
Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space, Brent Staples

In the essay, "Just Walk on By," Brent Staples succeeds greatly in demonstrating the current negative view of black men in America and the fact that racism is still alive today. He narrates a personal anecdote about the path he takes to understand the effect his appearance can have on his environment. Staples describes his extreme frustration at the fact that racism plays such a large role in his life. The essay illustrates that prejudice and racism are still prevalent by using many examples, his intended audience, imagery, and comparisons.

In this essay, Staples describes how he has always been discriminated against for being a black journalist in a white area of work. He first realizes this as a graduate student when he takes a walk late at night and frightens a white woman who believed he was following her. He agrees that the world is violent and that the woman had a right to be fearful of him, but it perturbs him that he cannot change the fact that he was the cause of the fear. He begins to understand that he has a quality to change the environment around him solely because of the color of his skin. However, he does not become angry but maintains a sense of calamity throughout the essay. His newfound understanding causes him to begin actively trying to make himself look less intimidating to others around him.

Accordingly, Staples uses many examples to express the racial stereotype he acquires to his intended audience, which are white women and black men in general. He describes two common times when people unreasonably mistook him for a burglar and a colleague of his as a killer. These examples begin to make the reader feel sympathy towards black men as a whole and the prejudice they cannot escape. He explains a time when he entered a jewelry store to write an article for a newspaper and was greeted with an "enormous red Doberman pinscher." Readers realize the hardship of the lives of black men who cannot even enter a jewelry store without causing alarm. Women in particular are victim to this behavior of racism, and some will realize their wrongdoings when reading the essay. Staples, however, will not let this stereotype of being a threat to society overcome his emotions. To lighten the environment around him, he whistles classical music to assure others that he is not a perilous man and that they should not fear him. Through these actions, he suppresses the personal notions of feeling like a thug while also lessening the aspect of terror felt by nearby people. The whistling allows others to see the accurate representation of Staples that they can only see once they put their racism aside.

Furthermore, Staples uses much vivid imagery to help his readers imagine the situations he has to cope with. The image of Staples barely being able to "take a knife to a raw chicken" shows readers that Staples is in fact a harmless person. Also, Staples describes white women who walk the street at night as seeming to "forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled." The women are intensely protecting themselves from black men who they do not know based solely on stereotypes. These images facilitate the reader's ability to fully experience the depth of Staples's story. His diction portrays this tactic from the very beginning of his essay. Staples states that his "first victim was a woman" causing many readers to jump to the conclusion that Staples hurt this woman in some way, like the predisposed notion of black people causes many to presume. Readers soon realize this mistake and recognize that he or she just made the assumption that many people make prejudicially every day.

Additionally, Staples uses comparisons to enhance the descriptions of the fear that others feel by Staples's presence. Staples explains that the woman's quick getaway when she saw him on a street at night made him feel like "an accomplice in tyranny" that was "indistinguishable from the muggers." This experience shows how the woman's racism affected her own actions but also how it negatively influenced the black man emotionally. He also uses an onomatopoeia to recreate the atmosphere of walking the streets at night when he says he "could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk of the driver-black, white, male, or female-hammering down the door locks." The sound of the cars locking creates an uneasy feeling among readers and shows the extent of precaution that not only women took as a result of his presence.

Staples effectively persuades his readers to believe that not all black men are harmful and to stop fueling racism. He also convinces his readers to feel sympathetic towards black men. I have been on both sides of this situation by being the one causing fear and the one falling victim to prejudice. I constantly find myself making sure that I am fully aware of my surroundings and the people around me when I am out alone. This prejudice has been passed down to me by my aunts who always encourage me to have pepper spray with me at all times and walk back to my car with my car key poking out between my fingers as a defensive action. I now realize that these notions are wrong and that black men do not deserve this unfair treatment. I know how horrible it makes me feel whenever people fear me in an airport, and I should not encourage this behavior by engaging in it. Staples's essay successfully reveals the emotions felt by black men when they are prejudiced against and the injustice that black men have to deal with still today.