The Downfall and Rebirth of Nash Williams

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Abstract

This essay will analyze the character, Nash Williams, from Crossing the River from a postcolonial and psychoanalytical perspective. The purpose is to understand how the horrors of slavery and abuse affected the psyche of Nash Williams. Nash is a displaced character in antebellum America who has suffered significant abuse from his father, Edward. Nash is freed by Edward and sent to Liberia with a Christian mission. However, when he becomes a free man, his psychological disposition slowly starts to change. The thesis is that by analyzing Nash through the postcolonial and psychoanalytical perspective, we will get an explanation as to how slavery affected Nash’s psyche and how the freedom from it affected him.
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Introduction

This essay will analyze Caryl Phillip’s character “Nash” in Crossing the River from a psychoanalytical and postcolonial literary standpoint. It will ask the question, “How is Nash affected mentally by the traumas caused by slavery?” It will do so by focusing on the consequences of displacement, regression, Stockholm-syndrome, Freud’s structure of personality, and theories on identity formation.

Caryl Phillip’s novel Crossing the River presents a gripping tale about the effects of colonization and mainly the trading of slaves from Africa to America and the aftereffects of it. It is a fictional tale, telling stories of the people exposed to slavery and their lives, all in different periods of time and different situations in life. Throughout this book, the reader is told the tale of displacement following the transformation that naturally happens with a displaced group of people of the African diaspora. Given the fact Caryl Phillips is part of the African diaspora, his novel serves to give the diaspora its voice back and tell the story from a non-Eurocentric perspective.

As the saying famously goes, history is written by victors. In the context of the transatlantic slave trade, that means that the colonialists and not the colonized wrote most of the history and kept it for the later generations. Giving the slaves and the colonized their voices back and telling the story from the enslaved perspective has since been an emancipatory task of many writers of the new African diaspora, which is also true concerning Crossing the River.

The spread of the African diaspora was, to no small extent, involuntary, caused by kidnapping, forced migration, and the slave trade. The example of the transatlantic slave trade is one of the most massive forced migrations of modern times, probably ever, in the sense of the number of people that were forced into migration and the vast historical period over which it took place. The resulting African diaspora, still
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connected with the continent by its black consciousness and identity, forms the so-called “Black Atlantic”, a term coined by Paul Gilroy in his book with the same title. The cause of this forced migration was the colonization of the African continent, and that, in its turn, was due to raw materials available in the African continent, which the newly industrialized world wanted to consume. The world was, from a purely cultural and inaccessibility perspective, much vaster in that time, making it easier for the governing bodies of the colonizing countries to create subterfuge in order to justify their actions to their respective populations. An admirable figurative picture of the civilization and liberation of the pagan continent was painted to subdue the European and American people when, in reality, it was done mostly to gain access to the raw materials and labor that was for the taking from a colonizers point of view.

The direct and mostly indirect consequence of the forced migration of Africans was, besides the terrible conditions they were exposed to, the feeling of displacement spreading through the African diaspora. Displacement can vary between individuals exposed to migration, mainly depending on which sort of migration they have gone through. A person who has voluntarily chosen to migrate from their country of origin will presumably not tend to feel as displaced as a person who has been physically removed from their country of origin or had no other choice other than making a refuge from it. Nonetheless, no matter which kind of migration the person has gone through, the feeling of displacement and estrangement is quotidian and a problem in the African diaspora.

Furthermore, these traumas often cause further psychological issues to the victims. In the new context the slaves were put in, they formed a new identity according to the way they were perceived and the way they were treated, which in turn laid the foundations for the new African diaspora. Given the earlier stated exposure to traumas, they were not given the right conditions to do so.
Review of relevant material

There are mainly two studies on this novel that have been relevant in writing this essay. The first one is “Caryl Phillips's Crossing the River and the Chorus of Archival Memory” by Bénédicte Ledent. In this study, Ledent analyses the motives behind the novel. She argues that Phillips wrote the novel as a piece of history converted into fiction in order to preserve critical historical events and tell those events from the perspective of the oppressed, as opposed to much of the literature which holds a Eurocentric focus: “[looking] at that history from a different angle – through the prism of people who have nominally been written out of it, or have been viewed as the losers or victims in a particular historical storm” (Ledent, 2017, p. 14). It is hard to disagree with those ideas since most of them are based on interviews with Caryl Phillips himself. Therefore, this perspective has been used as a factor in the writing of this essay to analyze Nash.

The second study which has been essential to this essay is Maria Rice Bellamy’s “Haunting the African Diaspora: Responsibility and Remaining in Caryl Phillips’s Crossing the River.” In this study, Bellamy presents the perspective of Edward’s sexual abuse of Nash, that is, “his sexual exploitation of young boys” (Bellamy, 2014, p. 6). This perspective plays a significant part in the interpretation of the characters in this study.

Theory

Defense mechanisms and regression

Defense mechanisms are part of Sigmund Freud’s theory and are used to describe the individual’s dealings with internal struggles. If severe enough, a problem undealt with may end up in the unconscious. The unconscious is a part of our mind that the
individual does not have access to, memories are stored there, but they cannot be brought up at will.

But like an iceberg, there is so much more going on below the surface—underneath the water is the unconscious mind that we don’t have access to.

Memories that were too painful to remember may be repressed, but they are still there—exerting their force on us in ways that we don’t understand. (Joseph, 2019)

When faced with an internal struggle, most problems are solved quickly, but in some cases, they remain unsolved in the unconscious of the individual. An unconscious issue often has a more severe problem underlying; because of that, a small issue can grow to be perceived as massive. An issue in the unconscious might linger for a long time before any symptoms show in the behavior or wellbeing of the individual. Because the struggle is mainly held in the unconscious, the individual is, to no small extent, not aware of the struggle happening. Because of the unawareness by the individual of the process, i.e., struggle, leading up to defense mechanisms being triggered, the individual is most likely not aware of the effects of them either. According to Freud, the problems are often caused by sexual and aggressive impulses that are generally held back since they would be inappropriate to act out in everyday life (Weiten, 2010, p. 496-497).

It is, however, presumable that these are not the only triggers for defense mechanisms. The brain would most likely trigger a defense mechanism when exposed to mental trauma or an experience that is so foul that it is incomprehensible. Weiten defines defense mechanisms as “largely unconscious reactions that protect a person from unpleasant emotions such as anxiety and guilt” (Weiten, 2010, p. 496). So, following Weiten’s argument, Freud’s notion that the triggers for these mechanisms are mainly related to aggressive and sexual instincts will be supplemented in light of new evidence. Aggressive and sexual instincts might be a trigger, but this essay argues that
there are several triggers for defense mechanisms and that they must not be attributed to instincts only but also trauma experienced by the individual.

Regression is one of the defense mechanisms in Freud’s theory. “Regression is a reversion to immature patterns of behavior” (Weiten, 2010, p. 496). This means that when an individual’s unconscious struggles with a problem or a trauma, regression might be triggered, and the person adopts a childish behavioral pattern. This means, for example, that “An adult has a temper tantrum when he doesn't get his way” (Weiten, 2010, p. 497) and a more serious state of regression might mean that an adult enters a complete childlike state. The relevance of this concerning the novel is that regression is often connected with trying to push away feelings and avoiding dealing with something; for example, a trauma that an individual has experienced. “Am I regressing to cope or not feel something, or am I avoiding that tough conversation or decision?” (Sisgold, 2014). This question posed by Sisgold is accurate but might be a bit basic for this analysis, so it will have to be developed a bit. Combining Sisgold’s question with the earlier discussion of defense mechanisms, this perspective might also apply to dealings with one’s compunction. Someone who has suffered a severe trauma might not have processed or dealt with the trauma, which in turn causes them to enter a state of regression.

Stockholm-syndrome

The typical description of the syndrome is when a victim develops feelings for or attachment to the perpetrator that has wronged them. Neel Burton describes Stockholm syndrome as an adaption by the victim of ideas and impulses that are not the victim's own, causing the victim to act in contrast with their usual selves.

Reaction formation is the superficial adoption and exaggeration of ideas and impulses that are diametrically opposed to our own. This ego defence may at
least in part underlie the apparently paradoxical psychological phenomenon that
the criminologist and psychiatrist Nils Bejerot baptized 'Stockholm Syndrome'.

(Burton, 2012)

This means that someone who lives through trauma caused directly by another person
adopts the perpetrator’s ideology and view of the world. If the victim adopts the
ideology of the perpetrator, the victim might start to work in the interest of the
perpetrator since the perpetrator’s interests are now also the victim’s interests.

Stockholm-syndrome can, of course, like any other psychological issue, develop on
both a large and a small scale. However, in order to have some reference index, the
crime that gave the syndrome its name will serve as such.

[A]fter some time in the vault, the hostages began to form an emotional
attachment with their captors. They reported fearing the police more than their
captors, and, after their release, refused to testify against them and even set up a
fund to cover their legal defence fees... He became friendly with of one the
hostages, Kristin Ehnemark: they met occasionally and even their families
became friends. (Burton, 2012)

Burton explains the retraction into the Stockholm-syndromic mental state as an
atavistic behavior related to a person’s survival instinct. When set in a hostile situation
that is not customarily handled, the mind enters a sort of atavistic survival mode in
order to handle and survive the situation. In this specific example, the mind enters a
state of sympathy with the perpetrator in order to seem like less of a threat (Burton,
2012).

In summary, when applied to the situation of long captivity, this means the
captive will as a mean of survival unconsciously undergo a mental change. The captives
will adapt the ideas of the captors, develop feelings, and act in the interest of the
captors. These symptoms are atavistic behaviors triggered as a defense mechanism in the unconscious as a calculation of more significant survival chances.

Structure of Personality

In Freudian psychology, the personality is split into three sections, Id, Ego, and Super-Ego. One of these components are usually more dominating and therefore orchestrates an individual’s actions (Weiten, 2010, p. 493). "The id is the primitive, instinctive component of personality that operates according to the pleasure principle" (Weiten, 2010, p. 494). The id is the component that holds the basic drives and speaks to the human in a primal way. The id holds the basic instincts which are usually connected to the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, breathing, eating, drinking, shelter, and sex, for example. The hierarchy of needs is a concept developed by Abraham Maslow to describe the needs of a human in a sort of priority order. The hierarchy is often described as a staircase where the basic needs are at the bottom, and as the individual escalates on the figurative staircase, more complex needs like self-fulfillment become wanted since the basic needs are filled (Burton, 2019). As the earlier quote describes, the id operates to the pleasure principle, which means that when someone operates according to their id, they are looking for instant gratification and pleasure. Therefore, individuals who operate according to their id are often shortsighted and do not take possible consequences into account because the id seeks instant gratification and pleasure (Weiten, 2010, p. 494). People who have an active id and find themselves at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid often suffer from mental illness. However, that is a bit of a generalization and not scientifically proven. There are, of course, lots of exceptions; a tribal person who has nothing and is at the bottom of the pyramid can, of course, still be happy, and a rich man with an active id can still be happy. Nevertheless, in many cases, these categories are related to mental illness.
"The ego is the decision-making component of personality that operates according to the reality principle" (Weiten, 2010, p. 494). This means that the ego works as a sort of valve for the id’s need of satisfaction, stopping a person from letting all the needs of the id out at the wrong moment or in the wrong place. This is basically how the reality principle works, as it is not always appropriate to let the needs of the id out, and the ego seeks to control the id and wait for a more appropriate time. "In short, to stay out of trouble, the ego often works to tame the unbridled desires of the id" (Weiten, 2010, p. 494).

The final component is the super-ego. “the superego is the moral component of personality that incorporates social standards about what represents right and wrong” (Weiten, 2010, p. 494). This means that the super-ego dictates an individual’s grasp of what is right and wrong. A person with a strong super-ego would, therefore, have a good grasp of what is right and wrong and would act accordingly. The super-ego and the id often stand as each other's counterparts. The id wants to stimulate its own needs and does not hold any thought of consequence, while the super-ego strives to act upon the perception of good with no concern of the id.

Displacement

Displacement means that a person is taken to or flees to a different geographical spot than the place considered that individual’s country of origin. Some people actively choose to displace themselves by moving to another country. However, the main concern of this essay is the people who have been involuntarily displaced. Displacement is often translated into migration, and although they are not interchangeable, they mean the same thing when used as a noun describing the movement of people across the world. Therefore, forced migration means the same thing as forced displacement, and according to the Columbia University, forced migration means:
a general term that refers to the movements of refugees and internally displaced people (those displaced by conflicts within their country of origin) as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects. (“Forced Migration Learning Module”)

This is a quite broad term, and the definition does not state that kidnaped or sold slaves are part of it. The cause of that is, most likely, that since slavery is not an institution at even nearly as grand a scale as it was in antebellum America, it is not accounted for in this definition. However, kidnapping and being sold into slavery should be considered by definition as an act of force since the subject does not have a free will of themselves. Therefore, a slave who is sold or kidnaped is to be labeled as a case of forced displacement/migration. Many Africans were forcibly kidnaped, which should be the ultimate form of forced migration, and some did not have a choice but to sell family members into slavery due to famine and poverty.

Displacement and how it affects a person’s identity is highly relevant for the analysis. The feeling of displacement is the feeling of not having a home or not being allowed to go to the place one identifies as their home. What this essay effectively wants to do is to try to identify some examples of the feeling of displacement to have a spectrum of measurement and reference when analyzing Nash's character. A prominent example of a group that is defined by displacement is the Jewish diaspora, which has, for a long time, been defined by forced displacement. When comparing the Jewish and African diasporas, a comparison of their literatures is relevant because the literature produced by a specific group often reflects on the group identity.

If there is a group where multidirectional connections could and should be established, these are the Jewish communities around the world which have
traditionally been defined by their transnational and diasporic nature. This is an aspect which has left permanent traces in their literary creations, as the Jewish people need to come to terms with a past marked by displacement is reflected on the increasing number of literary works problematizing Jewish identity conflicts (Andermahr, 2016, p. 62).

There are vast differences between Jewish and African diasporas, but both diasporas have gone through an extensive history of displacement, making them comparable. Therefore, the Jewish and African diasporas are examples to the same extent, regardless of their actual involvement in this narrative. Jewish literature has also been described in Andermahr’s book, though quoting other writers, to “hover between places, finding their voice in their sense of displacement […] bridging geographic centres or spaces” (Andermahr, 2016, p. 62) which is similar to the African diasporic situation, but on a vaster historical timeline. With that small grasp of the Jewish diasporic literature, and how displacement has affected that diaspora, a preunderstanding derives of the spectrum on which displacement can take place and affect large groups of people over a vast period of time.

When the Europeans kidnapped the Africans to make them slaves, a new diaspora slowly started to form. However, when the new diaspora began to take shape, the values and the identity also started to change. The new diaspora had seen a whole new world of problems, and their view of the world had drastically changed from the earlier generations, which is visible in the literature as well. "A new set of knowledge is being generated to understand this 'new diaspora,' including established and new literary works on the tropes of alienation, abandonment, suffering, and new opportunities" (Falola, 2013, p. 3). A valuable perspective to take into account when speaking about the feeling of displacement is alienation. Naturally, the individual who has been
forcefully displaced will feel alienated and estranged from the place in which they have arrived. The feeling of displacement means to not feel at home and to feel like one does not belong. So, the feeling of being lonely and not be able to identify with the country, the people, and the cultural heritage of the geographical place one is now at, is indeed the feeling displacement.

Identity

The identity of a person is closely related to how other people perceive that person. Identity can be interpreted differently by different people depending on their presuppositions. Stuart Hall said this about identity "Identity is neither continuous nor continuously interrupted but constantly framed between the simultaneous vectors of similarity, continuity, and difference" (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996, p. 277).

Stuart Hall rightly defines identity as very fluctuant and interchangeable over time. However, there is one thing missing from Hall's argument. Identity lies in the eye of the person who is defining it. Just because one person identifies the subject as something at a specific point in the subject’s life, others do not have to share that definition and a definition can vary from person to person. The notion that different people perceive people in different ways is relevant to the analysis of Nash since he is caught in an identity limbo.

Identity is often given to someone by other people, and Nash is not exempted from that. That might not seem like a problem in any way, and it might not be in theory. However, the problems start when someone’s perception of other people translates into action and affects how they treat other people. Frankenberg and Mani address this translation of identity perception into the social treatment of others in one of their articles. In this, what they call incident, the narrator is trying to enter campus buildings that are locked, and he needs to be let in by somebody. In the first phase, he knocks on
the office window of a white man in his mid-forties, and when the man addresses him, he is highly skeptical and denies the narrator entry because he does not know who the narrator is or what he might do. In the second phase, he is trying to get in again, and when he approaches the building, a Filipina cleaning lady sees him, smiles, and lets him in without question (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996, p. 277-278). This example paints the picture of how identity is related to perceiver and context. It also signifies that identify and identity markers are used to make presumptuous judgments and that the looks of other people can put them in a specific class bracket in the minds of other people. This often translates into the identity marker of race. In the earlier incident, the narrator is non-white and might, therefore, be judged a bit quicker by the white man as a threat and by the Filipina woman as a non-threat. "My initial naivete and surprise in response to such incidents as I have just described speak to my own 'postcolonial' and class identity" (Lavie & Swedenburg, 1996, p. 279).

Analysis

In order to analyze the character that is Nash Williams, his letters will be discussed in this section, with the occasional contextualizing by adding information given in the other parts of the chapter. Furthermore, the letters written by Nash will be analyzed chronologically in order for this analysis to follow how the feeling of displacement spreads in him and how his mental health and identity change over time.

Some assumptions must be clarified to understand the analysis better. Otherwise, the chronological approach might get confusing since the analysis is treating the whole rather than individual chapters; some variables will not be evident until the narrative ties together in the end. The first assumption regards whether or not Nash is the son of Edward. There are two possibilities, and there is no one right answer since the story does not explicitly deny or confirm if Nash is the son of Edward. Possibly,
Phillips deliberately made this point a bit unclear for the reader to make the analysis themselves.

The first possibility is that Nash is not Edward’s biological son but rather calls him that since he has been treated like one. He sees Edward as a leader and patriarch, that is why Edward is seen as a father of sorts. However, that perspective is unlikely, and there is more evidence in the text that Nash is Edward’s biological son. Firstly, it is not improbable that Edward could have had an illegitimate son with one of his other slaves since the sexual abuse of slaves in antebellum America existed during the time. Therefore, their relation as father and son is possible. What makes it probable is the treatment that Nash receives. He is singled out among the slaves to receive an education and an upbringing. It was uncommon for a slave to receive any education in antebellum America, even more so to be given an education to the extent that Nash is given. Edward goes through great expense to give Nash a good upbringing and education, signaling that he wants Nash to do well in life, exceeding his care for the other slaves by far.

Secondly, when Edward learns that Nash has given up his faith and is struggling in Liberia, he embarks on a great journey to rescue him, risking his wellbeing and spending vast amounts of resources in doing so. Edward would not do this for any other slave with whom he merely had a good relationship. Furthermore, the common terminology used when referring to one's slave keeper in that time was Master, and in reverse, a slave would be referred to as "boy", not father and son, as Nash and Edward call each other. With that evidence, however, not stated as absolute truth, it seems highly probable that Nash is the biological son of Edward, and this essay will treat it as a fact.

The second assumption is that Nash might have been abused sexually by Edward and that this abuse is one of the traumas of his past. There are hints dropped
throughout the narrative that would suggest that Nash and Madison have been sexually abused by Edward. A case of sexual abuse along with the deprivation of freedom that Nash has been the victim of amounts to a mental trauma that is well enough to open a pandora's box of mental illness and psychological reactions to protect the individual. This theory is strengthened by the notion that Edward chases Nash around the world and spares no expense in doing so, he is obsessed with Nash. He has a perverted obsession with Nash to the point that he risks his own life to find him and to be with him again when he finds out that Nash has discarded him.

One could argue that Edward's wife kills herself when she learns about the relationship Nash and her husband has, and what truth could be so dire that she felt she was left no other choice but to take her life. Presumably, she knew Edward sexually abused slaves before, and it seems unlikely that information as potent as that would go untold to the lady of the house. Possibly the truth that her husband was cheating on her with his bastard son was enough to drive her over the edge. However, Amelia’s suicide is described entirely from Edward’s perspective, and because of that, Amelia’s motives for ending her life can merely be speculated upon.

However, the question stands about why the slaves are not revolting against this inhumane treatment. It comes down to a state of dependency. The slaves know that they depend on the slave owner in order to survive and get resources in general. So is the case in the slaveowner’s estate, and so is undoubtedly the case in Liberia as numerous examples of things that Nash is asking for are presented. He thinks that he can still depend on his father to survive. This might have been the case for the slaves in general. They lived in horrendous conditions and needed everything they could get in order to survive. The abuse was so massive that these slaves were not willing to turn on the slave owner because they wanted the resources. However, throughout history, there have been
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Several slave revolts and acts of defiance, which speaks against the theory of slaves being passive victims of abuse. Regardless of the situation of abuse they might find themselves in, history has proven to be full of emancipatory acts of self-liberation and personal or collective declarations of independence.

Throughout the narrative, Nash keeps asking Edward for resources and various things he needs in Liberia. It must be kept in mind throughout this narrative that Nash is in need. Analyzing that need might nuance the understanding of the letters. The case might be that all the praise and love Nash show for Edward in his letters is simply a deliberate strategy he uses to get what he wants from Edward. The argument could be made that Nash is using this alleged strategy to manipulate Edward to get resources from him. However, Nash’s affection for Edward seems sincere. His sincerity does not void the theory of him using that sincerity to get resources from Edward. It does void the notion of Nash being a mastermind that has a deliberate strategy that he uses to make Edward the fool. However, as the narrative progresses, Nash realizes that he will not receive anything from Edward and that his supposed strategy will go unanswered. This causes him to liberate himself from all of the previous ties to Edward, both in correspondence and in the values he adopted from Edward. He changes his lifestyle completely, which, in a sense, is his declaration of independence.

In the first part of the chapter, before the letters, an unknown narrator contextualizes the story. In this first part of the chapter, the narrator uses internal focalization where Edward is the focalizer, which might be an attempt to lure the reader into Edward’s viewpoint. With Edward as focalizer, the narrator describes Nash in a glorifying way and praises him highly for his intellectuality and his achievements in studies. The reading of this segment presents their relationship as unclear, and it comes across as Edward is speaking about a close friend and not about a former slave of his,
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cementing the notion of something stronger being the basis for this relationship. There are evident signs of their master contra slave relationship when reading closer. However, from all this praise given to Nash by the narrator, it is evident that Edward holds Nash dear and, in some way, adores him. Furthermore, in this part, the scenario of Nash’s mission and disappearance is set, giving the context of the following letters (Phillips, 2006, p. 7-16).

The first letter from Nash to Edward is dated 1834, which is when Nash first arrived in Liberia. His first letter is a positive one, and he is joyed to have reached Liberia, indicating he has longed-for Libera a long time. Nash has a glorified view of Liberia as the haven of freedom that it has probably been described to him. He puts great emphasis on the fact that he finally will be able to enjoy the same rights as the whites do in America.

Liberia is a fine place to live in… A colored person can enjoy his liberty in this place, for there exists no prejudice of color and every man is free and equal. Although, dear father, I am greatly desirous of seeing you again before we leave this world, I doubt if I shall ever consent to return again to America. Liberia, the beautiful land of my forefathers, is a place where persons of color may enjoy our freedom. It is the home of our race... and here we may sit under the palm tree and enjoy the same privileges as our white brethren in America. (Phillips, 2006, p. 18)

With his overwhelming praise of Liberia, one can assume that he has longed to reach Liberia and possibly had some issues with his identity in America, which is not that strange, considering that he was born in captivity and has been abused by his father. Regardless of the education he was given and that he was treated uncharacteristically well compared to other slaves by Edward, Nash was still his inferior and a slave, which
would affect him in a purely hierarchal way and affect the way his identity was perceived in American society. However, this is a reliable indicator that Nash felt misplaced in American society. On a biological level, Nash always knew that he did not belong in America since the people who were treated with respect and accommodated there, by other whites than Edward, were white. The mistreatment of him was connected to the color of his skin since mostly everybody else with black skin was treated badly and as inferiors, and everybody with white skin could, as Nash says, enjoy their rights. By that logic, he expected to find his brethren among the natives and expected to be given the same right as the whites had in America when he came to Africa, a sort of hierarchal level playing field. Due to the circumstances, he felt displaced in America. Regardless of how much Nash is culturally adapted to American society, he will always be identified as a black man by antebellum American standards. The feeling of inability to change his position and the feeling of being prescribed the identity of an inferior is truly a feeling of displacement.

In this quote, there are hints of how dependent Nash is on Edward and the seemingly loving relationship they have. The rhetoric he uses to describe his father seems like a genuine expression of affection or a charade he puts on in order to keep getting resources from Edward. His affection appears to be sincere at this stage of the story, or at least a behavior that is deeply rooted within him and not a charade he puts on. Referring back to the discussion of theory, Freudian psychology presents a couple of different psychological defense mechanisms used to protect an individual from a traumatic experience of some kind. At this stage of the novel, it has not yet presented itself as a story of trauma, and it does not yet indicate that Nash has suffered any trauma which might have caused him to retreat into childhood. However, it seems that Nash has entered a state of regression. Regardless of him being treated relatively well by Edward in the sense that he has been given an education and an upbringing, he has been severely
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abused as well, causing the regression. His behavior is a combination of the defense mechanisms triggered by his severe traumas and a charade that he plays in order to keep getting resources from Edward (Phillips, 2006, p. 17-22).

The second letter is written about one year later. Nash still refers to Edward as “My Dear Father” (Phillips, 2006, p. 23), indicating that he still holds his father in high esteem and is still caught in the earlier mentioned mental state of Stockholm-syndromic captivity. In this letter, Nash is feeling rather ill and has fallen sick. “This letter leaves me in not a good state of health. I have had the fever” (Phillips, 2006, p. 23).

His illness, and the fact that he is mentioning the acclimatization to Liberia throughout the letter, indicates that this is the first encounter that Nash has with another society than the American one. In this part of history, to travel from America to the African west coast predicted a massive cultural encounter. The point of time is essential in this context since, in the early 1800-hundred’s, the continents were vastly different. Nash indicates his first feeling of displacement and estrangement towards Liberia since it holds a bacterial fauna which he is not accustomed to, and that makes him sick, indicating that he is brought up to be an American on a biological and geographical level. This means that he is brought up on a higher living standard than he is now facing. His identity has been formed by American values which caused him to focus on the Christian teachings resulting in, what from Edward’s perspective would be considered, a strong super-ego. However, the values that are considered virtuous by Edward are highly questionable, and some are even immoral. Throughout this essay, this will be referred to as a strong super-ego with the understanding that it is merely by the standards of Edward and some instances of antebellum America. He had the preunderstanding that he in Liberia would be able to fulfill the higher steps of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, such as self-fulfillment, but because of the poor conditions, he finds himself having to fight for the more basic needs like staying healthy, which causes him
It is in this letter that Nash’s estrangement to the Liberian society takes form, but he seems oblivious to it himself. He differentiates himself from the locals in Liberia, noticing the differences in identity as opposed to the last letter where he viewed all Liberians as alike to him. The way he is addressing them in this letter and the vocabulary he uses shows signs of a hierarchal construction, serving to estrange the natives. This shows in his language use towards them, “these natives”, “heathen” and when referring to their way of speaking, “crude dialect”. That is a first indicator of the estrangement towards Liberia and a notion of Nash’s cultural heritage, and in that sense, not belonging in Africa.

Nash reveals in this chapter that he has lost his wife and only child. These two people might be considered as anchors in a world otherwise dominated by displacement and estrangement. When they die, presumably, the Liberian society entirely clashes with his American upbringing and cultural Christianity, causing the first shadowing doubt in him that is displacement in Liberia, which Nash expected to be an emancipatory piece of land. “Although a country with some inconveniences, there remain many privileges to be enjoyed, for any man can live here that will work, although the quality of man that is these days choosing to make this new country his home leaves me with some cause for concern” (Phillips, 2006, p. 26). This shows initial traces of disliking Liberia from Nash, the country that he has initially praised. He no longer speaks of his forefathers, but rather men that are willing to work and that he is concerned with the quality of the men whom he has seen in Liberia so far. This indicates that Nash is used to seeing free men and slaves work in the rigorous American system and by that he sees the “natives” as lazy and estranged for their lack of engagement (Phillips, 2006, p. 23-28).

At the beginning of the third letter, Nash shows gratitude towards Edward for the letter he has received from him but also addressing the lack of response from
Edward regarding the letters Nash sent him. In this exchange, further understanding of the hierarchy that exists between Nash and his father shows, this relationship affects Nash even in freedom and how his state of regression and dependency is defining who he is as a person. “Your letter reached me on Feb. 5th, and was read with great joy. I declaimed it aloud to the people here and its kind contents caused some tears to flow” (Phillips, 2006, p. 29). Nash’s complex for his father is as strong as ever, causing the flow of tears when he realizes that Edward has not abandoned him. Edward is a slave owner who has exposed Nash and the other slaves he previously owned to possibly the most heinous violation of their rights there is, even abusing Nash sexually, those two in combination would demoralize a man. A natural feeling for Nash would be to despise the man who robbed him of his freedom and, by using Nash’s dependency on him, forced Nash to do as he pleases. The quote also indicates that Nash is not the only one feeling this way, apparently there are an unspecified group of people who are so moved by Nash reading the letter that they cry in joy. Nash has, due to years of abuse and dependency, developed a kind of Stockholm-syndrome relationship with Edward. He has started sympathizing with Edward as his captor on an unconscious level and therefore does not see him as a captor and breaker of human rights but accepts him as a loving father and adopts his values. "Why, dear Father, you chose to ignore my previous letters, you do not indicate. I must assume that this represents your either not receiving them, or you finding their contents so ignorant and poor in expression that you rightly deemed them unworthy of response" (Phillips, 2006, p. 29). Nash adopted a Stockholm-syndromic behavior of incorporating Edward’s values in his own life and also trying his best to please Edward by his actions, translating them into definitions of what is good and bad, and with his strong super-ego, he lives by it and his actions in Liberia is a proof of that. Nash has been liberated and sent to Liberia and could do whatever he pleases, he is finally free and can live his life, but instead of that he continues the
missionary tasks given to him by Edward and searches to please him and keep getting resources. In this stage of the narrative, Nash regards his father to be higher than him in the hierarchy, and therefore, Edward's purposes in life have become Nash’s own. That is a prime example of a mix between regression and Stockholm-syndrome taking place in the unconscious of Nash. Regarding Nash’s feelings towards Edward and the sincerity of those feelings, as of this letter, they start to falter, he is no longer filling his letters with only positivity and praise. There are high levels of self-doubt and questioning of their relationship in it, as is evident in the previous quote.

In this letter, there are traces of a clear distinction between the natives and the old diaspora. Since the old diaspora, i.e., Nash and the slaves that came from America, are brought up in America with Christian and stereotypically white values, they differ in thought process and way to perceive the world from the natives of Africa, making it hard for the old diaspora to understand the natives. They have a different identity and perceive the natives as having a hierarchal negative identity. “Indeed, the natives are a much-maligned people in this dark and benighted country. Some of our less respectable emigrants find cause to torment and exploit these creatures” (Phillips, 2006, p. 31). This indicates that the slaves who come to Liberia see themselves as higher in the hierarchy than the natives. They take advantage of the natives similarly to what they experienced in America. They are not equal to the natives in either country, causing them to feel displaced in both. The theory of the emigrants being culturally American is also strengthened by the natives referring to them as “white men” (Phillips, 2006, p. 32) when they visually are not (Phillips, 2006, p. 29-37).

In the fourth letter, Nash is starting to lose his religion and doubt his belief for his highly esteemed father; however, he has not yet let him go. Together with the ending of the last letter, this letter is the turning point in the psychological health of Nash Williams. The first indication being Nash wishes to return to America. “I have been in
Africa a long time, and I wish to come home as soon as possible” (Phillips, 2006, p. 35). He refers to America as home and is doing so for the first time. The home reference serves to confirm what hints have been dropped earlier on Nash’s cultural heritage and that Nash is experiencing the feeling of displacement in Liberia as well. He has not been through forced displacement when he went to Liberia. Nevertheless, because of his upbringing as a cultural American, Nash cannot relate to the African continent and the natives, and they cannot relate to him, causing him to feel displaced in Liberia. He feels misplaced in America because he is visually black and feels displaced in Liberia because he is culturally American.

The turning point of his relation with Edward starts when Nash comments on the lack of letters sent back by Edward, and when he thinks Edward’s affection for him has subsided. "Why your heart remains hard against me is a mystery which has caused me emotions of great distress. But so it must be. I can never guide your hand. I was greatly disappointed on the arrival of the last emigrant vessel by not receiving a single line from you" (Phillips, 2006, p. 38). This indicates that Nash has started to fear that his father has abandoned him and that loneliness has started to wash over him. He still has a dependency on his father for both material things and recognition, and when he gets neither, his Stockholm-syndromic behavior and his regression may let up, since he is forced to deal with the fact that he has been abused. He later describes in the letter that he has taken a new wife and is taking care of her unspecified family, indicating that he, for the first time, is not acting in accordance with Edward's plan but acting out of his own interest.

“Did I tell you of my partiality to a young woman hereabouts? After a short courtship I put my addresses to her, and I expect to be somewhat true to her till I die. We were married on the first of March” (Phillips, 2006, p. 38). He has made his own conscious decision to marry a woman and involve himself in her unspecified family,
which is the first, though slight, indication of his regression subsiding, meaning that he is no longer a child controlled by his father. It seems like he is trying to taunt an answer out of Edward. He mentions, casually, that he has married a woman and is pretending not to remember if he mentioned it or not. He also taunts the Christian values regarding marriage by writing that he will be somewhat true to her. By these taunts, he is trying to receive some response from his beloved father, to receive the recognition and resources he needs. He has not yet let Edward go; Nash still refers to him as "good father" (Phillips, 2006, p. 38) and seeds the love of the earlier mentioned and unspecified family of which he is now apart (Phillips, 2006, p. 38-42).

In the fifth letter, this losing of religion continues and takes new proportions. In this letter, he further abandons what previously has seemed to be a sincere admiration for Edward. He realizes that he will not get any resources or acknowledgment from Edward, which causes him to reevaluate his standpoint and further spiral down in his downfall. All of this is evident in the contents and the general tone of this letter.

I resort again to pen and paper in a final attempt to engage with you. I find the process humiliating, and I fail to see what hurt I ever inflicted upon you that could justify such a cruel abandonment of your past intimate, namely myself … My three wives (I have considered a fourth... (Phillips, 2006, p. 60)

Nash writes that this is his final attempt, which indicates that he is losing his adoration for Edward and seems to stop idolizing him. Given what has been proven earlier, regarding the traumas Nash has been exposed to from being abused to living with the feeling of displacement in both America and Liberia, what he can depend on is his father, and the adoption of his cause is probably what has served to push away the traumas and feeling of displacement. Regardless of his traumas and psychological issues, the adoration and dependency on his father might be what kept his unconscious
focused on other things and kept him from spiraling downwards and in the end reaching emancipation from his father. The false love and focus served to push his memories away and justify what Nash has been through by giving it a cause. However, the downfall of Nash is at this stage, reaching its final turning point, he is starting to reject his old values and by choice adopting a set of more typically native values. He has taken on more wives and seemingly is pushing away the super-ego in the form of Christian values by making the sacrament of marriage sacrilegious. Nash also makes it clear that he has let his antebellum American driven efforts in missionary and educational work die out since he no longer believes that they will bear any fruit. “The school is no more, and shall never again occupy a position of authority in any settlement of which I am a part. The missionary work, this process of persuasion, is futile amongst these people” (Phillips, 2006, p. 62). Because of the cultural differences, he cannot convert the natives and complete the quest given to him by his father. Liberia is a quite hostile place to live in, and since he is brought up in America, he is not equipped for it. Nash is vastly displaced in Liberia; he has lost his last anchor to sanity, which is his father and role model Edward. His view of himself, and therefore his identity, changes from his old self, which was defined by Edward’s values to a free man who has chosen to live as an African.

At this last part of the story, Nash’s downfall reaches its lowest point but also turns around into a form of rebirth. He finally realizes that Edward is not a savior and a saint-like father who will come to save him, he is an abuser who has used Nash. Nash realizes that he has served Edward’s cause to his own cost. The Stockholm-syndromic behavior and regression have been dealt with during his entire stay in Liberia, and it seems like the mental illness has lost its grip on him. Since he realized this, he is now freely available to choose the life of an African. He has emancipated himself from slavery’s cruel grip. “I must suspend my faith and I therefore freely choose to live the
life of the African ... It only remains that I request of you that you do not come out to Africa, for I fear I will surely disappoint you” (Phillips, 2006, p. 62).

After Nash’s last letter, the end of Edward’s search is narrated in the same way “The Pagan Coast” started, that is, with Edward as the focalizer. Edward sets out from basecamp with the help of a guide to reach the last place where Nash was seen. When Edward reaches his first settlement, he is baffled by the poor conditions the former slaves lived in. “The primitive nature of the conditions shocked Edward, who until now had not the slightest notion of the poverty-stricken rural existence which enveloped those Christians” (Phillips, 2006, p. 66). This information might seem irrelevant for the analysis of Nash, but when Edward reaches Nash’s last settlement, he is bewildered and disgusted by the filth and poverty-ridden settlement in which Nash and his fellow natives live. He cannot understand how Nash could have gone from a Christian and proper boy to live in this filth.

There, spread before him, he could now see the litter of brown cones that constituted the final Nash Williams settlement … (Edward) he was ill-equipped to disguise true feeling of disgust in the midst of this specter of peopled desolation … What could possibly have occurred in the Christian soul of his Nash Williams to have encouraged him to make peace with a life that surely even these heathens considered contemptible? (Phillips, 2006, p. 68-69)

This quote and the end of Edward’s search further highlight the rebirth of Nash, the journey he has made from a person shackled by his mental illness and the adoption of Edward’s foul values to an emancipated man who is finally free to make his own choice of living and dying as an African. It also highlights the foul and colonial perspective Edward holds since he sees most of the settlements as filthy. Edward, who seemingly was a saintly father, has shown his true face, he has shown the face of an
abuser and slave owner. A story that seemed to be one of Nash Williams’ downfall turned out to be the story of his emancipation and rebirth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nash has been exposed to a vast array of traumas throughout his life; that is why he is psychologically unstable. Firstly, he is a member of a displaced community who has been deprived of his freedom and lived a life in slavery. The ultimate violation of a person and their human rights is to deprive them of their freedom. That violation, along with sexual abuse, is precisely what Nash has been exposed to, which lays the foundation for his psychological illness. During his time in America, he is continually feeling displaced because of his ethnicity. Regardless of how much Nash is culturally adapted to American society, he will always be identified as a black man by antebellum American standards. That means that the whites will never accept him as their equal; they will never let him feel like America is his home.

His father has indoctrinated him, by abuse and dependency, to the point that he adopted his values and loves him unconditionally. Nash uses his, most probably sincere, adoration for Edward to ask for resources since he is in need. A state of dependency and mannerly adoration was not uncommon in a relation between a slave and a slaveowner, however not always as sincere. Some might argue that Edward treated Nash well, and that is why Nash loves him. Nash was treated better than most slaves, but he was nevertheless a slave and not able to enjoy his freedom. Nash develops a state in the unconscious which closely resembles a Stockholm-syndrome, a state where a victim develops a sense of sympathy and sometimes love for their captor or a perpetrator. Because of this, combined with the extensive trauma, he enters a form of regression in order to survive and acts as the son even in freedom to keep getting resources and recognition. Since Nash has nothing else in this world but despair and the memory of
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his trauma, he clings to his father's views and makes it his quest to fulfill this to please his father. Because of his regression, he is seeking his father's love, because what does a child want more than the love of his parents?

Because of his psychological issues, Nash has adopted Edward's values and converted them into an antebellum American version of a strong super-ego. Because of those values, he strives in the first letter to acts by those values and treats everybody according to his Christian teachings. However, as the letters progress, it is apparent that Nash is feeling more and more displaced in Liberia as well. He might have the "right" ethnicity to belong in Liberia, but culturally he is an anomaly and will not be accepted by the natives as one of them. Nash was raised in a civilized country, at least in comparison to Liberia in the 1830-s, so he behaves himself differently than they do and therefore feels displaced. He has an identity that is perceived by others not to be one of them and, therefore, not entirely fitting in. The natives refer to him as a white man, marking further that they define his identity as one that is different from theirs.

Throughout the following letters and during the entire narrative, Nash's transformation slowly starts to form. His mental illness and old values diminish, and his emancipation and "African-ness" grow for every letter. However, in the early parts of the narrative, he clings to his relation with his father since it is the only barrier that exists between him and his traumatic experiences. When his father does not respond to him, the traumas overtake Nash and he thinks he has been used and abused just to be abandoned. This is the turning point where Nash's downfall starts to become his rebirth. Since his mind is now gradually liberated, he makes conscious and free choices towards his emancipation and the life he wants to live. He abandons his mission and behaves more like a native. He takes on several wives, dispenses with the school and the church, and settles in a settlement that to Edward seem unworthily and filthy.

Since Edward is the focalizer in parts of this narrative, it is easy to perceive the
story of Nash Williams from Edward's point of view. From that standpoint, it might seem like Nash makes these decisions to taunt an answer and resources out of Edward. That might have been true in the third and possibly even the fourth letter. However, it is more likely that Nash is gradually liberating himself and realizing that he does not have to do as Edward pleases anymore, and in the fifth letter, that fact stands clear as he denounces Edward. As stated in the introduction, Phillips probably wrote this chapter purposely ambiguous. He probably wanted the reader to think for themselves and show a traumatic experience of slavery rather than telling it. Phillips has undoubtedly succeeded in doing so, showing the reader the pinnacle of human trauma and despair, but also showing the rebirth and emancipation of an individual who finally gains his freedom. Hopefully, he also succeeded, or at least made a significant contribution, in giving the African diaspora its voice back. At the very least, he has shown the downfall and rebirth of Nash Williams, a man who, despite a life in physical and mental captivity, chose to live and die as an African.


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