

## Unit 2 More than Skin Deep

### Preparatory Work

(1) Apparently the author's African American identity helps to enhance his exploration and denunciation of racial inequality and injustice in the story. His identity as an insider on the victims' side in the racist social system naturally endows him with authenticity in the depiction of the unfair treatment and oppression. Despite the risk of weakened objectivity, the first-person narration of a victim enables the reader to directly experience the victim's mental, emotional, and psychological sufferings and well as their responses to such sufferings. Occupying an important position in American literature, African American literature has produced a number of great works by well-recognized writers, poets and playwrights, such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) by Frederic Douglass (c. 1818-95), *Up from Slavery* (1901) by Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922) by Langston Hughes (1902-67), *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright (1908-1960), *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin (1924-87), *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison (1931- ), and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker (1944- ). Besides racial relationships, especially racial inequality and injustice, African American literature deals with a rich variety of themes, including dehumanization of slavery, religion and spirituality, African roots, migration, sexuality, *et cetera*.

(2) Omitted.

(3) Omitted.

(4) Omitted.

### Critical Reading

#### I. Understanding the text

1. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

(1) Clues such as the name of the school, the row kept empty between the white and the colored audiences at the grand dramatic offering, and the lack of presence of white people in the story make it quite obvious that racial segregation was

enforced in Hopkinsville. At least four classes of racially and economically defined people lived in the town: whites, yallors (represented by those who played Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty and their families), blacks (represented by the narrator and his family), and the most underprivileged blacks (represented by Rat Joiner). Obviously clear lines were drawn and strictly kept between the classes. Interestingly, the story doesn't tell the reader much about the privileges the whites enjoyed besides their having the power over the use of the Cooper Opera House and especially reserved seats at the yearly dramatic offering. Instead, Ted Poston approaches the racial issue by exploring the interactions and relationships among colored people. The lighter the skin color was, the more privileges the person enjoyed, while the darker the skin color was, the more deprived s/he was.

(2)The "Blue Vein Society" was a so-called elite organization of light-skinned African Americans created most probably to highlight color lines and to promote color prejudice. It had such a name because blue veins are more visible under lighter-colored skin. In the story, a "yaller" refers to a person of mixed-race ancestry who had a light skin color. The term was commonly used in America at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to describe very light-skinned people who had primarily white European ancestry but were classified as black for their African ancestry.

(3)To figure out what the narrator's facial expression was like, probably we first need to ask why he was putting on such an expression and whom he wanted to remember the character that he was playing. Was he trying to impress Sarah Williams, the Venus of his one-sided love affairs? Or the audience by going against their expectation? Was he trying to show Leonardius what real acting was and thereby ridiculing him? Was the Head Evil Fairy trying to steal the attention especially reserved for Prince Charming? Was he doing it because he was so angry at the unfair treatment he had received that he wanted to revenge himself by sabotaging the play, to whatever extent he could? Was he revolting against the teachers' authority, especially Miss LaPrade's? Or you might have other guesses? Then we can come to the question what he was really trying to do by putting on that expression. This, with the help of the clue word "hammy" at the end of Paragraph 18, naturally sheds light on the question what expression the narrator would

put on to achieve his purpose, or purposes.

(4) The situation was quite clear: the row that was normally kept empty to segregate the colored from the white had to be filled by some white audience, unexpectedly. The real question then is why the situation was a “delicate” one? Does it mean that the racial line was blurred, if not erased, even just temporarily? What would the white audience make of the situation? Or maybe more importantly, what would the colored audience make of the situation? Would they allow themselves to feel closer to the whites? Apparently physical segregation rules were broken by some whites for the sake of convenience, but was racial segregation only physical? Was segregation still in play when the dividing line was no longer as visible as it was expected to be? It is possible that the colored people had internalized racism and were so accustomed to it that they thought racially discriminated treatment was by nature all right? Do not forget that the “yallers” were in a sense benefiting from the racist system. Would it be fair to say that they were both being victimized and victimizing those of darker skins? Would you uphold the system if you were a “yaller”? Probably now we have some ready answer to the question why everybody tried to ignore this delicate situation and behaved “tactfully”. Here is a follow-up question: what tactics did they probably adopt to deal with the situation?

2. Decide whether the following statements are true or false according to the story.

(1) **F**: Who do “they” and “us” refer to in the sentence “It was the one occasion on which they let us use the old Cooper Opera House...” And “our” in “...the biggest event of the year in our social life in Hopkinsville”? Clearly “we” the colored were allowed to use the opera house for only this ONE event every year. As to whether “they” the white townsfolk would use the house for their own important events or just for operas, it’s hard to guess.

(2) **T/F**: This statement could be both true and false as the telltale word “naturally” is open to interpretation and therefore ambivalent. Consider the word “strangely” in the sentence “And strangely enough most of the Good Fairies usually turned out to be extremely light in complexion, with straight hair and white folks’ features.” (Paragraph 4) If it is read as irony

intended to ridicule the color-based social system, what seemed strange was nothing but natural in such a system; if it is read as sarcasm thrown at the social system, the practice was strange and unjust, and it made the system strange and unnatural. So was it natural or unnatural? Sometimes ambivalence is richness. So Statement (2) could be true if it is read as a description of the unjust racial situation of the story, while it could also be false if it is read as a moral judgment.

(3)**T**: Though not explicitly stated, it can be safely inferred from Paragraph 7.

(4)**T**: The expression “not only” in “Rat Joiner was not only black” is quite meaningful. It implies that Rat Joiner probably was in a situation worse than simply being black. What could be worse? Being an impoverished black would be the natural assumption. Note also that Rat Joiner could rationalize the situation probably because he had had a lot of personal experiences with racism.

(5)**T**: Obviously the narrator wanted to do something about his dark skin as he knew clearly that the darkness of his skin would render all his other efforts in vain.

(6)**F**: The narrator describes Roger Jackson as a dumb stutterer, saw himself much better qualified for the role, and was “inconsolable” when he lost it to Roger only because Roger had light-colored skin and his father was a powerful man in town. Apparently the narrator felt hurt by the unfair treatment and was not ready to accept such injustice.

(7)**T**

3. Choose the best answer to each of the following questions.

(1)**B**

(2)**A**

(3)**A**

(4)**B**

## **II. Critiquing the text**

- (1) The narrator had the best grades in his class, was the leading debater, and had a respected family. With such advantages, he had more hope than his classmates for the role of Prince Charming. However, greater hope means greater disappointment and greater sense of loss and injustice when the bubble of hope breaks. Therefore he took discrimination, the root cause of his failure, more personally. It is also possible that he had greater revolting spirit than his classmates.
- (2) Rat Joiner meant that dark-skin people are doomed by the color of their skin to suffer discrimination and injustice. He would probably think that the narrator was naïve.
- (3) The narrator should have received the part of Prince Charming. The skin color issue put aside, he was much better qualified for the part than Roger Jackson and Leonardus Wright.
- (4) The narrator's reaction in the play was most likely the venting of his vengeful impulses. Leonardus was a "goody-goody" boy, always followed the rules, and benefited from the rules, so it is hardly believable that he would try to strike the narrator on purpose to cause himself trouble. The narrator was only using self-defense as an excuse to justify his misbehavior. As the narrator says, he was not sure whether he saw evil gleam in Leonardus's eyes or in himself.
- (5) If the revolt of the Evil Fairies had really been part of the play, the audience would enjoy the novelty as they would be assured that the final outcome would be the same: the Good Fairies in white would still defeat the Evil Fairies in black. As long as the current social system and its power structure could be maintained, the white audience would not worry much about some trouble makers. The light-colored citizens would probably react in the same way as the white people since the unjust system was also to their advantage to some extent. The dark-colored citizens would be inspired by the revolting spirit since they had only been suffering from racial discrimination and would feel the strong urge to change the situation.
- (6) Omitted
- (7) Omitted

## Language Enhancement

### I Words and phrases

1. (1) vary (2) invariably (3) variable  
(4) consolation (5) console (6) inconsolable  
(7) declaimed (8) claimed (9) acclaim
2. (1) a, c (2) c (3) c
3. (1) make a nice touch (2) settle scores (3) came off  
(4) paid no mind (5) in fine fettle
4. (1) pass for (2) passing off (3) in scorn (4) scornful of  
(5) threw up (6) threw up (7) hanging around (8) hang on
5. A glossary of theatre terms:  
<http://www.docin.com/p-1464043885.html>

### II Sentences and rhetoric

1. Paraphrase
  - (1) There is no point getting angry over the casting for the dramatic offering, because racial discrimination has always been there in Hopkinsville.
  - (2) Mr. Clinton Jackson had a big say in deciding who would be employed by the Booker T. Washington Colored Grammar School. So it was not strange that his son got the part of Prince Charming.
  - (3) Leonardus Wright was a boy who knew how to please people. Even my mother often mentioned to me that he was a good boy.
  - (4) Leonardus was not at all as meek as he appeared to be.
2. Translation
  - (1) 虽然没人公开谈论过这种事，一个既成的事实就是，谁肤色浅谁就更有机会得到王子与睡美人的角色。
  - (2) 莎拉被选上演睡美人后，我就一心想要演王子。如果说在以前的比赛中我把台词说得很激昂，现在我的表现就无与伦比了。如果说以前我在家排练时弄得我妈妈不得安宁，这回可要烦死她了。是的，我还偷了我姐姐的帕尔默美

白霜。

(3) 当我从睡美人的床榻边退开，在王子到来之际溜到阴影中去的时候，你们真应该看看我脸上的表情。当我在最后一幕被王子闪亮的剑击倒时，我也许演得有点儿过——不过还是挺棒的！

(4) 根据剧情要求，我躺下来死了，但王子也许直到他死的那一天都会记得死了的我嘲笑他的模样。

(5) It is said that riot police intervened to try to end the revolt at the detention center for illegal immigrants.

(6) I hate being pestered in the shopping mall by those who come up and hand out flyers.

(7) She was stunned as if a spell was cast on her.

(8) In the round for impromptu speech, I was so nervous that I couldn't help but stutter all the time.