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Symbolism of Identity in *The Crossover*

The Crossover, by Kwame Alexander, focuses on the relationship between Josh and his twin brother JB. While the two boys are, obviously, separate, unique people, they share a connection which makes it feel as though they are one in the same. Josh, initially, is empowered by this relationship, but, over time, their closeness becomes an issue as both boys develop feelings for a new student, and grow further apart in their interests. To establish and maintain his own unique personhood as he and his brother separate, Josh places his self-worth and identity in his hair. Throughout *The Crossover*, the author employs the symbol of “locks” to explore Josh’s identity, and who he is with and without his hair.

The author, at one point, tells the audience, through Josh, that “identical twins / are no different / from everyone else, / except we look and / sometimes sound / exactly alike” (Alexander 105). Josh’s observations, in the beginning of the book, are celebratory—he loves that he and his brother are on the same team (both metaphorically and literally). As they grow older, however, tensions arise as JB and Josh begin to have divergent interests, and Josh uses his hair to establish his own unique identity: “[locks] help[] people know / that I am me and not JB” (Alexander 14). The author uses the symbolism of Josh’s hair to suggest that the boys’ identities are evolving as they grow older. Josh’s desire for individuality is more clearly expressed through his choice of hairstyle, while JB, instead, seems to put off the twins’ shared

sports interests for more romantic pursuits. Josh even goes so far as to say his locks “make [him] feel / like a king,” proving that much of his self-worth comes from his hairstyle (Alexander 14).

Josh explains that he wears his hair in locks not only to differentiate himself from JB, but also because it makes him feel closer to their Dad: “ever since I watched / the clip of Dad / posterizing / that seven-foot Croatian center / on ESPN’s *Best Dunks Ever*; / soaring through the air—his / long twisted hair like wings / carrying him / high above / the rim—I knew / one day / I’d need / my own wings / to fly” (Alexander 14). Josh, like his dad, is a great athlete; but, he believes these skills come from his “wings.” Josh’s locks connect him to not only his father, but also the game of basketball. This deep connection is why, after Josh is forced to shave his locks due to a lost bet, he loses himself and things go south for not only him, but also his family: “[JB] opens the scissors, / grabs my hair / to slash a strand” (Alexander 30).

Josh’s sense of restlessness, isolation, and confusion throughout the rest of the novel can be seen as the direct result of losing his locks—of losing himself: “Ever seen an eagle soar? So high, so fly. Me and my wings are—and that’s when I remember: MY. WINGS. ARE. GONE” (Alexander 131). Though changing one’s hair is a normal part of life, this tragic circumstance suggests that Josh’s identity will have to shift drastically as he further separates himself from his brother. The author reinforces this symbol of lost identity, much like Samson losing his hair and, thus, his strength: “I feel empty with no hair” (Alexander 204). Josh’s character is so deeply rooted in his appearance, in his locks, that he is unsure who he is without them.

Toward the end of the novel, however, Josh begins to accept who he is apart from JB, as well as his new role—one that he is given upon his father’s passing: “I guess you Da Man now,

Filthy” (Alexander 236). Over the course of the novel, Josh uses his locks for various reasons, whether it be to connect him with his father, separate himself from his brother, or improve his game; but, ultimately, he has to learn what it means to be a man, to be himself, without his chosen hairstyle and without his father. The author, throughout *The Crossover*, equates Josh’s identity with the symbol of his locks, and explores the consequences Josh faces when he loses them.

Work Cited

Alexander, Kwame. *The Crossover*. HMH Books for Young Readers, 2014.