

BLACK LIKE ME

JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN

LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY RONALD GOODRICH

SYNOPSIS

Late in 1959 John Howard Griffin, a white novelist and newspaper columnist living with his wife and children in Mansfield, Texas, decides that the only way to discover what it is like to be a black man in the South is to become a black man. Although conditioned since childhood by the customs and mores of white Southern society, Griffin has grown intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually to the extent that he can no longer accept a social and economic structure that condemns a whole people to subservient status merely because of the dark pigmentation of their skin. According to the white power structure of the time, black people are happy in their subservient role and are incapable of rising above it. As an article of faith the white racist believes that white people are the bastion of civilization and that black people are primitive and naturally inferior. Questioning these assumptions and recognizing that black people might be reluctant to talk candidly to a white journalist, Griffin proposes a project to his good friend, George Levitan, publisher and editor of *Sepia*, a popular Negro magazine. He offers *Sepia* first rights to the journalistic material that he gathers as a white man posing as a black man in the Deep South. Levitan argues against the proposal, citing the risks but, at the same time, agreeing that Griffin's idea is an excellent one. After talking the matter over with his wife, who supports him in his project, Griffin resolves to carry out his decision to disguise himself as a black man and travel through the South in spite of all the obvious risks.

On November 1, 1959, Griffin flies into New Orleans and checks into a hotel. In New Orleans he consults a dermatologist who prescribes a medication that gradually darkens the pigmentation of Griffin's skin. Griffin also takes sunlamp treatments and, to hurry the process, uses stain to darken his skin further. After shaving his head and thoroughly staining his body, Griffin sneaks out of the white hotel shortly after midnight on November 8, 1959, and checks into a black hotel, the best available for black travelers but, nevertheless, much shabbier than the many hotels available to the white Griffin. Although Griffin has only changed the color of his skin, the transformation is traumatic. Seeing a strange black man staring back at him from the mirror disturbs and shocks him. He feels trapped inside a strange body, and his sense of loneliness seems

almost overpowering. That day Griffin contacts Sterling Williams, an elderly black shoeshine "boy" whom he had patronized before his transformation. Until Griffin reveals himself as his former patron, Williams does not recognize him. Then Williams, who is delighted by Griffin's deception, gives Griffin some helpful advice on how to survive as a black man in the South. As a black man he must plan his movements so that he can take advantage of the limited eating, drinking, and restroom facilities available to black people. Griffin, who has not attempted to change his name or occupation, quickly learns that white people never see him as an individual. They are unable to look beyond the dark pigmentation of his skin. Griffin is simply a black man and is expected to act according to their preconceived notions about all black men.

After several days in New Orleans, Griffin makes preparations to take a bus into Mississippi, where he knows that racism is far more blatant than in cosmopolitan New Orleans. Williams and others advise him against this course of action, but Griffin is determined. One difficulty that he encounters before ever setting out is cashing a traveler's check. The banks are closed, and no store owner seems willing to cash a traveler's check for a black man. Griffin finally succeeds in cashing his check at a Catholic book store. As a devout Catholic, he is gratified to discover that the Catholic Church's strong stand against racism has had some effect. At the bus station Griffin experiences a form of white malice that becomes fairly commonplace during his travels as a black man—the "hate stare"—a look of total malevolence directed at anyone black. He reflects that the hate stare, like so many other acts of white racism, brutalizes whites more than blacks. Riding in the back of the bus, Griffin is impressed by the warmth and friendliness that he encounters among the blacks. Two individual encounters are particularly noteworthy. Christophe, a highly intelligent and sensitive young black man, hates his blackness so much that he has contempt for his own people. Frustrated by his inability to find fulfillment in a white racist society, Christophe has wasted his talents by turning to a life of crime. Griffin has a more positive encounter with another black man, Bill Williams, who provides him with friendly and helpful advice on how to survive in Mississippi. Although Griffin enjoys the companionship of the black riders on the bus, he also suffers with them from the atmosphere of brutal oppression existing in

BLACK LIKE ME

Mississippi at the time of his masquerade. Tension grips the black riders as the bus passes through Poplarville, the town where Mack Parker, a black truck driver, was lynched for allegedly raping a white woman. At another point on the ride the bus driver commits a cruel and petty act of oppression. He coldly refuses to let the black riders off at a rest stop.

Getting off the bus at Hattiesburg, Griffin secures a "safe" room as Bill Williams has advised him. The bleak and decrepit room depresses Griffin, and he tries to write his wife. He is unable to complete the letter because he now perceives himself as a black man. Blacks have warned him repeatedly that it is dangerous in Mississippi even to look at a photograph of a white woman. Griffin is so despondent that he contacts P. E. East, a white newspaperman in Hattiesburg whose courageous stand on racial justice has brought him to the brink of social and financial ruin.

After a pleasant and stimulating visit with P. D. and his wife, Griffin continues on his journey through Mississippi, this time hitchhiking across the state and into Alabama. Most of the white drivers who pick him up offend Griffin with their salacious conversation. They believe implicitly that all blacks are promiscuous and indulge in all kinds of sexual activity with wild abandon. One exception to this prevailing attitude is the young white construction worker who gives Griffin a ride into Mobile. This young man treats Griffin as an individual and seems to place no importance on the fact that Griffin's skin is black. Griffin speculates that the young man is so much in love with his wife and child that he extends his love to all humanity. The encounter with the construction worker points up one of the central themes of *Black Like Me*. Griffin clearly believes that only love can overcome racial hatred and injustice. This theme is reinforced by the black preacher who shares his humble room with Griffin. According to the preacher, being human means loving all people, black and white. A vivid contrast to these two examples of love is the attitude of the white grandfather who gives Griffin a ride. This man, a respected citizen, warns Griffin that he will be taken care of if he stirs up trouble. It is evident that he has no compunction against murdering Griffin if he feels that murder is justified. The white grandfather believes intensely in racial purity but, at the same time, thinks that he is doing a black woman a favor by fathering her child.

Griffin's experience with the white grandfather is offset by another example of love. A black sawmill worker picks up Griffin and offers him the hospitality of the two-room shanty that he and his wife and several children share.

Although the young man works hard, he always makes just a little less than he owes to the company store. Because of the love they have for one another, the members of this family seem happy. However, Griffin is deeply saddened by their terrible poverty and limited future.

After saying goodbye to the mill worker and his family,

Griffin goes on to Montgomery, Alabama. His sense of loneliness and isolation is causing severe emotional agony, but he derives comfort from a brief telephone conversation with his wife. Griffin also derives hope and comfort by noting the effective work that Dr. Martin Luther King has done in Montgomery. Dr. King's philosophy of Christian love and non-violence has particular appeal because it so closely coincides with Griffin's own philosophy.

After living for three weeks as a black man, Griffin decides to make the transition back into white society on November 27, 1959. He has stopped taking the medication to darken his pigmentation and now scrubs his skin vigorously to remove as much stain as possible. Back on the streets as a white man, Griffin immediately notices the change in people's behavior toward him. White faces are now open and friendly, but black faces have become closed and cautious. For the next three weeks Griffin alternates between his white and black identities. When he wishes to pass as black, he applies stain, and, when he wants to re-enter the white world, he scrubs it off. This is understandably a confusing period for Griffin because his perception of himself and the way others perceive him changes radically with his change of skin color. During this period of zigzagging between two worlds, Griffin visits Tuskegee, Conyers, and Atlanta. At Tuskegee Griffin is disillusioned by the behavior of a white Northern liberal Ph. D. who wants blacks to honor and respect him because he has condescended to come to the South and help them. In Griffin's opinion, too many white liberals have this paternalistic attitude and do not recognize the racism that it implies. In Atlanta Griffin is impressed by the social and economic progress of the black community. He credits this progress to black unity, black leadership, the fair-mindedness of Mayor William B. Hartsfield, and Ralph McGill, publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*.

On December 14 Griffin reassumes his white identity permanently. He meets with the editorial staff of *Sepia* to discuss the article that he will write on his experiences. Then he returns to his family in Mansfield, Texas. Griffin's masquerade as a black man does not become widely publicized until March 14, 1960. The storm of controversy that erupts is even worse than Griffin has expected. After televised interviews with Dave Garroway, Mike Wallace, and Paul Coates, Griffin's mail is generally supportive, but the reaction of his home town and other parts of the South is violent. Griffin and his family are harassed and threatened, and Griffin himself is burned in effigy. To escape further harassment Griffin, his family, and his parents move to Mexico.

The most recent edition of *Black Like Me* includes an epilogue written by John Howard Griffin that updates his journal. Astute readers may note that the mood of the epilogue is more pessimistic than the original book. In spite of social progress and extensive civil rights legislation,

BLACK LIKE ME

black people are as economically oppressed as ever. Furthermore, the dream of integration that seemed so close in 1960 is not appreciably closer. Griffin concludes that racism may be so deeply ingrained in the fabric of our society that significant integration may be impossible at this point in our history.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

John Howard Griffin, born June 16, 1920 in Dallas, Texas, studied music at the University of Pointiers and the Conservatory of Fontainebleau in France during the late 1930's. He served in the United States Army Air Force from 1942 to 1945, losing his sight due to a war injury but regaining it ten years later. His other works include *Land of the High Sky*, *Nuni*, and *Scattered Shadows*, an autobiographical work about his loss of vision. He is a frequent magazine contributor and an associate editor of *Ramparts* magazine.

CRITIC'S CORNER

"*Black Like Me* is a moving and troubling book. Though slender, this volume is a scathing indictment of our society." *Saturday Review*

"For all its despair the book is rooted in courage and the conviction that there must be communication between black and white." *Booklist Magazine*

"It is the frankness and personal honesty of the author which raises the book high above the sensational aspect of its conception." *Commonweal*

"We have had, in Wright and Baldwin and others, the story of how it is to be black as told by a Negro. Here we have it in reverse terms: how the shock of being black hits a white man. This is strong stuff." *San Francisco Chronicle*

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate journalistic writing
2. To judge a journalist's objectivity
3. To identify a journalist's purpose or bias
4. To find examples of racism in modern America as they are revealed in contemporary non-fiction
5. To determine the effects of racial oppression both upon the oppressed and the oppressor
6. To examine the effects on the individual of moving from one society into another
7. To speculate on strategies to eliminate racism in America

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate John Howard Griffin's style and to determine the effectiveness of his journal

2. To analyze the objective and subjective content of *Black Like Me*
3. To explain Griffin's purpose for assuming the identity of a black man in the South
4. To describe how Griffin is affected by his journey through the South as a black man
5. To note the changes that occur in Griffin's perception of himself and the way others perceive him as he shifts between his white and black identities
6. To analyze the effects of racism both on the dominant white society and the oppressed black society
7. To compare Griffin's discoveries about being black with what black writers have written about their experiences in a racist society
8. To discuss and evaluate Griffin's expressed and implied solutions to America's racial conflict

MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences or thought units that have particular meaning in the story. Explain the meaning each has in this book. Page numbers are given so that you can note the context from which the item is taken.

1. paternalism (p. 125)

[a practice of a government or anyone in a superior position that is suggestive of a father and child relationship. This practice or attitude is particularly resented by black people because it perpetuates the myth that they are like children. Even some white liberals, professing a commitment to the advancement of the black race, may unconsciously adopt this paternalistic attitude. They do not seem to realize that it is the most insidious kind of racial slur, denying Negroes the right and privilege to shape their own destinies. True equality is impossible as long as official attitudes are colored by paternalism.]

2. mongrelization (p. 101)

[A mongrel is any creature of mixed breed, race or origin. According to the author, the white racist regards the idea of mongrelization--in this context, producing children with white and black parentage--with horror. This is one of the main reasons given to resist integration. Ironically, as the result of certain practices in the slave-holding South as well as some modern practices, many black Americans have some white ancestry.]

3. "the hate stare" (p. 52)

[a term that Negroes have coined to describe a look of naked hostility they receive from some white people. As a Negro, the author experiences this stare several times and is struck by the exaggerated and absolutely irrational hatred demonstrated by whites who use "the hate stare." The black person need do nothing to motivate this expression of hostility. His only offense may be that he is black, and being black is sufficient reason for some whites to hate him.]

BLACK LIKE ME

4. into oblivion (p. 15; p. 40)

[into a state where one is lost or forgotten by the world. John Howard Griffin's world is the white world. When he darkens his skin and goes out disguised as a Negro, the dermatologist who has provided the means for this disguise advises Griffin, "Now you go into oblivion." He means that Griffin will disappear from his familiar world and enter a completely new place of existence--that of the Southern Negro. After his first brush with white racism, Griffin recognizes the full extent of his oblivion. He has disappeared as an individual and sunk from the status of first-class citizen to that of tenth-class citizen. The experience points up the sharp dichotomy between the white and black worlds in the South. The rights, privileges, and even the toilet facilities that were available to Griffin before are now denied to him because of his black skin.]

5. economic injustice (p. 42)

[This is the pattern or vicious circle discussed by Griffin and some of the Negroes he meets. As one elderly black man puts it. "Our people aren't educated because they can't afford it or else they know education won't earn them the jobs it would a white man." (p. 42) Another form of economic pressure to keep black people from pulling themselves out of their trap of poverty is brought out by a young sawmill worker in Alabama. Although he works regularly, he never makes enough money to get out from under his debts:

Always, when he took his check to the store, he owed a little more than the check could cover. He said it was the same for everyone else; and indeed I have seen the pattern throughout my travels. Part of the Southern white's strategy is to get the Negro in debt and keep him there. (p. 105)

In addition to this economic injustice, Griffin notes the "legalized injustice" in the South of 1959. Unconstitutional legislation continues to provide the force of law for the evil of discrimination. (p. 75) The purpose of this economic and legal injustice is to keep the black race in its place--the inferior status of second-class citizenship.]

6. the lighter the skin the more trustworthy the Negro
[This is one of the myths perpetuated by both white and black people. Ironically this cliché is presented by an obviously intelligent doctor who has heard it from Negroes themselves. Griffin, whose skin treatment has made him particularly dark, is struck by the absurd destructiveness of the belief: "for in effect it placed the dark Negro in an inferior position and fed the racist idea of judging a man by his color." (p. 14) One of Griffin's major contentions is that skin color alone is the basis for racial discrimination. Using skin color as the means of judging a man's trustworthiness is not only absurd but is one of those misconceptions that must be eliminated before racial equality can be achieved.]

7. He saw the Negro as a different species. (p. 88)

[This is the attitude expressed by an educated young white man who gives Griffin a lift in his car. The young man thinks he is a liberal in race relations and perhaps has even deluded himself into thinking he is unprejudiced, but his conversation reveals him to be otherwise. Among his preconceived notions is the supposition--that in the ghetto the Negro's life is one of marathon sex with many different partners, open to the view of all; in a word, that marital fidelity and sex as love's goal of union with the beloved object were exclusively the white man's property. Though he pretended to be above such ideas as racial superiority and spoke with genuine warmth, the entire context of his talk reeked of preconceived ideas to the contrary. (pp. 86-87)

Clearly the young man sees Negroes as not being human in the same sense he is. It is as if the black man is akin to an animal. Despite his apparent education and his avowed liberalism, the young man's words and actions deny the black race the same status in the human race that he enjoys.

8. His day-to-day living is a reminder of his inferior status.
[Griffin observes that Negroes generally believe that discrimination is not directed at them personally. The prejudice does not single out individuals but is against the entire black race. However, certain things, such as the polite rebuffs a Negro receives when seeking a better job, he cannot help taking personally. Unavoidable situations that occur every day remind the individual black man that he has been relegated to an inferior status. He is reminded every time he hears the derisive terms nigger, coon, and jigaboo; every time he must bypass an available rest room or eating place to find one designated for him he feels personally the inferiority imposed upon him. There seems to be no way for the black man to escape and forget for a single day that he has been denied even the common, civilized amenities the white man takes for granted.]

9. . . . he is more afraid of his fellow white racist than he is of the Negro. (p. 153)

[Griffin is drawing a conclusion about the average Southern white from the number of favorable letters he receives from Southerners following his experiment. He concludes that many Southern whites believe that to deny first-class citizenship to the black race is morally wrong. They do not speak out because they are afraid the white racists might threaten them with social and economic pressure or even violence. Griffin's own experience after his six weeks as a Negro may or may not tend to verify his conclusions. In his home town of Mansfield, Texas, he is frequently met by silence or hostility.

BLACK LIKE ME

He and his family receive threatening calls, a cross is burned above his house, and Griffin is hanged in effigy on the main street of Mansfield.

Readers may accept or reject Griffin's conclusion about the average Southerner favoring the cause of Negro equality. Some black writers would disagree, being convinced that racism is so deeply embedded in American society that even the best intentioned whites are warped by some racist attitudes. Some of Griffin's own experiences could be cited to substantiate this view. Because it is impossible to know completely what is in the minds of other human beings, readers have the right to agree or disagree with Griffin's conclusion.]

10. The Negro's lack of sexual morality and his intellectual incapacity--are smoke screens to justify prejudice and unethical behavior. (p. 111)

[Sexual promiscuity and intellectual inferiority are the two main arguments whites use to deny the black race first-class citizenship and a rightful share in the American dream. These cultural and ethnic clichés, which are the justification for discrimination and segregation, are not supported by any scientific evidence. In fact, the studies suggest that, when blacks are given the same advantages and opportunities as whites, there are no real moral or intellectual differences between the races. Any difference that exists now is the result of the vicious circle of racial injustice. According to Griffin, the white racist salves his conscience by hiding behind cultural myths and rationalization. The racist points to the behavior of some black people and their poor scholastic achievement and says, "Aha, the black man is inferior; therefore, he must be kept in his place." Never does he admit that the racist attitude, the persecution, and an inferior educational program are the true causes of Negroes' seeming lack of sexual morality and intellectual capacity. Griffin believes his experience proves that the only criterion for discrimination, after all myths have been stripped away, is skin color. Black people have the same morality, dreams, needs, and capacities as all humanity.

Not all readers will agree that the only difference between the races is skin color. Black leaders have pointed out that the generations of deprivation have created needs that equal opportunity alone cannot solve and that there are cultural differences. They maintain, however, that there is nothing inherently inferior in the intellectual capacity or culture of the black race. What America needs to do, in their opinion, is to provide some means to compensate for the long years of deprivation and develop a greater tolerance for cultural divergence.]

COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is

important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1 - 5 Literal Level

1. Describe the steps Griffin takes to enter the world of the Southern Negro.

[After deciding to conduct the experiment, Griffin contacts George Levitan, the publisher of Sepia, who agrees to cover Griffin's expenses in return for some articles for his magazine. (pp. 8-9) In New Orleans Griffin sees a dermatologist who prescribes the treatment for darkening his skin. (p. 12) The treatment consists of medication, sunlamp exposure, and, finally, dark stain. The last step in crossing the color line is to contact Sterling Williams, an elderly and intelligent shoeshine boy Griffin met before his transformation. (p. 14) Sterling Williams is one of the few people in whom Griffin confides, and the black man is delighted to coach Griffin on how a Southern Negro must behave. (pp. 26-33)]

2. What do Southern Negroes consider to be their biggest problem?

[Mr. Gayle, a civic leader and bookstore owner, agrees with Griffin that Negroes' biggest problem is lack of unity. He says:

Until we as a race can learn to rise together, we'll never get anywhere. That's our trouble. We work against one another instead of together. Now you take dark Negroes . . . We're old Uncle Toms to our people, no matter how much education and morals we've got. (p. 35)

Upon reflection Griffin concludes that black people in the South have a double problem:

I realized that every informed man with whom I had spoken, in the intimate freedom of the colored bond, had acknowledged a double problem for the Negro. First, the discrimination against him. Second, and almost more grievous, his discrimination against himself; his contempt for the blackness that he associates with his suffering; his willingness to sabotage his fellow Negroes because they are part of the blackness he has found so painful. (p. 44)

3. Cite examples of persecution against black people that the author either observes or experiences.

[Griffin's journal is filled with examples that readers can cite. A constant indignity is the bar that prohibits him from using available facilities for eating, sleeping, or even relieving himself. Just to get a glass of water he might be forced to walk long distances to find an establishment designated for Negroes.

Some specific examples of racial persecution are:

A large white boy attempts to terrify Griffin. (p. 37)

One bus driver deliberately forces Griffin to ride eight blocks beyond his stop. (p. 47)

BLACK LIKE ME

A Mississippi grand jury fails to indict the white men responsible in the Mack Parker kidnap-lynch murder case. (p. 49)

While traveling by bus in Mississippi, Griffin and other blacks are forbidden to get off the bus during a rest stop. (p. 61)

There are several other examples of racial injustice which students could cite.]

4. What discovery does the author make about the way Southern Negroes treat each other?

[After describing his first prolonged contact as a Negro among other Negroes, Griffin reflects:

Its drama lay in its lack of drama, in its quietness, in the courtesies we felt impelled to extend to one another. I wondered if the world outside were so bad for us that we had to counter it among ourselves by salving one another with kindness. (p. 20)

Almost without exception other black people, complete strangers, treat Griffin with the most incredible courtesies. A young college student walks miles out of his way to direct Griffin to a Negro movie house. (p. 41) Later a black sawmill worker shares what little he has so that Griffin will have a place to eat and sleep. (pp. 105-113) Readers may find many such examples of courtesies extended to the author.]

5. Both races suffer misconceptions about each other. Point out some of these misconceptions.

[The author focuses on the misconceptions whites have about blacks. Some have already been noted. For example, whites believe that Negroes are completely lacking in sexual morality and intellectual capacity. While hitchhiking in Mississippi, Griffin experiences first-hand how it feels to be a member of a subhuman species. During the night several white men stop to give him a ride:

It quickly became obvious why they picked me up. All but two picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book--except that this was verbal pornography. With a Negro, they assumed they need give no semblance of self-respect or respectability . . . All showed morbid curiosity about the sexual life of the Negro, and all had, at base, the same stereotyped image of the Negro as an inexhaustible sex-machine with oversized genitals and a vast store of experiences, immensely varied. (p. 85)

One driver is amazed when Griffin speaks intelligently about how black people feel. He tells the driver:

We worry just as much as white people about our children losing their virginity or being perverted. We've got the same miserable little worries and problems over our sexual effectiveness, the same guilts as you have. (pp. 87-88)

According to the author, the root cause of white misconceptions about the black race is the refusal of whites to

recognize their common humanity with blacks. They confuse hereditary characteristics with those resulting from environmental conditioning:

You place the white man in the ghetto, deprive him of educational advantages, arrange it so he has to struggle hard to fulfill his instinct for self-respect, give him little physical privacy and less leisure, and he would after a time assume the same characteristics you attach to the Negro. (p. 89)

Although Griffin concentrates on white misconceptions and preconceived notions, he also points out that the Negro does not understand the white any more than the white understands the Negro. (p. 156) The long years of segregation and oppression have convinced many blacks that they are hated by all whites. "The Negro sees him [the white man] as a man with muscular emotions who wants to drive out all of his race except the beasts of burden." (p. 99)]

Questions 6 - 8 Interpretive Level

6. What evidence does the author find that there are Southern whites who both understand the Negroes' problem and sympathize with their cause?

[In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Griffin is driven by the "need to hide from white eyes degenerate with contempt." (p. 71) He telephones P. D. East, a newspaperman and the one white man in Hattiesburg with whom he might find refuge. During his brief stay with the Easts, Griffin reads a manuscript of P. D.'s autobiography, The Magnolia Jungle. It tells the story of a native-born Southerner who for a time manages to publish an innocuous little newspaper which would never mention Negroes "except in a manner harmonious with the Southern Way of Life." (p. 73) However, East is tormented by the feeling that he is "prostituting his conscience and his editorial responsibilities." (p. 74) After the 1954 Supreme Court decision on segregation, his editorials begin to lean away from the "correct" Southern attitude towards what he calls a "fair" editorial policy:

He continued stubbornly to preach justice. He said that in order to prove that the Negroes have no right to their freedoms, we are subverting the very principles that preserve the spirit of our own . . . we are endangering ourselves, no matter what our race or creed. (p. 74)

As the result of his courageous stand on racial justice, P. D. East suffers the ire of his fellow Southerners. He is threatened and finally starved out for expressing views not in harmony with Southern prejudices. Obviously, Griffin has recorded East's experiences to illustrate that there are Southerners opposed to white racism and that such opposition invites persecution. Griffin concludes his journal entry with this statement:

His case, along with those of other "Southern

BLACK LIKE ME

traitors," like Hodding Carter, Easton King, Ralph McGill and Mark Ethridge, illustrates the "true Southerner's" admirable lack of race prejudice: he is as willing to destroy whites who question his "wisdom" as he is to destroy Negroes. (p. 76)

Although pages 71-76 record the most detailed illustration of a Southerner sympathetic to racial justice, readers may cite other brief references to those who are critical of the traditional Southern Way of Life. Note page 134, for example.]

7. How does the atmosphere in Atlanta differ from what found throughout most of Georgia and Mississippi? [Griffin's experiences in the deep South are so discouraging that he is left with the feeling that the situation for the Negro in the South is utterly hopeless. Atlanta provides him with a ray of hope. This city has made great strides towards proving that "the Problem" can be solved. He points out three factors responsible for Atlanta's more enlightened atmosphere:

First and most important, the Negroes have united in a common goal and purpose; and Atlanta has more men of leadership quality than any other city in the South--men of high education, long vision and great dynamism.

Second, as one of the leaders, Mr. T. M. Alexander, explained to me, though the state of Georgia has never had an administration sympathetic to the Negro cause, the city of Atlanta has long been favored with an enlightened administration, under the leadership of Mayor William B. Hartsfield.

Third, the city has been blessed by a newspaper, the *Atlanta Constitution*, that is not afraid to take a stand for right and justice. Its most noted columnist (and now publisher), Ralph McGill, Pulitzer Prize winner, is significantly referred to as "Rastus" by the White Citizens Councils. (p. 134)]

8. How do the Southern whites react when they learn about Griffin's experiment?

[When Griffin makes public his six weeks' experiment posing as a Negro, Southern reaction is predictable. After the news breaks on a television interview show, Griffin immediately receives one favorable call from a friend and a similar one from his parents; then the telephone is silent. (p. 143) His mother receives the first abusive call from a local cafe run by ardent segregationists. (p. 144) In his hometown of Mansfield, Texas, Griffin experiences the silent treatment and looks of naked hostility. Only a couple of people in town openly defend him. (p. 148) He is hanged in effigy on Mansfield's main street. (p. 149) Although *Black Like Me* ends with the author still living in his hometown, it might be pointed out that local harassment finally forces Griffin and his family to move from Mansfield. The prevailing attitude seems to be that Griffin has deliberately stirred up trouble and threatened social stability.

In contrast to these direct experiences, Griffin receives six thousand letters and only nine of them abusive. This leads him to believe that rabid racism is condoned and promoted by a strong, vocal minority.]

Questions 9 and 10 - Critical Level

9. Why does John Howard Griffin write an intensely personal journal instead of the detached scientific report he originally planned?

[The author indicates his original intention of doing a scientific research study in the preface. Then he simply states that he has changed his mind and is publishing a personal journal instead. Readers can speculate on the reasons behind this change. It may be pointed out that immediately after his transformation Griffin claims to feel "Negroid even into the depths of his entrails." (p. 16) Traveling through the South, he seems to forget he is a white man posing as black. He is like an actor so completely submerged in his role that he lives the part. By establishing at the outset his subjectivity, Griffin cannot be condemned for a bias he freely admits. Readers are not misled into expecting an objective report. They are fully prepared for an intensely personal account of how it feels to be black. Black readers especially can identify with Griffin as he travels through the deep South and suffers the soul-destroying experience of being what he calls a tenth-class citizen.

Some more skeptical readers may express doubts that a white man can become truly black by simply darkening his skin. They may even wonder if material opportunism could have been a factor in Griffin's decision to publish a personal journal. Certainly *Black Like Me* has had a much wider circulation than any scientific study could possibly have had. The book is in its forty-first printing and has, without a doubt, earned its author a tremendous amount of money. But mature readers will probably recognize that the sensational success of the book cannot be taken as proof of the author's insincerity. There is certainly no direct evidence that John Howard Griffin is not a sincere writer.]

10. Do you consider Griffin's conclusions following his experiment optimistic or pessimistic? Explain. Are his conclusions valid or invalid? Give reasons for your opinion.

[Whether or not the dominant tone of *Black Like Me* is optimistic or pessimistic is open to debate. Griffin's total experience points up the prevalence of racial injustice, but he also notes some rays of hope and some progress towards the solution of "the Problem." The final sentences of the book are not particularly bright. Their implication is clear: Unless justice for all becomes a reality soon, a tragic race war could engulf us all. Another development that Griffin fears and deplors is what he calls the rise in racism among Negroes. As he says--

BLACK LIKE ME

It only widens the gap that men of good will are trying desperately to bridge with understanding and compassion. It only strengthens the white racist's cause. The Negro who turns now, in the moment of near-realization of his liberties, and bares his fangs at a man's whiteness, makes the same tragic error the white racist has made. (p. 156)

As readers may note, there are some black leaders, writers, and thinkers who disagree with Griffin on this point—who have rejected integration now as the solution to "the Problem." They propose a policy of separation. This is not to be confused with segregation which all blacks vehemently condemn. For a detailed explanation of the philosophy behind separation readers could consult The Autobiography of Malcolm X.

The validity of Griffin's conclusions can also be debated since Black Like Me is admittedly a subjective account. Since there is no attempt at a scientific approach with its hard data and rigid system of controls, one may reasonably regard Griffin's conclusions as simply one man's opinion. One can also wonder if six weeks is sufficient time to discover how it feels to be black in the South. Black readers are perhaps in a better position to judge whether or not Griffin's conclusions are accurate. They may agree with some points and disagree with others.]

Question 11 - Creative Level

11. When reading *Black Like Me*, you must keep in mind that it deals with conditions in the deep South of more than a decade ago. Judging from your own observation or experience in your community or state, has there been any real progress towards racial equality and justice? Has the relationship between the races improved or deteriorated in the past ten years?

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. *Black Like Me* describes conditions in the South in 1959. Write an essay explaining how Griffin's experiences might be different if he would conduct the same experiment today either in the South or in the North.
2. John Howard Griffin has written an epilogue for *Black Like Me* that updates his journal and describes not only what has happened in the area of race relations but how his own attitudes have changed during the intervening years. As a class discuss Griffin's epilogue and compare it to his original journal.
3. If possible, secure a copy of the illustrated article dealing with Griffin's experiences as a black man that appeared in *Sepia* Magazine in March of 1960. Compare this article with *Black Like Me* that was published later in the year.

4. Debate the following statement:
Humanitarian love is the only means to achieve racial justice.

ALTERNATIVES FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

1. Set up role playing situations in which members of the class pretend that they are of a different racial or ethnic origin. For example, whites could assume the role of blacks, and blacks the role of whites. Other minority groups—such as Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, or American Indians—could also be represented. In their roles class members can explain the problems of their assumed race or ethnic group as they perceive these problems. (NOTE: If the class is racially mixed, great care must be taken not to let the role playing situation get out of hand.)
2. Conduct research and prepare reports on the following:
 - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - The NAACP
 - The Urban League
 - The Civil Rights Movement During the 1960's
 - The Black Muslims
3. Read other non-fiction books dealing with the black experience in America and compare them to *Black Like Me*. Two good choices for comparative purposes are Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
4. Topics for Discussion or Composition:
 - Religion and Racism
 - Education and Racism
 - Equal Economic Opportunities
 - Racial Justice or Injustice Today

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, Jean. "Black literature for the 'Culturally Deprived' Curriculum", ENGLISH JOURNAL, December, 1970, pp. 1229-1233.

[Annotated bibliography recommending this book]

Dodds, Barbara. NEGRO LITERATURE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. Champaign, Illinois, National Council of Teachers of English, 1968, pp. 100-101, 127.

[Critical comment with synopsis, recommended for use in unit on civil rights]

Ethridge, James and Kopala, Barbara (ed) CONTEMPORARY AUTHORS. Vol. 1-4, rev. ed. Detroit, Gale Research, 1967, pp. 396-397.

[Biographical material, career information]

Ploski, Harry and Brown, Roscoe C. THE NEGRO ALMANAC. New York, Bellwether Publishing, 1967, pp. 680-681.

[Brief critical comments]

BLACK LIKE ME

TEST A

Part I: Vocabulary (20 points)

Match each underlined word with its definition listed below. Write the letter of the definition in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Williams showed none of the obsequiousness of the Southern Negro, but was polite and easy to know.
- _____ 2. The whites, especially the tourists, had no reticence before us.
- _____ 3. "People read this racist poison—and it's often presented in a benevolent tone."
- _____ 4. The woman undoubtedly considered it a supreme insolence for a Negro to dare to feel sorry for her.
- _____ 5. I saw a pleasant young man who showed no hint of animosity.
- _____ 6. P. D. ran an innocuous little newspaper, *The Petal Paper*.
- _____ 7. The young man's glance was friendly, courteous, and he spoke with no condescension.
- _____ 8. The white man's questions had the spurious elevation of a scholar seeking information.
- _____ 9. The white grandfather overrode my feelings and the conversation grew more salacious.
- _____ 10. "We show our prejudice in our paternalism."

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| a. false | g. kindly |
| b. animalism | h. extreme discourtesy |
| c. hostility | i. patronizing manner |
| d. lustful | j. stubbornness |
| e. harmless | k. slavish obedience |
| f. practice of providing people's needs without giving them responsibility | l. uncommunicativeness |

Part II: True or False (10 points)

In the space provided write *true* if the statement is completely true or write *false* if any part of the statement is false.

- _____ 1. When Griffin first conceives of the idea to pose as a black man, he is chiefly motivated by the desire to obtain a sensational story.
- _____ 2. Besides changing his skin color, Griffin assumes a false name and occupation when he passes into black society.
- _____ 3. Because of its cosmopolitan nature, New Orleans is less blatantly racist than many other areas of the Deep South.
- _____ 4. The black riders on the bus going through Mississippi are so distrustful of strangers that they refuse to talk to Griffin.
- _____ 5. All of the white drivers in Mississippi and Alabama who give Griffin a ride reveal their racial prejudice.
- _____ 6. According to Griffin, white racists brutalize themselves more than they do black people.
- _____ 7. Griffin discovers that if he behaves intelligently in front of white people, they will perceive him as an individual.
- _____ 8. Although Southern white racists believe in racial purity, many white men see no inconsistency in having sexual relations with black women.
- _____ 9. Griffin's final conclusion in *Black Like Me* is that racial justice in America is completely impossible.
- _____ 10. The epilogue that updates *Black Like Me* shows that Griffin feels exactly the same as he did in 1960 when he wrote the original journal.

BLACK LIKE ME

Test A Continued

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- _____ 1. *Black Like Me* may be best classified as (a) black literature (b) propagandist literature (c) a book about black people written primarily for a white audience (d) a book about the experiences of a white man written primarily for a black audience.
- _____ 2. When Griffin passes into black society, black people (a) reject him because he is a stranger (b) accept him with incredible courtesy (c) are totally indifferent to his presence (d) suspect him of being of a white man.
- _____ 3. A general consensus among black leaders seems to be that blacks lack (a) unity (b) courage (c) intelligence (d) the desire to improve their status.
- _____ 4. In Griffin's opinion, when white people commit malicious acts against black people, they are demonstrating (a) the inherent evil of white people (b) their well-developed sense of moral superiority (c) their desire to destroy the black race completely (d) their own lack of self-esteem.
- _____ 5. Many of the white drivers who give Griffin a ride in Mississippi and Alabama pick him up (a) to prove that they are not prejudiced (b) to show their paternalistic compassion for black people (c) to engage Griffin in pornographic conversation (d) to put Griffin in his place by terrorizing him.
- _____ 6. According to the black preacher, the white racists will win when black people (a) start turning the other cheek (b) stop loving them (c) fail to fight back (d) give up their homes and move to the North.
- _____ 7. The white grandfather, who is a respected member of his community, considers black women (a) the moral bulwark of the black race (b) objects on which to satisfy his lusts (c) too unclean to touch (d) more beautiful than white women.
- _____ 8. The Alabama sawmill worker is kept in economic slavery by (a) the Southern welfare system (b) a heavy tax burden (c) the necessity of securing an employment card (d) his debt to the company store.
- _____ 9. As a black man Griffin regards the colored restroom as a (a) symbol of degradation (b) sanctuary (c) foul place (d) sensual experience.
- _____ 10. A central theme in *Black Like Me* is that (a) blacks must eventually resort to force in order to achieve racial justice (b) Northern liberals must help Southern blacks achieve their rights (c) only through publicizing their oppression will blacks achieve racial justice (d) only through humanitarian love will racial justice be achieved.

Part IV: Matching (10 points)

In the space provided write the letter corresponding to the person described in the phrase.

- _____ 1. Mississippi newspaper editor who faces financial ruin because of his stand on racial justice.
 - _____ 2. Griffin's contact for entering the black community of New Orleans.
 - _____ 3. his love for all humanity seems to grow out of his great love for his wife and child
 - _____ 4. has a paternalistic attitude toward Southern blacks
 - _____ 5. owner of *Sepia* who finances Griffin's project
- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a. George Levitan | f. a white Alabama grandfather |
| b. Sterling Williams | g. a Ph.D. from New York |
| c. Bill Williams | h. a black sawmill worker |
| d. P. E. East | i. a young white construction worker |
| e. Christophe | |

Part V: Essay Questions (40 points)

1. Why does Griffin decide to pose as a black man? Does he achieve his purpose? Explain.
2. What are the specific aspects of white racism that Griffin deplores?

BLACK LIKE ME

TEST B

Part I: Vocabulary (20 points)

Match each underlined word with its definition listed below. Write the letter of the definition in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Sterling's entire attitude of connivance was superbly exaggerated.
- _____ 2. The white boy sounded diabolic.
- _____ 3. The Negro knows by the white man's look of disapproval and petulance that he is being told to get on his way.
- _____ 4. Every Negro craned his head to look at the phenomenon.
- _____ 5. I was afraid my presence anywhere near P. D. might further jeopardize him.
- _____ 6. A young man glanced at the notice and snorted with amusement and derision.
- _____ 7. A man will reveal himself in the dark, which gives an illusion of anonymity.
- _____ 8. The white construction worker was boisterous, loud and guileless.
- _____ 9. My face had taken on the strained, disconsolate expression that is written on the countenance of so many Southern Negroes.
- _____ 10. A holocaust may drag down the innocent and right-thinking masses of human beings.

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. unusual occurrence | g. confidence |
| b. hopelessly sad | h. namelessness |
| c. hostility | i. unreasonable irritation |
| d. widespread destruction | j. conspiracy |
| e. endanger | k. mockery |
| f. devilish | l. sincere |

Part II: True or False (10 points)

In the space provided write *true* if the statement is completely true or write *false* if any part of the statement is false.

- _____ 1. Griffin's wife vehemently opposes his plan to travel through the South as a black man.
- _____ 2. During the six weeks that he lives as a black man, Griffin reveals his white identity to no one.
- _____ 3. Because he appears to be black, Griffin has difficulty cashing a traveler's check in New Orleans.
- _____ 4. Since he perceives himself as black, Griffin is unable to finish a letter to his wife because she is a white woman.
- _____ 5. Most of the white drivers in Mississippi and Alabama who give Griffin a ride are interested only in his sex life.
- _____ 6. Griffin concludes that nowhere in the South have black people made any social or economic progress.
- _____ 7. According to Griffin, black people in Mississippi and Alabama are essentially happy because they do not know any better existence.
- _____ 8. The white Ph.D. from New York whom Griffin meets at Tuskegee convinces Griffin that the best hope for racial justice in the South rests with the Northern white liberals.
- _____ 9. Griffin's epilogue reveals his belief that racial justice has been fully achieved in the 1970's.
- _____ 10. A central theme in *Black Like Me* is that only through humanitarian love can racial justice be achieved.

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Complete each of the following statements with the best response. Indicate your choice by writing the letter of the appropriate response in the space provided.

- _____ 1. As a black man Griffin quickly learns that white people (a) hate him (b) can no longer see him as an individual (c) regard him as an unusual individual (d) are not easily fooled by his masquerade.

BLACK LIKE ME

Test B Continued

- _____ 2. According to Griffin, many black people turn to drink (a) to escape from the hopelessness of their lives (b) to conform to the myth of black inferiority (c) to have the courage to defy white people (d) to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh.
- _____ 3. The hate stare that the ticket seller and the white man at the bus station direct at Griffin evokes Griffin's (a) hatred (b) sense of humor (c) pity (d) self-loathing.
- _____ 4. Christophe, one of the black riders on the bus traveling through Mississippi, shows his (a) hatred for all white people (b) contempt for other black people (c) deep concern for helping his own people (d) quiet competence in coping with white oppression.
- _____ 5. P. D. East copes with tragedy and hardship by (a) withdrawing from society (b) moving to the more liberal North (c) relying on his sense of humor (d) adjusting to the "Southern way of life".
- _____ 6. The young white construction worker who gives Griffin a ride to Mobile (a) is only interested in Griffin's sex life (b) warns Griffin that he will take care of him if he tries to stir up trouble (c) offers to share his room with Griffin (d) seems to be truly without racial prejudice.
- _____ 7. As he travels as a black man, Griffin is troubled by the recurring dream of (a) black people discovering his white identity (b) white people discovering his masquerade (c) black people whose eyes are burning with hatred closing in on him (d) white people whose eyes are burning with hatred closing in on him.
- _____ 8. Griffin approves of Martin Luther King's philosophy because it (a) recognizes the moral inferiority of the white race (b) inspires the militancy of the black race (c) is based on faith in the power of love (d) is derived from the religious heritage of the Deep South.
- _____ 9. Griffin credits all except one of the following for Atlanta's social and economic progress (a) Dr. King's leadership (b) an enlightened city administration (c) black unity (d) the *Atlanta Constitution*.
- _____ 10. The epilogue clearly establishes that Griffin (a) has not modified his views since writing *Black Like Me* (b) has lost to some extent his faith that white America will respond to love and non-violent tactics (c) now recommends violent action as a means to bring about change (d) has totally given up hope that racial justice can ever be achieved in America.

Part IV: Matching (10 points)

In the space provided write the letter corresponding to the person described in the phrase.

- _____ 1. despises his own race and has turned to a life of crime
- _____ 2. is kept perpetually in debt to the company store
- _____ 3. sees black women merely as sex objects to satisfy his own lusts
- _____ 4. young man on the bus traveling through Mississippi who helps Griffin find a place to stay in Hattiesburg
- _____ 5. an elderly and wise shoeshine "boy"

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a. George Levitan | f. a white Alabama grandfather |
| b. Sterling Williams | g. a Ph.D. from New York |
| c. Bill Williams | h. a black sawmill worker |
| d. P. D. East | i. a young white construction worker |
| e. Christophe | |

Part V: Essay Questions (40 points)

1. What internal changes does Griffin experience as the result of changing his skin color?
2. Traveling as a black man, Griffin encounters both love and hate. Cite and describe examples of both.

BLACK LIKE ME

TEST A ANSWERS

Part I: Vocabulary (20 points)

1. k
2. l
3. g
4. h
5. c
6. e
7. i
8. a
9. d
10. f

Part II: True or False (10 points)

1. false
2. false
3. true
4. false
5. false
6. true
7. false
8. true
9. false
10. false

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

1. c
2. b
3. a
4. d
5. c
6. b
7. b
8. d
9. b
10. d

Part IV: Matching (10 points)

1. d
2. b
3. i
4. g
5. a

TEST B ANSWERS

Part I: Vocabulary (20 points)

1. j
2. f
3. i
4. a
5. e
6. k
7. h
8. l
9. b
10. d

Part II: True or False (10 points)

1. false
2. false
3. true
4. true
5. true
6. false
7. false
8. false
9. false
10. true

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

1. b
2. a
3. c
4. b
5. c
6. d
7. d
8. c
9. a
10. b

Part IV: Matching (10 points)

1. e
2. h
3. f
4. c
5. b

BLACK LIKE ME

TEACHING NOTES:



BLACK LIKE ME

TEACHING NOTES:





PERMA-BOUND • VANDALIA ROAD • JACKSONVILLE, ILLINOIS 62650

PHONE 217/243-5451