to understand and analyze the world. He knows that he has important insights, but in one moment a single white person––even if they are only a child––can make it seem as if these insights count for nothing. In this sense, Fanon demonstrates the power of racism against even those who have dedicated their life to understanding how racism operates. Again, it is important to use a psychoanalytic framework to capture the full horror of being seen as an "object."

Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When they like me, they tell me my color has nothing to do with it. When they hate me, they add that it's not because of my color. Either way, I am a prisoner of the vicious circle. I turn away from these prophets of doom and cling to my brothers, Negroes like myself. To my horror, they reject me. They are almost white. and then they'll probably marry a white woman and have slightly brown children. Who knows, gradually, perhaps . . .

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has described the crushing self-consciousness and hatred caused by experiencing racial prejudice. He has argued that the psychological reaction to such experiences involves a total unravelling of black people's sense of self. Here, he describes white people's habit of claiming that whether they like or dislike him has "nothing to do with" his race. Although some people think this is a compliment or a sign of progress, Fanon shows that it is actually dehumanizing and causes alienation. After all, the reality is that Fanon *is* black, and that his race does in fact determine his experience of the world. As a result, when white people claim to not take his race into account, they are actually refusing to acknowledge him.

Fanon then points out that he cannot find solace in a sense of communion with other black people because they have chosen to reject their own blackness and are now "almost white." Of course, as Fanon points out throughout the book, it is actually impossible for black people to make themselves *truly* white, which is part of why the delusion of becoming "almost white" is all the more damaging. On the other hand, he shows that by marrying white people and having biracial children, black people could end up erasing blackness altogether.

Two centuries ago, I was lost to humanity; I was a slave forever.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has discussed the fact that science has now "proven" that there is no biological difference between people of different races, but points out that in the past science was instrumental in justifying and encouraging racism. He has declared that "science should be ashamed of itself." In this quotation, he points out that the institution of slavery did more than just enslave people who were alive at the time—it also placed their descendants in the symbolic category of the slave "forever." This might seem exaggerated or like it contradicts Fanon's later statement that he is not enslaved in the same way that his ancestors were.

However, it is important to note that when Fanon says "I was a slave forever," he does not mean he was literally condemned to the physical experience of enslavement. Rather, the legacy of slavery is that the symbolic mark of "slave" is attached to every black person. This is partly because, as Fanon points out here, modern Western ideas about humanity developed against the backdrop of slavery. The underside of the Western idea of "man" is the idea of who is not a man––in other words, the slave. Although slavery has been abolished, these ideas have not gone away.

Chapter 6 Quotes

In Europe and in every so-called civilized or civilizing country the family represents a piece of the nation. The child leaving the family environment finds the same laws, the same principles, and the same values. A normal child brought up in a normal family will become a normal adult. There is no disproportion between family life and the life of the nation.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has explained that psychoanalysis is founded on the connection between one's experiences in childhood and one's behavior as an adult. He has pointed out that in Europe, the power of the father in the family not only mirrors the power of the nation's rulers, but prepares the child to accept this kind of authority. Here Fanon explains that in Western countries the family is a microcosm of the nation, and that the nation as a whole is deeply invested in what takes place in the family. The values of the nation are transmitted through the family, and thus the nation needs to make sure that families are "normal," i.e. that they are transmitting these values correctly.

It is important to read this passage in the context of psychoanalysis and the way the family appears within the psychoanalytic tradition. Psychoanalysis connects the adult mental state and behavior back to what took place in a person's childhood. If a person grew up in a family that was not "normal," this will surface in their adult behavior, even if they are not able to consciously remember these abnormalities. Here Fanon suggests that examining the family in this way can be considered part of the project of boosting the nation's power. This is problematic if, as in the case of "civilizing" countries, these nations are the perpetrators of colonialism.

Since the racial drama is played out in the open, the black man has no time to "unconsciousnessize" it. The white man manages it to a certain degree because a new factor emerges: i.e., guilt. The black man's superiority or inferiority complex and his feeling of equality are conscious. He is constantly making them interact. He lives his drama. There is in him none of the affective amnesia characteristic of the typical neurotic.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has included some passages by Freud explaining how people repress the traumatic memories that cause them to develop neuroses. Repression in turn makes these neuroses difficult to overcome. Fanon argues that white people repress racism because of their feelings of guilt. In contrast, however, black people do *not* repress the issues of race and racism: indeed, even if they wanted to, it wouldn't be possible because they are constantly reminded of their status as "inferior." In this way, Fanon shows that traditional ideas within psychoanalysis (such as the connection between repression and neurosis) must be adapted in the case of black experience to account for their subjection to systematic oppression and racism.

Still on the genital level, isn't the white man who hates Blacks prompted by a feeling of impotence or sexual inferiority? Since virility is taken to be the absolute ideal, doesn't he have a feeling of inadequacy in relation to the black man, who is viewed as a penis symbol? Isn't lynching the black man a sexual revenge? We know how sexualized torture, abuse, and ill-treatment can be. You only have to read a few pages of the marquis de Sade to be convinced. Is the black man's sexual superiority real? Everyone knows it isn't. But that is beside the point. The prelogical thought of the phobic has decided it is.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has argues that anti-black racism is rooted in fear about black people's sexuality, yet has also suggested that this "fear" is a manifestation of white people's (inexpressible) sexual desire for black people. Here he discusses the way that anti-black racism is also built out of white fears about black people's supposed sexual prowess. He points out that "everyone knows" that myths about black people's sexual superiority––such as the idea that black men have larger penises than white men––are foolish and untrue. Yet the fact that people know this consciously doesn't actually matter: the idea is "prelogical," meaning that it has a lasting power *even when* the logical part of people's

minds tells them it is false.

This is one of the instances in which Fanon most convincingly shows how psychoanalysis can be usefully applied to the issues of race and racism. One of the things that is most puzzling about racism is the fact that it is so irrational, based on stereotypes and fears that are so absurd it is hard to believe anyone actually thinks they are true. As Fanon shows, the "truth" of such ideas is really beside the point. We learn far more about the way racism operates by examining the irrational and often contradictory characteristics of human psychology than by trying to prove or disprove racist beliefs.

Chapter 7 Quotes

The Antillean does not possess personal value of his own and is always dependent on the presence of "the Other." The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, or less good than I. Every self-positioning or self-fixation maintains a relationship of dependency on the collapse of the other.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon opens Chapter 7 with a quotation from *The Neurotic Constitution* by Alfred Adler, in which Adler explains that neurosis causes sufferers to pursue a "fictitious goal." Fanon then returns to his argument that black people are forced to exist "in comparison" to others. Fanon repeats this idea many times over the course of the book, which emphasizes its centrality to his overall argument. As Fanon shows, existing in comparison to others creates a relentless competitiveness in the minds of black people, a competitiveness which will never be satisfied because it is less about actual inferiority and superiority than it is about lacking a sense of independence and self-worth (or, in Fanon's words, "personal value").

Fanon also uses this passage to show how this condition of existing "in comparison" is a type of psychological dependency. As he argues elsewhere in the book, colonizers create a material dynamic of dependency by extracting the natural resources of countries while simultaneously building infrastructure that convinces the native population that they "need" the colonizers to survive. In this passage, Fanon shows that alongside this material dependency there is a *psychological* dependency, which involves the colonizers taking away the colonized population's sense of self and identity, such that the colonized no longer understand themselves except in relation to the colonizers.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Intellectual alienation is a creation of bourgeois society. And for me bourgeois society is any society that becomes ossified in a predetermined mold, stifling any development, progress, or discovery. For me bourgeois society is a closed society where it's not good to be alive, where the air is rotten and ideas and people are putrefying. And I believe that a man who takes a stand against this living death is in a way a revolutionary.

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

In the concluding chapter, Fanon has considered what it will take for there to be change in the world. He knows that appealing to reason and human dignity alone will not be enough to end racism. Here, he critiques "bourgeois" societies that encourage narrow-mindedness and discourage curiosity. This is important, because bourgeois culture's image of itself is of a culture that encourages education, intellectualism, and creative expression through the arts. However, Fanon rejects this as false, pointing out that bourgeois society is in fact only interested in replicating existing hierarchies of power.

This passage also highlights what Fanon perceives to be the connection between critique and revolution. Although Fanon does not think that intellectual work alone is enough to transform the world, he does maintain that those who are curious and dedicated to the pursuit of truth—those who work against the oppressive force of mainstream ideology—are "in a way revolutionary."

My final prayer:
O my body, always make me a man who questions!

Related Characters: Frantz Fanon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Fanon has discussed his hopes for the future, expressing the belief that people need to let go of the past—and to all notions of superiority and inferiority—in order to communicate properly and recognize each other as human. He hopes that there will be an end to humans exploiting and "instrumentalizing" one another. In the final lines of the book, Fanon repeats his commitment to curiosity, which he frames as the characteristic he most values in himself.

Note the fact that Fanon addresses his "prayer" not to God but to his own body. This is significant in light of the fact that, throughout the book, Fanon has argued that he experiences race and racism *through* his body. By calling on his body to sustain his curiosity, Fanon emphasizes the idea that the experience of being a black person creates a special kind of knowledge about the world, in part because of the way that black people experience issues of race through their bodies. This final cry also reiterates the idea that Fanon does not need an external force to help him transform the world—that the tools he needs lie within himself.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Fanon begins with a quote from *Discourse on Colonialism* by the Martinician writer Aimé Césaire, which describes the negative psychological impact of empire on colonized peoples. Fanon warns that he is not "the bearer of absolute truths," and that no one asked him to write this book, particularly not the people "for whom it is intended." He considers the different ways people address race and the legacy of colonialism, which he feels are inadequate. To Fanon, the truly important questions are: "What does man want?" and "What does the black man want?" He argues that "a Black is not a man," and that instead black people exist in a "zone of nonbeing."

At first glance, Fanon's arguments can seem alarming. Be careful to note that in making a statement like "a Black is not a man," Fanon is not *arguing that black people are inhuman. Instead, he is making the point that Western ideas of humanity have been built on the foundation of anti-black racism. "Man" is supposedly a universal term, but the image of "man" created in Western culture is white.*

Fanon's aim is to "liberate the black man from himself." He refuses to sympathize with the perpetrators of colonialism and denounces both white people who patronizingly "love" black people and black people who try to make themselves white. Fanon wanted to write the book three years ago, but was too angry to do it then. He seeks to understand the relationship between races, and argues that while black people want to be white, white people try to live up to the "rank" of whiteness. Both are trapped within their own race. Some whites see themselves as superior to black people, and some black people try desperately to prove that they are equal to whites—all of which adds up to a cycle that needs to be broken.

Fanon's insistence that both white people and black people suffer because of the way they are trapped within their respective racial identities is important: it shows that, for Fanon, the idea of race itself—rather than racism alone—is the problem. Even though whiteness is supposed to be superior to blackness, white people's lives are also made worse (although to a lesser degree) by the existence of racial categories.

Fanon argues that it is essential to use psychoanalytic thought in order to understand black experience. According to the psychoanalytic framework, the problems people experience—both personally and socially—tend to originate in childhood. Starting in childhood, black people develop an inferiority complex that is initially rooted in their economic oppression, and then in their *internalization* of the idea that they are inferior. Fanon emphasizes that even though the psychological element of oppression is crucial, liberation can only come about through material (economic) redistribution.

One of the most important elements of Fanon's contributions to the canon of race theory is his employment of the psychoanalytic framework to examine social injustice. Trained as a psychiatrist, Fanon draws upon traditional psychoanalytic concepts (such as the origins of neurosis in childhood) and adapts them so that they are relevant to black people's experience.

Thus far in history, the relationship between black people and white people has created "a massive psycho-existential complex" that Fanon aims to "destroy" through analysis. He is aware that many people—both black and white—will not be able to see themselves in the descriptions he gives, and argues that if people *do* recognize themselves, then this is a sign of progress. Fanon insists that he is writing for the present, rather than the future. He describes the structure of the book's contents, pointing out that the fifth chapter—which describes black people's journey to understand black identity—is especially important. Fanon argues that white culture has created a false image of black people, which makes it difficult to grasp the true nature of black identity.

Unsurprisingly for an intellectual, Fanon is hopeful that reaching the truth through analysis and critique has the potential to instigate meaningful social change. This is not to say that Fanon thinks that intellectual pursuits alone will solve the issues created by colonialism and racism—but he believes that without tackling the psychological issues behind race and racism, it will be impossible to transform the world into a just place for everyone.

CHAPTER 1: THE BLACK MAN AND LANGUAGE

Fanon places huge importance on language. He argues that black people exist in two modes: one when they are around other black people, and the other when they are in the company of whites. In this chapter, he will outline the way that black Antilleans become "whiter" through their absorption into the French language. All colonized people are forced to think of themselves in relation to the language and culture of the colonizers, and are taught to consider the colonizing country as vastly superior to their own homeland. Antilleans who travel to the major cities of the colonizing country and assimilate into the colonial culture are treated with awe by those who do not leave the Antilles. They stop speaking Creole, using it only to communicate with servants; other Antilleans will describe them as "almost white."

The importance of language as a vehicle for colonial oppression is one of the most important themes in postcolonial studies. As Fanon shows, language is not simply a neutral tool through which people express themselves: rather, language gives people a sense of their own identity. When Antilleans who go to France stop speaking Creole except to servants, it is as if they have assumed the identity of the colonizer (even though their race means that they will never actually *be in the colonizer's position).*

Antilleans who spend time in France imitate the "correct" pronunciation of the French language to a degree that is at times almost comic. Fanon would like to see a study of the way that black people's psychological state changes after only one month in France, and believes it is important to address the issue of narcissism. He argues that France casts a "spell" on black people in the colonies, due to the fact that everyone who occupies a position of authority in the colonies originates from France. When Antilleans return from France, they deliberately "forget" the way things work in their homeland, are highly critical of their countrymen, and behave in an authoritative manner.

Here Fanon elaborates on the idea that colonialism encourages the colonized population to aspire to the experience and position of the oppressor, the end result of which is nothing less than the complete alienation of the colonized population from their own heritage, culture, and way of life. This is one of the most significant ways that colonialism promotes feelings of self-hatred among the colonized population.

Fanon reemphasizes the way that returnees from France speak in a new language, and points out that this is not just true of people from the Antilles but in fact all colonized peoples. Black people from the Caribbean tend to think of themselves as superior to Africans, because they are closer to French culture and thus to whiteness. For example, there is no solidarity between Antilleans and Africans who are serving in the army. Instead, Antilleans align themselves with the white Frenchmen. Black citizens of different nations within the Caribbean also feel superior to one another—for example, some Martinicans feel that they are better than Guadeloupeans.

As you can imagine, Fanon thinks the competitiveness and lack of solidarity between black people (and even between different black Caribbean populations) is pointless and harmful. Note that the idea of racial (or ethnic, national, tribal) superiority is not unique to Western colonialism. Still, the terrible power of Western empire is to blame for greatly exacerbating this issue among colonized populations.

Fanon brings up the common stereotype that black men are like children, but argues that the problem of the inferiority complex is far more complicated than this. Antilleans speak "correct" French in order to prove themselves to whites, and as schoolchildren they are forbidden by their teachers from speaking Creole. While many black people feel pressured to prove their intelligence to whites, Fanon emphatically states that philosophy and intelligence "never saved anybody." While he is describing black people who have become "alienated" because of colonialism, it is important to remember that white people are equally alienated.

Fanon's statement that "intelligence never saved anybody" may appear confusing, given that elsewhere in the book he emphasizes the importance of intellectual thought in undoing the damage of colonialism and racism. However, at this moment Fanon is rejecting the myth that if only black people were able to "prove" their intelligence to whites, their persecution would end.

Fanon speaks from a position of curiosity and inquiry. He knows that the history of black people "takes place in obscurity" and that he must therefore illuminate this history himself. Some people try to prove the equality of the races by appealing to religion, love, and generosity, but this is not Fanon's goal. Instead, he is trying to "liberate" black people from the psychological oppression caused by colonialism. Frequently, a white person will speak pidgin to a black person, supposedly out of kindness and generosity—while in reality it is deeply patronizing toward the black person. White people will protest that there is no harm meant, but this is not the point. The effect is that the black person feels his very self disappearing. When white people speak pidgin, the aim to remind black people to remain in their position of inferiority.

Fanon is not convinced by the idea that kindness, generosity, and love are enough to fix racism. As he shows in this passage, white people can claim (and perhaps they sincerely believe) that they are acting in a kind manner to black people. However, racism is so deeply entrenched in people's psychology that it is often not enough to simply try to be kind (or claim that you are being kind). Instead, people must understand how their way of thinking has been shaped by racism and then actively work to undo this. In the example Fanon gives, the white person's act of "kindness" only serves to reaffirm existing power structures.

When Fanon speaks to a non-French white person who has only a limited command of French, he communicates in a simple manner while reminding himself that this person has a language and culture of their own. Yet within the colonial mindset, black people do not have a culture of their own, and are understood only in terms of racist stereotypes invented by white people. These stereotypes are conveyed through books, movies, and other elements of culture, and their impact is to trap black people within a false image of themselves. Black people who defy these stereotypes—for example, by being highly intellectual—are treated with suspicion.

One of the major themes of "Black Skin, White Masks" is the idea that black people are excluded from the category of humanity within the colonial mindset and are thus not treated with the basic decency and respect that all humans deserve. Indeed, this becomes something of a vicious cycle, because the more whites treat black people as less than human, the less convinced they become that black people are human.

White people fear that if black people are well-educated, they will revolt against white supremacy (particularly if they are reading authors who challenge existing power structures, such as Marx). Fanon notes that some Antilleans who return from France continue to speak Creole and deliberately try to make it seem as if "nothing has changed," yet this act is unlikely to last long, since the returnee in fact *has* changed. Fanon argues that Antilleans who wish to become white will achieve this aim in the sense that, through their use of the French language, they can appropriate French culture. He recalls being told by a white Frenchman that he was "basically… a white man" because he had been speaking about French poetry.

In this passage, Fanon highlights both the positive and negative ways in which knowledge can be used—as a tool and a weapon. On the one hand, knowledge of radical political theory (such as the writing of Marx) may help empower people to fight oppression. On the other, colonial societies associate intelligence with whiteness, and thus when someone like Fanon reveals his high level of intellect and education, he will be told that he is "basically" white.

Black people speak French in order to enter spaces and unlock opportunities from which they'd otherwise be excluded, but also to prove themselves to white people. When Aimé Césaire was running for office in 1945, his speech was so powerful it made some audience members fall on the floor convulsing. Some have said that Césaire has a command over the French language unmatched by any white person, and Fanon comments that if this is true, it shouldn't really be surprising considering Césaire is "a Martinican with a university agrégation."

Throughout the book, Fanon repeatedly argues that as a result of colonialism, European culture no longer "belongs" only to white Europeans but equally to colonized populations. Therefore, to suggest that there is anything surprising or exceptional about Césaire's masterful command of French wrongly implies that French culture and language belong exclusively to white French people.

CHAPTER 2: THE WOMAN OF COLOR AND THE WHITE MAN

Fanon argues that real love requires freedom from the conflicts in our unconscious. In this chapter, he will explore how real love is impossible until the problem of the black inferiority complex is resolved. He quotes Lucette Ceranus's semi-autobiographical novel *I Am a Martinican Woman*, written under the pseudonym Mayotte Capécia. In the quotation, the narrator expresses her desire to marry a white man alongside her knowledge that, from the perspective of white men, black women are "never quite respectable." Fanon notes that the novel was hugely popular, but he asserts that it advocates "unhealthy behavior."

In I Am a Martinican Woman, *Mayotte Capécia (unintentionally) demonstrates how the inferiority complex instilled in black people by colonialism and racism prevents them from engaging in healthy relationships. Mayotte desires a white man even though she knows that white man view her as inferior. Her desire to be seen and associated with whiteness is more powerful her desire for a healthy relationship.*

The novel portrays Mayotte's unconditional and self-sacrificing love for a white man whom she loves because of his whiteness—and through whom she hopes to become white herself. However, she is not accepted by white society because of her race. Fanon considers ideas that associate whiteness with virtue and beauty, and blackness with the earth, the cosmos, and the id. He argues that both white and black people are doomed to remain in battle with their own racial identities. He analyzes moments in the book where Mayotte tries to symbolically blacken, and later whiten, the world around her. Fanon laments that she doesn't provide an account of her dreams, which would provide a useful insight into her psyche.

Mayotte is not ignorant. She knows that if she chooses to date or marry a white man, he will view her as inferior to him. However, Fanon argues the psychological forces of racism have thoroughly infiltrated her subconscious, and the result is that she desires something that she knows to be irrational. Despite being aware that she will never truly be accepted by white people (and will certainly never actually become *white), Mayotte still organizes her life around this impossible goal.*

Martinican women like Mayotte have been taught to believe that their race will be saved by becoming whiter. Fanon personally knows many female Martinican students in France who swear they will never marry a black man. They say that they are not demeaning black people, but that it is simply a fact that being white is better. They suggest that Césaire speaks proudly about blackness as a way of making up for this natural inferiority. Fanon worries about these women returning home to the Antillles to teach children.

The argument that white is better raises a difficult ethical dilemma. On one hand, it is obviously not true that whiteness is actually *superior to blackness. This is a lie created by racist societies. At the same time, the women Fanon describes are correct in pointing out matter-of-factly that white people have more advantages in French society than blacks. Fanon doesn't judge the women for wishing to access these advantages through marrying white men, but worries about others accepting this as a fact rather than striving to change the perception of black people as inferior.*

Fanon considered submitting a version of *Black Skin, White Masks* as his thesis for medical school; however, he knew he needed to first do further work in understanding the psychology of black people. He wonders if the black women who wish to marry white men will ever acknowledge that they are harboring a doomed desire. He thinks they won't, because they simply crave "whiteness at any cost." He mentions one black woman who claimed to be "almost white," and another who kept a list of clubs where she was certain not to meet any other black people.

Here Fanon provides further examples of the understandable but irrational ways of thinking that racist societies engender in people of color. In their desire for "whiteness at any cost," the women Fanon is describing abandon all respect for themselves and other black people, falling into a cycle of self-hatred. This sad reality speaks to the power of racism on people's psychology.

Fanon wonders if black people can overcome the feelings of "abasement" that have been instilled in them. He quotes Anna Freud on the lengths people go to in order to avoid confronting pain. Fanon notes that black people are led to believe that the only escape from suffering comes through "the white world," and thus many black people become desperate for "white approval." In *I Am a Martinican Woman*, Mayotte's white husband leaves her, giving her instructions on how to raise their son whom he describes as being "superior" to Mayotte herself.

Although Fanon critiques the behavior of Mayotte and women like her, by explaining in detail how this behavior originates, he shows that it is hardly the fault of these women that they desire and in some cases choose to pursue white men. The tragic fate of Mayotte suggests that there is nothing inherently progressive about interracial relationships: her white husband sees their biracial son as superior to Mayotte because he is half-white.

Fanon considers the nature of white Europeans' feelings about black people, arguing that it is actually a "struggle" to acquire the feeling of hatred, since it clashes with already-existing feelings of guilt in the white psyche. He goes on to analyze the work of the Senegalese writer Abdoulaye Sadji, and in particular his novel *Nini*, which describes the life of a biracial woman named Nini who desperately wants to become white. Nini receives the marriage proposal of a devoted black man names Mactar, but Fann notes that their union would be "illogical" within the colonial racial hierarchy. Like Mayotte and her husband, Mactar is "the slave of Nini" because of her proximity to whiteness. Ultimately, she rejects him and even requests that the police punish him for his audacity in pursuing her.

The story of Nini is part of what has come to be known as the "tragic mulatto" narrative within literature. Because of her biracial identity, the "tragic mulatto" figure does not truly belong in either the world of white people or black people, and thus ends up isolated and alone—not fully accepted by whites, and alienated from blacks. The fact that Nini and Mactar's relationship is "illogical" within colonial culture—despite the fact that Mactar truly loves Nini—shows how sinister the impact of colonialism is at the most personal level.

At another point in the novel, Sadji describes the excitement Nini feels upon hearing news of a different biracial woman, Dédée, marrying a white man. Fanon notes: "Overnight the mulatto girl had gone from the rank of slave to that of master… she was no longer the girl wanting to be white; she was white." Fanon compares *Nini* to another novel featuring a well-educated biracial woman who also rejects black men as "savage." He states that it is a worldwide phenomenon for black women to desire white men due to their own internalized feelings of inferiority.

In this passage Fanon shows how the legacy of slavery continues to impact the lives of people of color long after slavery itself has ended. Dédée's ascendance from "the rank of slave to that of master" shows that the perception of a racial hierarchy which had been the basis of slavery remains in place. The use of the word "savage" is a similar instance of black people internalizing colonial prejudice.

Black Skin, White Masks is the result of seven years of psychiatric experiments and observations, which have proven to Fanon that both white people and black people suffer from neuroses related to their imprisonment within their own conceptions of race. Black people in particular experience alienation, insecurity, and self-hatred as a result of racism. Fanon mentions the case of a black medical student who felt that he would never be respected by the white medical world, which drove him to drink. When he enlisted as an army doctor, he refused to join a colonial unit because he wanted to have white men working underneath him. Fanon brings up another example of a black customs worker who was extremely harsh to white Frenchmen because otherwise they would never respect him.

Like his teacher and friend Césaire, Fanon is careful to point out that it is not just black people who psychologically suffer as a result of race. Although white people have placed themselves on top of the colonial racial hierarchy, this doesn't mean that white people are unaffected by race and racism. Indeed, as Césaire points out in "Discourse and Colonialism" and Fanon elaborates here, the act of being racist has a corrosive, dehumanizing effect on white people.

Fanon will refer to the work of three theorists in order to build an impression of black people's worldview: Alfred Adler, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Sigmund Freud. He returns to the characters of Nini and Mayotte, wondering if it is possible for black people to find different patterns of behavior.

Adler, Hegel, and Freud are three famous white European theorists. By applying their work to the experience of black people, Fanon continues to reject the idea that white culture belongs only to white people.

CHAPTER 3: THE MAN OF COLOR AND THE WHITE WOMAN

Fanon argues that black men desire white women because, through being loved by a white woman, black men feel recognized by the world as white and closer to the white ideal that racist culture upholds. He will examine René Maran's seemingly autobiographical novel *Un homme pareil aux autres* (*A Man Like Any Other*), about a black Antillean called Jean Veneuse who has lived in Bordeaux, France for many years. In the novel, Jean states that white Europeans do not understand black people. It is possible to describe Jean as an "introvert" or a "sensitive person." He is talented, but shy and anxious, and is desperate to "prove to… others that he is a man."

At first glance, Jean Veneuse's psychological issues don't necessarily have anything to do with race. After all, shyness, sensitivity, and a desire to prove oneself are characteristics that anyone can experience for any number of reasons. However, as Fanon will show, racism has such a powerful impact on people's psychology that even seemingly unrelated issues are often traceable back to race in some way.

Jean is in love with a white woman named Andrée Marielle, who has in turn written to say that she is in love with him. However, Jean feels that he needs a white man to give him permission to be with her. He seeks the advice of his white friend Coulanges, who tells him that since he left his home country as an infant and is so connected to Bordeaux, he is "really one of us." Coulanges emphasizes: "You only look like a black… you think like a European. That's why it's only normal for you to love like a European." Fanon notes that although Coulanges has given his permission for Jean to marry Andrée, he does so on the "condition" that Jean renounces his blackness and thinks of himself as a white Frenchman.

At first it may seem as if Jean's white friend Coulanges is behaving in a kind way by accepting Jean as "one of us." However, as this passage develops it becomes clear that even if Coulanges thinks he is being kind, in reality his words are deeply cruel and dehumanizing. Not only does Coulanges maintain the belief that white people are superior—he also denies the reality that Jean is truly black, thereby denying Jean's existence.

Jean cannot accept Coulanges' demand that he renounce his blackness. He knows that many black men in France desire white women not because they truly love them, but because they wish to have the vengeful "satisfaction of dominating a European woman." He wonders if his own motivations are really different than these men. Historically, black men who were caught having sex with white women would be castrated. Fanon notes that Antillean men newly-arrived in France tend to be obsessed with the prospect of sleeping with a white woman, and that it is a "ritual of initiation" for them to stop at a brothel at the port in Le Havre before heading to Paris.

This passage contains a powerful examination of the way that racism and sexism interact. According to Maran and Fanon, black men choose to enact revenge for colonial violence on the bodies of white women. Although white women are not innocent within the colonial dynamic, the dynamic of black men using the bodies of white women as a site of revenge perpetuates a cycle of violence.

Fanon returns to analyze Jean Veneuse using Germaine Guex's book *The Abandonment Neurosis*. Guex argues that the abandonment neurosis consists of an anxiety surrounding abandonment, which leads to "aggressivity" and "devaluation of self." Fanon argues that Jean suffers from this neurosis, which manifests itself as bitterness about the past, low self-esteem, and feeling that no one understands him. His experiences of abandonment as a child make it difficult for him to desire and accept love as an adult. He does not believe he is worthy of love, and is constantly searching for acceptance by white people while believing he is not deserving of it.

In this passage Fanon demonstrates how common psychological experiences like that of abandonment can intersect with the experiences of black people and the ways in which they are shaped by racism. Anyone can develop an abandonment complex because anyone can be abandoned as a child. However, Jean's version of this complex plays out in a very specific way due to the further alienation he experiences as a black man in a racist world.

Guex writes that as a result of these issues, the person who suffers from abandonment neurosis becomes obsessed with the feeling of being excluded from society. He is permanently in the position of "the Other" (or at least so it seems to him). Fanon adds that the abandonment neurotic can never feel certain of another person's love, even if that person states it clearly. Although Jean Veneuse has a rich intellectual and creative life, he nonetheless feels ashamed of himself. He is socially paranoid and distrusts the possibility that anyone truly likes him. Fanon emphasizes that Jean's problems should be understood as a general psychological condition rather than an experience unique to black people. Fanon seeks to show that black people can understand their experiences through the framework of psychoanalysis.

Much debate exists over whether a traditional psychoanalytic framework like the one Fanon employs can actually be transposed onto the lives of black people in this way. While Fanon believes that psychoanalysis is a useful tool for analyzing the experiences of black people, others have argued that psychoanalysis should not be used to try to describe the experiences of a group of people based on their racial identity alone. Fanon's argument proceeds under the assumption that some general statements can be made about the psychological experiences of—for instance—black Antillean men, but that even these experiences vary according to the specific individual.

Fanon emphasizes that Jean Veneuse's feelings about white women are not inherent to the condition of being a black man, but rather are the product of Jean's own personal alienation. It is vital not to think of race as a "stain," and not to accept the conditions of alienation that European culture imposes on black people—since the only way forward then is to aspire to become white and seek the approval of white people. Fanon claims that there is an alternative solution, but that it requires "restructuring the world."

Here it becomes clearer that the psychoanalytic tradition can serve a useful role in understanding black experience precisely because *it helps to show that not every black person's experience and behavior is the same. Fanon emphasizes that the black population is, naturally, just as internally diverse as any other population.*

CHAPTER 4: THE SO-CALLED DEPENDENCY COMPLEX OF THE COLONIZED

This chapter begins with a quote from Aimé Césaire about how every person is implicated in the torture and humiliation of others. Fanon explains that this chapter will cover the French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni's book *The Psychology of Colonization*. Fanon admits that Mannoni's work is "intellectually honest" and that on some level he has captured the psychological dimension of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. However, Mannoni has failed to reach the truth of the matter. Fanon criticizes Mannoni's claim to objectivity, arguing that *subjectivity* is crucial to truly understanding the psychology of colonization.

Pay close attention to Fanon's distinction between truth and objectivity; note that he does not *use these terms interchangeably. Fanon believes in truth and is an ardent advocate of its importance. However, he rejects the notion that the way to get to truth is through objectivity. Particularly when it comes to an issue like colonialism, striving for objectivity is not a useful way of accessing the truth.*

One problem is that Mannoni argues that the psychological complexes that exist in colonized people have existed since childhood. Fanon objects to the idea that neuroses caused by colonialism pre-exist colonialism itself. He declares that "society is racist or is not," and those that claim certain countries and regions are less racist than others are misguided. Fanon is resistant to the idea that only black people can understand the problem of racism, but adds that Mannoni—who is white—has not truly understood "the despair of the black man confronted with the white man." Fanon argues that he does not write from an objective position, and that in fact such a position is impossible.

Here Fanon identifies a point of conflict between the white European psychoanalytic tradition and the experience of colonized populations. Traditionally, psychoanalysis locates the origin of all neurosis in the traumas of childhood. Yet surely the trauma of colonialism has a far greater impact on the lives of colonized peoples than ordinary childhood traumas––in this way, Fanon identifies the limits of the usefulness of traditional psychoanalysis.

Fanon argues that wealthy people encourage anti-Semitism among the less well-off because the rich benefit from popular anti-Semitism. He turns to the example of South Africa, arguing that racism does not originate with certain groups of people, but that the entire structure of the country is racist. Mannoni argues that colonial racism is different from other forms of racism, but Fanon rejects this, arguing that "all forms of exploitation are identical" because they all target other humans. Fanon is personally insulted by anti-Semitism because he is invested in the welfare of his "brother," the Jewish man. He includes a quotation from *Discourse on Colonialism* in which Césaire argues that Nazism was the application of colonial violence—which had previously only been directed at non-Western people of color—to European populations.

Once again we see Fanon extending and expanding on the work of Césaire. Césaire's argument (that Nazism was the transposition of colonial violence into the European context) is one of the most important ideas in the early development of postcolonial theory. European theorists tended to treat the Holocaust as a unique and unprecedented horror, but—as intellectuals like Césaire and Fanon point out—there are in fact many precedents to Nazism in the history of empire.

In contrast to Césaire, Mannoni claims that "European civilization and its best representatives are not responsible for colonial racism." Fanon argues that this statement is false. In reality, every member of a certain nation or culture is responsible for what is done on behalf of that nation. Fanon states that the whole of Europe "has a racist structure," contradicting Mannoni's claim that France is one the least racist countries in the world. Mannoni argues that one needs to be a member of a minority population in a certain country in order to experience racism. However, Fanon points out that white people are a minority in South Africa, and yet it is black South Africans who are the victims of racism.

Fanon's critiques of Mannoni's points may seem obvious: there is no denying, for example, that black South Africans experience racist persecution even though they are clearly the majority population. However, bear in mind that many of the ideas Fanon is critiquing remain powerful in the present day. For example, many people in the West cling to the belief that Western culture overall is not "responsible for colonial racism."

Fanon concludes that "*it is the racist who creates the inferiorized*." This echoes Jean-Paul Sartre, who argues that "it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew." Fanon argues that Mannoni only leaves two options for colonized people: develop an inferiority complex, or become dependent on one's "superiors" for a sense of self-worth. He also claims that Mannoni "forgot" to actually describe "the colonial situation." The reality of this situation is that colonized people have stopped "existing" in their own right, and are forced to exist "in relation to the European." The arrival of colonizers in a country creates an economic, social, and psychological "wound."

Fanon's statement about "the racist who creates the inferiorized" refers to the fact that concepts of race are developed through racism; unlike language or religion, "race" is not an inherently meaningful idea, nor is it neutral. Whereas differences in language, for example, can be objectively acknowledged, race is an inherently hierarchical invention.

Mannoni claims that when white people arrived in Madagascar, Malagasy people "discovered" they were human, then discovered that humanity is divided into white and black, and then sought to achieve equality with white men. However, Fanon points out that prior to colonization, Malagasy people had a coherent sense of their own identity that had nothing to do with white people. Colonized people do not suffer because they are inferior to white people—they suffer because white people *treat them* as inferior. In response, colonized people try to make themselves white in order to prove to white people that they are human.

Here Fanon exposes the dishonest and self-justifying logic of colonialism. Throughout the history of empire, colonizers would rationalize their violent acts by arguing that colonized people were themselves violent "savages" who believed white people were superior. Of course, in reality these ideas are all completely false.

Mannoni doesn't understand this because he insists that the dependency complex is a fundamental part of colonized people, and that only some kinds of people are psychologically suitable for colonization, reemphasizing the idea that colonized people's feelings of inferiority and dependency were instilled *through* colonization. Fanon comments that when he is treating black patients, he must not consider their psychological experiences in isolation but in the context of the world. He aims to help black people avoid the demand to "whiten or perish" by enabling them to understand the ways in which their psychological problems are related to the racist world around them.

As Fanon has mentioned before, at the moment the only options that society gives to black people who are struggling with psychological problems is to "become" white. This is because, in racist culture, whiteness is associated with goodness and wholeness. However, as Fanon has shown, trying to become whiter will of course not help black people—in fact, it will only serve to worsen their feelings of self-hatred and alienation.

In *The Psychology of Colonization*, Mannoni analyzes seven dreams that he claims are indications of am irrational fear of black people. Most of the dreams feature the dreamer being haunted, chased, or attacked by black people (or black animals that symbolically represent black people). Fanon admits that after first moving to France, he was shocked to learn that North Africans "despise" black people, but goes on to explain the way that racist culture encourages different ethnic groups to hate and look down on one another. Fanon emphasizes that people's individual desires, fears, and neuroses are influenced and even created by the society in which they live. It is wrong to deny the real-world resonance of the symbolism in dreams by always framing these symbols in traditional psychoanalytic terms, rather than acknowledging their racial significance.

At the time Fanon is writing, many volumes of psychoanalytic literature already exist that are dedicated to the analysis of dreams. This literature theoretically explains what the symbolism in dreams refers to. However, as Fanon points out, such writing is seriously undermined by the fact that race is almost never considered an important factor in this symbolic scheme. Once again, the European psychoanalytic tradition is shown to be working with too narrow a frame of reference.

Mannoni describes "the Prospero complex," which describes the colonizer's feelings of paternalistic superiority and also his irrational fear that his daughter will be raped by "an inferior being." Mannoni notes that those who experience the Prospero complex have failed to understand that groups of people who are different from them inhabit worlds of their own, which must be respected. Fanon concludes by reiterating that it is the colonizers who instill the "feeling of inferiority" in the colonized, and that this feeling did not preexist colonization. He argues that Mannoni has no knowledge of the psychological character of Malagasy people in precolonial times, nor does he have any sense of what the Malagasy character might be once freed from colonial domination.

Again, Fanon's point about Mannoni's profound lack of knowledge of the Malagasy people may seem obvious to us now. However, throughout the history of empire, the colonial dynamic encouraged European colonizers to see themselves as "experts" on the cultures of the colonized, even if they actually had little to no knowledge of these cultures. Indeed, one way in which this "expertise" proliferated was through the lie that colonized populations did not have *a culture or civilization prior to colonization.*

CHAPTER 5: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE BLACK MAN

The chapter begins with two exclamations: "Dirty nigger" and "Look! A Negro!" Fanon notes that such phrases turn black people into objects. After hearing them, he wants the person who said them to give a sign confirming that he is indeed human, but gets nothing. As long as black people remain living in black nations, they will not have to exist "for others," an idea Fanon adapts from Hegel. Fanon argues that colonialism has destroyed people's ability to grasp the ontology of blackness—meaning that it is impossible for people (of all races) to understand what it means to exist as a black person. This is due to the way colonialism forces black people to live *in relation* to white colonizers.

The concept of "ontology" is essential to understanding Fanon's work, but its meaning can be quite difficult to grasp at first. In philosophy, ontology refers to the part of metaphysics that deals with thinking about the nature of things as they are. Thinking about blackness in ontological terms means asking questions like "What is blackness?" and "What does it really mean to be black?" Therefore, the difficulty inherent in grasping the ontology of blackness is that it has historically been defined Euro-centrically—that is, by *European whites and* in relation to *whiteness.*

Due to this ontological erasure, black people are cut off from their own bodily experience, forced to view themselves "in the third person." Fanon considers the cumulative effect of hearing a child on a train shout: "Look! A Negro!" over and over again, followed by "I'm scared!". He argues that if he had only heard that phrase once it might be easy to dismiss, but hearing it multiple times leads to a complete crisis of identity. He feels self-conscious about his body and an awareness of the history of his ancestors. Fanon returns to the scene on the train, adding that the child's mother urges Fanon to ignore the boy, saying "he doesn't realize you're just as civilized as we are." Yet this does not make it any better.

Here Fanon contrasts two forms of racism: one exhibited by the child, and the other by his mother. The child has internalized racist ideas which have led him to fear black people. Because he is too young to know any different, he expresses this fear openly. The child's mother suppresses her instinctive feelings for the sake of politeness. However, her assurance that she knows Fanon is "civilized" shows that she still associates civilization with whiteness.

Fanon runs through all the negative stereotypes and fears about black people, before writing that the little boy now cries: "*Maman*, the Negro's going to eat me." Fanon feels crushed by whiteness and filled with anger. When a woman remarks, "Look how handsome that Negro is," Fanon reacts with the same fury, responding: "Fuck you." He is roused by the thought of a conflict, but is disappointed by the reality that white people respond to his righteous anger only with further rejection. He feels determined to "assert myself as a BLACK MAN."

Again Fanon returns to the idea that expressions of kindness, desire, and love can be just as hurtful as open racism because both are often undergirded by the same racist ideas and only serve to reinforce existing power structures. The woman who comments "how handsome that Negro is" is exoticizing and fetishizing Fanon—marking him out as strange, different, and inhuman. *This is why Fanon wants to assert himself as both black—the way people see him—*and *a man—which is manifestly* not *the way people see him.*

Sartre argues that Jewish people are constantly fearful of confirming anti-Semitic stereotypes, and that this fear corrupts their personalities. Yet Fanon points out that it is possible for Jews to hide or downplay their Jewishness, and that, while Jewish people have faced terrible persecution, unlike black people they do not suffer from being "trapped" in their own race in the same way, since black people cannot hide their blackness. Fanon desires nothing more than to be "unnoticed." He feels ashamed and humiliated, and cannot even find solace in other black people, as they have internalized racist ideas and are constantly trying to make themselves white.

One of the most tragic elements of Fanon's portrayal of black existence is the intense isolation caused by racism. Fanon feels a sense of solidarity with Jewish people, and yet remains distanced from them due to the differing nature of their oppression. Similarly, he cannot connect with black people who have chosen to reject their own blackness. These experiences show how racism creates a matrix of dimensions to the isolation felt by people of color because of racism.

At the time Fanon is writing, there are many black doctors, teachers, and priests, so it might seem to some as if negative stereotypes about black people are dying away. However, he points out that black doctors exist in a precarious situation. If they make a single mistake it will be taken as proof that black people are not capable of being doctors at all. White people claim to hope that "color prejudice" will soon "disappear," but Fanon must still live with the torturous knowledge that he is irrationally "despised" on account of his race. Science has now proven that there is no biological hierarchy of the races, and that, from a biological perspective, people are all the same. Yet while white people reluctantly acknowledge this, they have remained steadfast in their opposition to sexual and romantic intimacy between different races.

Here Fanon describes the way that even as racism seems to be changing, its root—the belief in white supremacy—remains the same. While there are many surface-level indicators of racial progress (such as the existence of black doctors and white people's claims to want racism to disappear), in reality there are still powerful expectations, codes, stereotypes, and practices that reinforce the idea that black people are inferior to white people. One difference is that at the time Fanon is writing, these phenomena are perhaps more likely to be unspoken than was the case in the past.

Examining the way that science has been used to justify racism in the past, Fanon exclaims: "Science should be ashamed of itself!" He then returns to the comparison between anti-black racism and anti-Semitism. Some people say that anti-blackness and anti-Semitism are essentially the same thing, but Fanon clarifies that while all anti-Semites are also prejudiced against black people, the reverse is not necessarily true. At a certain point, Fanon decided to take pride in his blackness and in black culture. Having been irrationally rejected by white people, Fanon refuses to participate in irrationality himself. Instead, he embraces the "bitter brotherhood" of black people.

Note that Fanon's criticisms of science do not mean that he is rejecting science point-blank. Fanon is, after all, a scientist himself who believes that medicine, psychiatry, and the quest for truth can all play a significant role in achieving social justice. At the same time, Fanon's relationship with science is decidedly ambivalent. At many points in history, science's potential for good has been overshadowed by its use for sinister purposes.

Fanon includes quotations from Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, the central text of Négritude. He acknowledges the power of "black magic," eros, and rhythm, but cautions that celebrating these things can give the impression that black people are "backward" and "naïve." Claiming that black people have a special relationship with the body and earth can in turn reveal that white people lack such a relationship. Fanon quotes an American friend who writes that when white people feel they have become too "mechanized," they turn to black people for "human sustenance." While it may give black people relief to be "recognized" in this way, Fanon emphasizes that this is really a false assurance.

This is the point at which Fanon really launches into his critique of Césaire. In "Notebook of a Return to My Native Land," Césaire celebrates blackness through a surrealist lens. Yet Fanon is concerned that Césaire's understanding of blackness can be too easily coopted by white people and used to reinforce harmful stereotypes about black culture, ultimately empowering racism rather than combatting it.

White people often claim that black people are supposedly magical, poetic, or animalistic in nature because they are at an earlier stage of human development. Yet from his own reading Fanon knows that there were advanced black civilizations that long preceded the colonial period. Fanon quotes another passage by Césaire, in which he argues that precolonial black populations were both technically advanced and morally superior to the violent white colonizers who destroyed their way of life. However, once again Fanon points out that it is easy for white people to coopt a view like Césaire's. White people might claim that precolonial black civilizations were gentle and kind in the same way that children are gentle and kind, and that, again, this is because black people are at an earlier stage of development than whites.

Fanon spends a great deal of time refuting arguments whose falseness and racism probably seems painfully clear to modern readers. However, some might respond to Fanon's critique of Césaire by claiming that he is too cynical, and that even the most revolutionary thinking can be coopted to reinforce the status quo. Fanon is highlighting the way that everyone—even preeminent anti-colonial intellectuals like Césaire—has been influenced by colonial ideology. Ridding one's mind of that ideology requires rigor and arguably even a bit of paranoia.

Fanon moves on to quote Sartre's critique of the fact that followers of Négritude tend to be "militant Marxists," who substitute a focus on the issue of race for the more universal issue of class. Fanon admits that when he first read Sartre's words, he was deeply hurt. Although Sartre goes on to suggest that black people embrace Négritude anyway, Fanon finds this patronizing and not at all reassuring. Fanon is left with a feeling of total loss, and re-emphasizes that "the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man." Black people suffer from the feeling that they do not exist, and live in fear of themselves. Fanon is determined to embrace the depth and fullness of his own existence in spite of racism. However, this is difficult and painful.

Sartre's critique of Négritude might seem confusing at first—since he accuses the first artistic-political movement to celebrate the black diaspora of prioritizing class over race. Although this may sound unlikely, later generations of anti-colonial theorists have reiterated Sartre's point, and even Césaire himself reversed his position soon after "Discourse on Colonialism" was published. While Césaire was once optimistic about a global interracial working class fighting in solidarity for change, over time he lost this sense of optimism.

CHAPTER 6: THE BLACK MAN AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Fanon states that it is time to assess whether psychoanalysis offers useful insight into black people's consciousness. Psychoanalysis situates all mental and emotional problems in the context of the family. In Europe, the family is patriarchal: the father has the most power in the family, and his power represents the power of the nation on a small scale. The health of the nation depends on people living in healthy, "normal" families. Parents are entrusted with raising their children to follow social and moral rules. Children learn to submit to authority within the family environment.

In ordinary conversation, families are mostly discussed as units of love, care, and comfort. In this passage, Fanon presents the family in a notably different light: as an instrument of state power and thus of racism and sexism. This may at first seem far-fetched, but Fanon shows how children are taught to accept authority (and particularly the authority of men) through the family structure.

Fanon argues that black people do not fit into this model because "normal" black people who grow up in "normal" families will becomes "abnormal" as soon as they encounter white society. Fanon includes several passages by Freud in which Freud argues that neuroses are normally the result of not one but multiple traumas. Freud also explains that people repress the traumas that cause neurosis, which seems like a solution but in fact makes the neurosis difficult to treat. Fanon considers the possibility of a "collective unconscious" of black people, in which the conflict between the white "Master" and black slave is submerged. This means that even black people who have never personally interacted with a white person can still be psychologically damaged by the legacy of colonialism and slavery.

The notion of a "collective unconscious" may sound somewhat farfetched to some, but this concept is in fact quite widely accepted (although it is not always expressed in the psychoanalytic terms Fanon uses). For example, scientists have shown that the descendants of people who experience major trauma (such as slavery or the holocaust) "inherit" trauma through their genes. This genetic inheritance is arguably another way of understanding the idea of a collective unconscious.

Fanon suggests that the solution to this widespread psychological damage is "collective catharsis." All societies need to have avenues through which people can express their anger. Children's comics such as Mickey Mouse can be one such avenue, but the problem is that these cartoons were written by white people for white children. They contain racist imagery and thus cannot perform the function of catharsis for black children (even though they are beloved in the Antilles). Comics encourage black children to identify with the white heroes of the story, which sows further feelings of internal conflict and self-hatred within the black population. Fanon suggests that there should be special comics, songs, and history books designed for black children to help them avoid feelings of alienation.

Here Fanon shows that even a children's comic like Mickey Mouse can be far from neutral. Walt Disney himself was deeply racist, and many children's cartoons are filled with racist imagery. Furthermore, even something as seemingly innocent as a white comic hero can, as Fanon argues here, have a negative impact on black children. Although a single white hero won't do any damage, the self-esteem of black children drops when they are not culturally represented.

Fanon argues that white families preserve and replicate society's values and overall "structure." He repeats the argument that Antilleans in France are forced to feel "inferior" to white people. For black people, racism is an external matter, not something that is easily repressed or forced into the unconscious. However, because white people feel guilty about racism, they *do* repress the issue of race. It is easy to feel as if neuroses are an inevitable part of human existence, but this is actually not true. Fanon argues that the Oedipus complex, for example, is not a black experience, perhaps because black populations tend to be more matriarchal (meaning that mothers have a more powerful role as heads of the family).

The Oedipus complex is a psychoanalytic idea which describes a sexual desire for one's parent of the opposite sex (although it mostly refers to the dynamic between boys and their mothers). The sexual desire itself is repressed, but evidence of it lingers, such as in the form of antagonism with the same-sex parents. Although the theory is highly important within traditional psychoanalytic theory, today it is widely regarded as an overly simplistic conception of the family dynamic.

Before Césaire and Négritude, most Antilleans did not even think of themselves as black. When black people encounter white culture, they experience a psychological fragmentation and see themselves as "the Other." Psychoanalysts believe that phobias are the result of an early trauma having to do with the mother, but Fanon questions this in the case of "negrophobia," or fear of black people. He wonders if white women's fear of being raped by black men is in fact a manifestation of their desire for black men. Similarly, negrophobic men might in fact be "repressed homosexuals," afraid of their unacknowledged and illicit attraction to black men. Where anti-Semitism is based in the fear of Jewish people's supposed ability to "take over" institutions of power, anti-black racism is rooted in fear of black people's sexuality.

The relationship between anti-black racism and sexuality is very important. Fanon's claim that the persecution of black people often takes on thinly-veiled sexual significance. Meanwhile, psychoanalysis is deeply concerned with sexuality, and thus fits well with this issue. However, it is also crucial to understand that the relationship between anti-black racism and sexuality doesn't have *to be understood in the psychoanalytic terms that Fanon offers here, and many would find them reductive.*

This sexual element of antiblackness helps explain white people's obsession with black athletes, whom they routinely turn into objects of erotic fantasy. White men are famously paranoid about the superiority of black men's sexual virility. Even though this idea of superiority is obviously false, it remains powerful—like all phobias—precisely *because* it is irrational. Fanon emphasizes that we must understand psychoanalysis not in universal terms, but in the context of particular issues such as racism. He gives the example of the fact that anti-Semites do not castrate Jewish people—rather, castration is an act of violence used on black people specifically due to the sexual nature of anti-black racism. Black people are viewed as a "biological danger," whereas Jewish people are seen as an "intellectual danger."

As is clear by this point in the book, Fanon is not afraid to make sweeping generalizations. In saying that anti-Semitism is about fear of Jewish intelligence while anti-black racism is about fear of black sexuality, Fanon is not implying that there are no sexual elements to anti-Semitism or that anti-Semitic oppression has been free of sexual violence. Rather, he is point to a general pattern with the hope of beginning to make sense of how people's prejudices translate into specific acts of violence.

Racism leads white people to associate black people with animals, biology, sex, the body, the devil, and sin. White people circulate absurd stories to perpetuate these racist stereotypes, including a story Fanon mentions having heard from a sex worker about a white woman who had sex with a black man and "lost her mind" as a result. Fanon also mentions the stereotype that white women who have slept with black men lose interest in men of their own race. Again, such stories and stereotypes are irrational, yet they are deeply powerful.

Part of what makes psychoanalysis useful in understanding racism is the fact that it focuses on explaining irrational behavior. Why do people act against their own interests, or maintain belief in something that is obviously false? Understanding people's "pre-rational" and repressed impulses is one way of explaining irrational acts and beliefs.

Fanon notes that while his focus is on the Antilles, there are black populations living under Belgian and British colonial rule as well as independent black nations, and it is thus difficult to make generalizations about the race as a whole. One commonality, however, is that "wherever he goes, a black man remains a black man." White people "need" black people, but will not let black people exist on their own terms. Fanon reiterates that white people's fears about black people are irrational, and that many white people harbor masochistic fantasies about black people. He returns to the issue of white women's desire for black men, suggesting that many white women have repressed desires to commit violence against women and thus come to fantasize about being violently harmed by black men in a sexual context.

Some feminist critics object to Fanon's discussion of women's desire for violence, pointing out that it seems dangerously close to the argument that women secretly want to be raped. Indeed, this fits into a larger criticism of the sexism of psychoanalytic thought. On the other hand, we don't have to interpret Fanon as arguing that women desire rape. In light of the fact that white women are forbidden from expressing desire for black men, there is perhaps little surprise that this desire morphs into an apparent appetite for violence.

Black and Jewish people are both associated with evil within the racist white mindset, however, Fanon argues this is more acute in the case of black people. Some Jewish people internalize anti-Semitic ideas, decide to reject their own Jewishness, and will speak in a violently anti-Semitic way themselves. Fanon hopes that *Black Skin, White Masks* will be a "mirror" through which black people "can find the path to disalienation." Fanon has noticed that black people are increasingly trying to universalize their own experience, which risks blinding them to the unique severity of anti-black racism.

While many different colonized and oppressed populations around the world have experienced horrifying trauma and violence, it is generally agreed that there is something uniquely severe about the persecution of black people in history. For this reason, Fanon warns against black people universalizing or comparing their own experience to that of other groups.

Fanon remains optimistic that the "collective unconscious" of black people can be transformed in the future, just as people anticipate that in 100 years' time, the Jewish collective unconscious will be transformed after the trauma of the holocaust. He rejects the idea that the collective unconscious is the same across all humanity and that its characteristics are fixed. The transformation of the black collective unconscious will be difficult due to the intensity of anti-black racism and the need to "move slowly." Anti-black sentiment is embedded in every aspect of European culture, linking blackness with evil, while whiteness is associated with beauty, innocence, and goodness. Black people, including Fanon himself, are coerced into feeling suspicious of their own blackness.

It can be gauge how optimistic Fanon is about the possibility of progress. Here he expresses hope in the idea that black people's collective unconscious can be healed, and even indicates that it might take around 100 years, which—depending on how you look at it—could be a fairly optimistic prediction. Elsewhere in the book, however, Fanon writes that the only way black people will be seen as human is if the world ends as we know it. Although his message is at times hopeful, it often seems to be deeply pessimistic about the prospect of meaningful change.

In European culture, black people are the scapegoats who "shoulder the burden of original sin." Black people internalize this idea, and when they behave morally they think of themselves as "not black." Yet even black people who strive toward whiteness will be reminded by white people that they are not truly white. Fanon includes more quotations from Césaire's *Notebook*, in which Césaire claims that he recognized the "white man" he had internalized within himself and decided to "kill him." The "black problem" is not rooted in the coexistence of white people and black people, but in the legacy of genocide, slavery, and colonialism that was committed against black people by whites. Fanon insists that black people are not outsiders to France but "truly part of French history and its drama."

It might seem surprising that, after such a vicious critique of European culture, Fanon still insists that black people are part of France—but he does so because he rejects any attempt to return to a precolonial period or mentality. Although colonization is a terrible crime and trauma, nothing can change the fact that it happened. The only way to work toward healing and equality, Fanon suggests, is to acknowledge and address the legacy of colonialism.

Fanon describes a case study that took place in a psychiatric hospital in France, concerning a 19-year-old woman with a nervous disorder that caused her to have involuntary tics. The woman explained that the tics normally happened while she was at work. The head doctor at the hospital prescribed waking-dream therapy, and this revealed that the woman dreamed about a "black drum" and half-naked people dancing to its rhythm. In another session, it is revealed that the people dancing are black and "look evil." The dancers are going to "burn a white man" who hasn't done anything wrong. An angel persuades the dancers to let the man go free. In the next session, the woman meets the "chief" of the dancers and decides to join them in their dancing. The head doctor wrote that these treatments significantly improved the woman's health and that her tics stopped.

The case study of the young woman highlights the way that racism is deeply embedded in people's unconscious. This woman lives in France, so her only contact with the tribal Africa she envisions in her dreams is through the racist imagery and ideas that exist in French culture. Nonetheless, these ideas—however abstract—terrify her so much that they manifest themselves in the form of nervous tics. This story is thus a demonstration of the strange, immense, and irrational power that racism wields.

In a conversation with the doctor, the young woman reveals that her father was a veteran of the French colonial army and that he used to listen to "black music" when she was a child. She became afraid of this music and the idea of black men it conjured, and her siblings would exploit this fear and play drums around her. Fanon concludes that the girl's mental instability is the result of her fear of black men, and that although her treatments appear to be creating progress, it is unlikely that she is ready to rejoin society.

The inclusion of this case study serves as a model for how awareness of the intersection between race and psychology can help individual patients while also creating a more just society. At the same time, Fanon also highlights the limitations of psychoanalysis alone in the face of the overwhelming racism that exists in the world.

CHAPTER 7: THE BLACK MAN AND RECOGNITION

Fanon includes a quotation by Alfred Adler arguing that neuroses are shaped around a "fictitious goal" which dictates the behavior of the sufferer. Fanon wishes to consider this idea in the context of black people. He returns to the concept that black people exist "in comparison" and that they are robbed of the chance to have their own internal sense of self-worth. They constantly feel the need to prove themselves in the face of those who are supposedly superior. This creates a strong sense of competitiveness among Antilleans, who develop the "desire to dominate" one another. Fanon writes that Martinicans are desperate for assurance and recognition, desperate for the chance to "flaunt themselves."

Again Fanon shows that colonialism indirectly promotes behavior that is toxic, unhealthy, and irrational. Because of racism, black people feel the need to constantly try to prove themselves—yet in a racist world, such a goal will never be complete, and this leaves black people in an endless quest to meet a goal that is "fictitious" insofar as it is unachievable.

Fanon returns to Adler, arguing that Adler viewed psychology only in individual terms and that this is insufficient to describe the situation of Antilleans. The whole of the Antilles is "a neurotic society, a *comparison* society." Fanon argues that the idea of "overcompensation" can be applied to the case of black people, meaning that black people strive to overcompensate for the negative stereotypes about their race. If only black people were able to see that the neuroses they develop are not their own fault but a social problem, this would lead to "the end of the world."

Fanon's use of the words "the end of the world" can, like other aspects of his rhetoric, seem bizarre and somewhat alarming. The apocalypse to which Fanon is referring, however, means the end of the world as it has been constructed by Western imperial power. This colonial view of the world has come to stand in for everything that the world actually is and could be—and it is for this reason that Fanon calls for its end.

Fanon emphasizes that people understand their humanity only in relation to others, and that they require recognition in order to feel human. He brings up Hegel's "master-slave dialectic," which features both the master and slave waiting for recognition from one another. Since the abolition of slavery, black men have been encouraged to adopt the master's perspective, whereas white people remain in the position of a master who has "kindly" allowed black people "to eat at his table." When slavery was abolished, black people suffered "psychoses and sudden death" in the same way that a patient who has made a recovery can relapse as soon as they learn that they are about to leave the asylum. The formerly enslaved were supposed to be grateful to white people for having freed them.

Although he does not spell it out explicitly here, one of the most important aspects of Fanon's writing is the idea that while the formerly enslaved are encouraged to take on the "master's" perspective, the whole of society is discouraged from taking on the position of the enslaved. Indeed, Fanon would argue that, for white people, inhabiting this position is actually impossible, because part of the violence of anti-black racism is that it casts black identity in relation to whiteness.

Fanon argues that black people have never truly "fought" for freedom: at times they have fought for "liberty and justice," but even then their conceptions of liberty and justice were determined by white people. Black people wish that white people would openly acknowledge the racist antagonism they feel so that they could react to it, but white people often do not do so. However, Fanon clarifies that this dynamic is unique to France, while in the United States, there is more open conflict. In France, there is a false performance of unity between the races. Fanon states that all people want to be affirmed and to have access to "life," "love," and "generosity," while being able to refuse the evils of the world—such as hatred and exploitation.

Fanon's point here is that, although there is a social taboo against openly expressing racist ideas, this does not *mean that racism has disappeared or even lessened in its scope. Rather, the forces of racism are simply submerged into the subconscious where they remain unspoken, which in some ways actually makes racism harder to identify and address.*

CHAPTER 8: BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Fanon begins the conclusion with a quotation by Karl Marx, in which Marx argues that revolution cannot rely on the past but must strive to envision the future before the future has actually happened. Fanon admits that colonized peoples from different parts of the world face markedly different issues and will need different solutions. He also notes that appealing to "reason or respect for human dignity" is not enough to change the world. In some cases, direct conflict is the only answer. Fanon criticizes "bourgeois" societies which encourage stasis over progress and discourage curiosity. He argues that black people are "locked" in their bodies and are "slave[s] to the past." They are often forced to defend their history and culture in the face of the supposed "purity" of European culture, but Fanon points out that this is absurd.

At the beginning of the book, Fanon announces that he is not writing for the future, but for the present. In this passage, he further clarifies that he is not writing for the past either, and that he in fact wants to leave the past behind. Fanon's desire not to dwell on the past may seem difficult to reconcile with the knowledge that the historical suffering of black people is often too easily dismissed, and also that those who do not understand history will make the same mistakes as were made in the past—but he is not suggesting that readers forget *the past. Rather, he wants readers to use what they know of the past and present to focus on imagining a better future* now.

Fanon writes that he feels a sense of "solidarity" with anyone from the past who has refused to participate in injustice. Yet he will not devote his life to focusing on the past and attempting to prove the existence of historical black civilization. A friend of Fanon's who was at war in Vietnam reported to him that Vietnamese teenagers facing the firing squad were amazingly calm. Fanon suggests that these teenagers "accept death for the sake of the present and the future." Fanon, meanwhile, chooses to dedicate his life to trying to ensure that no one is ever enslaved again, and "risk[s] annihilation" in order to reveal the truth. He then states: "I have neither the right nor the duty to demand reparations for my subjugated ancestors." He also does not have the right to hurl either hatred or gratitude at white people.

Fanon's disavowal of the duty or need to demand reparations is highly surprising in the current political climate, given that contemporary anticolonial and antiracist figures place a large emphasis on reparations as being essential to the process of decolonization and racial justice. Perhaps Fanon is rejecting reparations because he sees them as a way of assuaging guilt or achieving catharsis for the oppressor. Perhaps he is pointing out that the legacy of colonialism, slavery, and genocide is a crime that can simply never be forgiven.

Fanon rejects the idea of a "white world" with specifically white morality and intelligence. He also clarifies that he is not "a slave" in the same way that his ancestors were enslaved. He does not want to remain stuck in "a world of retroactive reparations"; what he does want is for "man never to be instrumentalized." Fanon writes that both black people and white people must leave behind the voices of their ancestors and forget about superiority and inferiority. He hopes that the reader now has a sense of "the open dimension of every consciousness." He concludes: "Always make me a man who questions!"

Again, Fanon's concluding lines are provocative and controversial. For many black people, the prospect of giving up on reparations and letting go of the voices of the ancestors is precisely the opposite course of action needed to enable healing and flourishing. On the other hand, Fanon's emphasis on curiosity and openness suggests that there is perhaps some degree to which people need to let go of the pain of the past in order to thrive.

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