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**Final Project: Interpretive Essay**

The story that resonated with me the most was “White Trash Primer” by Lacy M. Johnson. The reason I chose this text is due to how strongly I relate to the narrator, her struggles, and many of the experiences that are detailed throughout the story. Most relatable, however, is the fact that we share a common goal: The need to rise above where we came from. “White Trash Primer” is the epitome of an iconic Theodore Roosevelt quote: “Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty…” Johnson’s choice to use simple words, a second-person point-of-view, and Southern slang assist in creating a story that anyone who has ever had to work for anything can relate to. Through the use of tone, plot, and distinct settings, Johnson tells a beautiful story about determination, perseverance, and accomplishing one’s goals no matter what physical or emotional obstacles one encounters.

From the start of “White Trash Primer”, the reader is hit with a second-person point-of-view which immediately inserts them into the story. This point-of-view combined with the simple words of Johnson’s chosen vernacular, such as “mama and daddy”, as well as her forward and no-nonsense wording sets a tone of Southern poverty and inner strength that is nearly impossible to not be sucked in to. Johnson also makes it a point to avoid pretty language that would simply sugar coat the occasional ugliness of the narrator’s life. Her directness when writing about life-altering situations such as the rape of the narrator as written here: “—his breath is stale and sweet like the beer your daddy drinks and when you try to push him off and tell him to stop he puts a pillow over your face and jams himself right up inside you and you can hardly breathe it burns so bad but there is nothing God will do.” (Johnson p. 758), makes it seem like something that *just happens*. This straightforward style of writing shows that she believes that although bad things do happen, hiding those things behind fancy vocabulary and pretty words will not negate the fact that they did in fact happen. However, the important part is that we control our reactions to these events, and we can choose to let them control us, or to accept that they happened and to keep pushing for a better future. Additionally, throughout the story Johnson employs capitalization on certain words. This emphasis on these words, and the context in which they are used show that these things (some minor materialistic things and some just simple ideas) are normal to people who are not “white trash” despite being very special and meaningful to the narrator, further defining the tone of poverty within this story. From the first sentence of the story and all the way to its conclusion, the tone remains consistently unwavering in its unambiguous simplicity and straightforward honesty. These aspects of tone directly affect the relatability of the plot to everyone, even those who have had extremely dissimilar upbringings compared to the narrator.

The plot of “White Trash Primer” encapsulates all of the minute details of the narrator’s story thus far. These details are what show how determination, perseverance, and strength are necessary traits to accomplish one’s goals. The first sentence of the story tells where the narrator comes from: “You live with your mama and daddy, your two sisters, three dogs, two horses and exactly twelve cats on a farm so far from town you barely see the street lights’ bright white tossed over the horizon.” (Johnson p. 756). Furthermore, where Johnson writes: “Your mama’s always made all your clothes special with her own two hands and you are grateful for each hem until the rich kids in your Sunday School don’t look at you even when you sit right next to them.” (Johnson p. 757), provides a glimpse into the poverty in which the narrator lives and details how she sees herself as an outsider, a point that is of great import to her inner growth and self-acceptance that we see later on . Throughout the story there are many crucial plot-points that prove the narrator’s strength, determination, and perseverance. For example, when she sees her father struggling on the failing farm and decides to apply at Wal-Mart and must apply six different times before they finally hire her. That, and her willingness to give her father her entire paycheck to help with trying to keep the farm running, and most importantly her simple acceptance of failure shown here: “You save every penny you earn, but disappointment’s what you get for dreaming because every penny ain’t enough.” perfectly show her determination and perseverance. Furthermore, the narrator shows how one’s resourcefulness can positively improve their living conditions when she tells how she acquired much of her furniture from her “wasteful” neighbors (Johnson p. 759). Similarly, the narrator’s growing self-confidence and resourcefulness is demonstrated when she quits Wal-Mart because they refused her a day off to study, and instead applies for student loans and “exactly three” credit cards (Johnson p. 760). There are also many plot-points prove the narrator’s strength in the face of hardship. One example is her ability to treat her own rape as something that just is and is unchangeable: “—but there is nothing God can do.” (Johnson p. 758). Another example is her reaction to learning that her mother has cancer and how she stood with her family during her surgery and the concern she held for her father: “You don’t even breathe until she’s waking up from surgery…now you know it’s not just money he worries over, so you tell him you’ll drop out of school…”. Both instances show an inner strength that is rare in most individuals. Moreover, there is a part where she explains how she goes on dates, and how if she sleeps with the men then usually they will take her shopping, and how she is thankful that they are gullible. This is a very different view on female sexuality than is common in society even to this day. The idea that the woman sees the men as gullible is a bit of an ironic twist on how these relationships are usually portrayed. Most eye-opening, however, is the narrators apparent surprise when she is taken on a motorcycle ride and all the man does is kiss her before taking her home without asking for anything. This minor plot point shows the narrator’s ever-growing inner strength and adaptability in order to acquire what she wants. The most important display of determination, however, is undeniably when she finally graduates college. This is excellently shown in the humble pride of the narrator shown here: “Your English professor says you have POTENTIAL and you hold this real close to your heart when you’re walking up to get your diploma…” (Johnson p. 760). The capitalization of “potential” points to the importance of this compliment from her professor. This moment of success legitimizes everything she has been through to reach this point in her journey, and further proves that nothing worth doing is ever easy, but it will definitely be worth it. It needs noted, however, that a plot would not be very well received, no matter how meaningful, if the setting in which the plot occurs is boring and lackluster.

There are multiple key settings that set the backdrop and enhance the story being told by Johnson. First is the farm where the narrator lives as a child where we learn that she lives with her family and a herd of animals “so far from town you barely see the street lights’ bright white tossed over the horizon.” (Johnson p. 756). This brings to mind a rural setting with a lot of green, fenced in paddocks and at least one barn, even if they are not explicitly mentioned. “Your mama grows a garden of fresh green vegetables right outside your back door…you and your sisters pick peas and tomatoes in the afternoon while mama hangs clean white sheets on the clothesline…your daddy comes up to the house all sweating and covered in hayseed…” (Johnson p. 757) These small points paint a mental picture of simple farm life. The man working in the field and the woman tending the house. The image of sheets hanging from a clothesline is a strong one that solidifies the simplicity of this stage in the narrator’s life. “You move into a white house with blue shutters and a yard with exactly thirteen trees on a paved street in town…” details the next part of the narrator’s journey. After their family is forced to sell the farm they move into town. Here Johnson emphasizes the changes in setting by mentioning the paved street and thirteen trees, complete opposites of the open grass, dirt roads, and woods she grew up exploring. The differences compared to the farm with surrounding woods and land should be jarring and yet the narrator seems to take it all in stride. The most notable differences are that now neither of the parents are home very much because they were both forced to get day jobs: “He works at the power plant…and your mama waits on rich folks at the restaurant…and you don’t have to set the table anymore cause you and your sister eat peanut-butter sandwiches for dinner and watch cable television before you go to bed.” (Johnson p. 758). This description makes it quite simple for the reader to imagine two young girls in an empty house basically fending for themselves. While still showing the closeness of the two sisters, it also clearly shows the forced separation of their family unit. The next notable setting in the story is when her mother is in the hospital: “—together with sixteen of your cousins and your aunts and uncles and grandparents on both sides and both of your sisters in your mama’s hospital room holding hands around her bed…” makes it easy to imagine a large family cramped together in a small room all anxiously hoping for a positive outcome. The next important stage for this story is the narrator’s apartment, where we see her still struggling with poverty. “You hide that you are poor…You take furniture from your neighbor’s dumpster and thank your luck that they are wasteful. You fog your apartment for roaches and clean with bleach so they don’t come out when you have company.” Here we can easily picture a little run-down one bedroom apartment that though mostly dilapidated is clean and fresh on the inside because she puts the work in to keep it that way. Lastly, the diner where her parents take her and her sisters after she goes back to school. A minor place in the story, though extremely meaningful as this is when her father tells her he’s proud of her. All of these places within the story, as well as the previously discussed literary devices work together to convey a heartfelt, relatable story of trial and error, growth, strength, and success that many readers are able to relate to.

Lacy M. Johnson’s short story “White Trash Primer” is a powerful story that epitomizes Theodore Roosevelt’s ideal of hard work yielding the most worthwhile results. It is a simple story that people from every generation or walk of life can appreciate, relate to, and perhaps even learn from. Those from more well-off beginnings could possibly learn to refrain from judging the “white trash” people they see as lesser. Arguably more important, however, is that this story could give people who share a similar background a character that they can deeply relate to. I believe that this text could impact teenagers and young adult from all places by showing them that hard work is paramount to success. While not everyone can relate to the poor, white, southern female identity, many can relate to the idea of the struggle to rise above one’s beginnings, no matter where those beginnings are. Johnson’s flawless use of tone, plot, and distinct settings make this humble story of determination, perseverance and accomplishing one’s goals something that readers through the ages will appreciate.

**Works Cited:**

Johnson, Lacy M. “White Trash Primer.” *Literature: The Human Experience*, by Richard Abcarian et al., 13th ed., Bedford/St. Martins, 2019, pp. 756–760.