Black Like Me

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN

After spending his childhood in Dallas, Texas, John Howard Griffin moved to France to become a doctor. When he was nineteen, he became a medic and worked as part of the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of Europe, eventually helping transport Jewish people to England. Unfortunately, though, the Nazis soon learned of his involvement in such activities, so he fled the country, returning to the United States and joining the military. As part of the Air Corps, he went to the South Pacific, where he later suffered a concussion so severe that he lost his eyesight and returned home. Blind for the next ten years, he became devoutly Catholic and began publishing fiction and essays about his experience as a blind man. In 1957, he inexplicably regained his sight, and two years later began conducting the social experiment that led to the publication of *Black Like Me* in 1961. In the decades following this book, Griffin became a civil rights activist, often working with well-known figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Dick Gregory. In 1975—fourteen years after the publication of *Black Like Me*—members of the Ku Klux Klan jumped Griffin and gave him a life-threatening beating. Thankfully, though, he survived, though he died only five years later due to a struggle against diabetes. He left behind his wife and daughter.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Mississippi in 1959, a young black man named Mack Parker was accused of raping a pregnant white woman. He was arrested and put in jail to await his trial, but a group of enraged white men took him from his cell three days before his hearing and brutally beat him to death. Despite the fact that several of these men actually confessed to having done this, the jury didn't indict any of them for their crimes, effectively sending the message that white people can do whatever they want to black people without having to fear the consequences of their actions. News of the jury's decision not to indict the murderers reached John Howard Griffin when he was still in the first several days of posing as a black man in New Orleans. As a result, he decided to visit Mississippi to see for himself what it was like. On another note, it's worth keeping in mind that the United States established the Civil Rights Act of 1964 three years *after* the publication of *Black Like Me*, meaning that it was not illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or nationality while Griffin was working on the book. However, the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown V. Board of Education* had already passed (in 1954), a case that declared it unconstitutional to racially segregate public schools. As such, Griffin's racial experiment took place at an interesting time, when the nation was aware of the importance of integration but hadn't yet made the necessary moves to do actually make it happen.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Since John Howard Griffin is a white man writing about the experience of black people in the United States, it's important to consider the many black authors who were examining race from a more authentic perspective. For instance, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* considers the divide between whites and blacks, as well as what it's like to grow up as a black person in a country that is openly hostile toward African Americans. In addition, it's worth mentioning the Langston Hughes poem "Dream Variations," since Griffin takes his title from the poem, in addition to using an excerpt of the piece as an epigraph; the poem's final lines read, "Night coming tenderly / Black like me."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Black Like Me
- **When Published:** 1961
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** The American South in 1959
- **Climax:** Because *Black Like Me* is comprised of many anecdotes and stories about Griffin's experience as a dark-skinned man in the South, it's impossible to pinpoint one climactic moment.
- **Antagonist:** The many racists Griffin encounters throughout *Black Like Me* are the ostensible antagonists of the book, though one might argue that the entire concept of discrimination is the true antagonist.
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration. Although Griffin doesn't mention it in his preface or afterword, a white journalist named Ray Sprigle presented himself as a black man in 1948 and lived for a month in the South, ultimately writing about his experience in a handful of articles that led to the publication of his book *In the Land of Jim Crow*.

The Big Screen. In 1964, only three years after the publication of Griffin's text, *Black Like Me* was made into a film starring James Whitmore as Griffin.

PLOT SUMMARY

It is 1959, and journalist John Howard Griffin is sitting in his office five miles from his home in Mansfield, Texas. After reading a report about the high suicide rate of African Americans in the South, Griffin thinks about the fact that white people claim to have a "wonderfully harmonious relationship" with black people, despite all evidence to the contrary. To learn the "truth" about what it's like to live in the South as an African American, then, Griffin decides to "become" a black man himself by darkening his skin. Having made this decision, he visits his friend George Levitan, the owner of *Sepia* magazine. George, for his part, thinks Griffin's plan is crazy, but he can't deny that it's a good idea, so he finances all of Griffin's expenses in exchange for several articles about the experience. At this point, Griffin discusses the project with his wife, and once she agrees, he meets with several local police officers before he goes. With Levitan, the police officers, and Adelle Jackson (*Sepia*'s editorial director), Griffin concludes that he shouldn't change anything about his actual identity other than the way he looks.

Griffin travels to New Orleans and stays with a friend, though he informs his host that he might leave without warning. This is because he doesn't want to involve his friend in the project, knowing it might attract negative attention once racists hear about it. After visiting a dermatologist, Griffin starts taking pills that darken his skin. He also spends hours at a time under a sun lamp to ensure that his coloration changes enough. Although the dermatologist was onboard with the experiment at first, he begins to have regrets about helping Griffin disguise himself as a black man. Because he can't do anything to stop him, though, he warns him about the dangers he might face throughout the project, saying a number of racist things even though he claims to believe in "the brotherhood of man." As such, Griffin encounters this first of many white people throughout this experience that pose as beneficent supporters of equality while simultaneously holding bigoted views and refusing to admit their own prejudices.

When Griffin is finally about to step into public for the first time in his disguise, he looks in **the mirror**. He has shaved his head and applied stain to his face to enhance the overall effect, and he's taken aback by the reflection he encounters. "I had tampered with the mystery of existence and I had lost the sense of my own being," he writes, shocked to discover how thoroughly disoriented he feels by the experience.

After spending his first night disguised as a black man in a depressing hotel, Griffin makes his way to a shoeshine stand he's been frequenting as a white man while in New Orleans. At first, the shoeshine, Sterling Williams, doesn't recognize him, so Griffin reveals his identity. To Griffin's relief, Sterling laughs, and then he teaches Griffin how best to present himself in conversation so that nobody will suspect his true identity. He even lets Griffin work for the day at the shoeshine stand—an experience that proves valuable to Griffin's overall project, as he learns that many white men aren't afraid to ask black men lewd questions about where to find prostitutes. To that end, Sterling says, "Yeah, when they want to sin, they're very democratic."

During his first few days looking like a black man in New Orleans, Griffin eventually finds a clean place to stay near the local YMCA, where he starts visiting a café frequented by a number of intelligent black "civic" leaders. In this café, Griffin has insightful conversations with the owner and other men, speaking at length about the "lack of unity" in the black community. The owner raises important ideas about "economic injustice" and education, suggesting that young black people have no incentive to earn college degrees because they know doing so won't help them secure good jobs after they graduate. Worse, black people are at a financial disadvantage because they can't pay taxes very easily (due to unfair employment opportunities), and this enables white people to dictate public policy, since they're the ones who pay the majority of taxes. This, the owner suggests, is how white society perpetuates patterns of systemic oppression that keep black people disenfranchised.

One morning, Griffin goes to the shoeshine stand, where Sterling tells him that a Mississippi jury opted not to indict a group of white men who lynched Mack Parker, a young black man accused of rape who was taken out of jail before his hearing and killed. Because of this terrible news, everyone in the black community is outraged and in a state of despair, feeling as if Mississippi has effectively told white people that they're free to do whatever they want to black people without repercussions. Hearing this, Griffin decides he must visit Mississippi himself to gain firsthand experience of the state, which most black southerners agree is the most racist and dangerous state in the country. As such, he goes to the Greyhound station to buy a bus ticket, but the woman at the ticket window refuses to break his ten dollar bill, giving him a "hate stare." Though she eventually sells him the ticket, she throws the change at him so that it scatters on the floor.

On the bus, Griffin sits in the back with the other black passengers. At one point, a light-skinned black man named Christophe boards and makes disparaging remarks about the other African American passengers, eventually getting into a verbal altercation with another man—a dispute that nearly leads to a physical fight, though Christophe moves to sit next to Griffin before this happens. He then falls into conversation with a reluctant Griffin, saying that he sat next to him because he seems capable of "intelligent" conversation" and admitting that he has disdain for dark-skinned African Americans. He also reveals that he has just gotten out of prison, openly weeps, and says he misses his church community. When Griffin encourages him to return to religion, though, Christophe says he can't

because has to go "shoot up a couple of guys." With this, he gets off the bus, and everyone is relieved to see him go.

At this point, Griffin gains a new seat-partner: a man named Bill Williams who is kind and helpful, giving Griffin tips about how to stay out of danger in Mississippi. When the bus stops and the driver lets the white passengers off to use the bathroom and stretch their legs, Bill slips out, too, and though the driver calls at him to return, he pretends not to hear. Meanwhile, the driver sends Griffin and the other black passengers back to their seats, refusing to let them off. Upon Bill's return, the driver asks him why he didn't stop, but Bill says he couldn't hear him. After all, Bill points out, the driver was calling out "Boy," which isn't his name.

In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Griffin makes his way to the African American part of town, and though Bill has helped him find reliable people who give him what they claim is a safe room, he's overcome by fear and depression. This is because the entire atmosphere of the town is steeped in an ominous sense of foreboding, as if racially inspired violence could break out at any moment. In keeping with this, a car full of white men slows down and throws a tangerine at Griffin before screaming at him and driving away. Unable to bear this constant state of dread, Griffin calls the only person he knows in the area, a "newspaperman" named P.D. East. Thankfully, P.D.'s wife, Billie, tells him that P.D. will pick him up and that he can stay with them as long as he doesn't work on his project while he's at their house. She makes this request because their family has already attracted considerable amounts of negative attention, since P.D. has become an outspoken civil rights advocate. Riding in P.D.'s car, Griffin feels a strange tension and realizes that he has grown accustomed to being on his guard when in the presence of white men. Nevertheless, he manages to relax once he gets to P.D.'s house, where he reads a manuscript of P.D.'s memoir, which tells the story of how he changed his newspaper, *The Petal Paper*, from a publication that only published what racists wanted to hear to a paper that didn't shy away from tackling tricky racial issues.

Shortly after Griffin leaves Mississippi, he decides to return, this time hitchhiking through Biloxi. Although he doesn't get picked up much during the day, he suddenly starts getting rides from white men at night. However, he quickly sees why—these men want to ask him questions about his sex life, since they think that, because he's black, he'll have lewd stories that differ from their own sexual experiences. The questions they ask often put him in uncomfortable and dangerous situations, as they urge him to admit that he desires white women—something he knows he shouldn't admit because it's generally unsafe for black men to speak this way about white women in the South.

After Griffin's long night of uncomfortable rides with white men, he finds some respite from racism, as he manages to meet a black man who invites him to his family's tiny two-room home, where Griffin eats dinner and spends the night. Despite the fact that he has a good time with this family, though, he wakes up in the middle of the night, screaming after having had a nightmare he's been having rather frequently. In the dream, white people advance upon him as he stands with his back against the wall.

Griffin travels rather extensively throughout the South, encountering a range of compassion and hatred, often benefitting from the kindness of black strangers and feeling overwhelmingly thankful for their willingness to help him navigate through harsh, racist environments. Eventually, his skin begins to lighten enough that he can again present himself as a white man, though there's a period during which he alternates between both identities, carefully noting how his experience changes depending upon the color of his skin.

When Griffin finally returns home to Texas, Levitan tries to convince him that it might not be worth it for him to go through with his plan to write about the experience, but he refuses to listen. In fact, he even gives a handful of television and radio interviews, ensuring that everyone in the country—and especially everyone in his town—knows about what he's done. As a result, a group of racists hang a dummy of him in the middle of Mansfield. However, he doesn't let this intimidate him, standing strong even when an out-of-towner pulls up next to him at a stoplight and tells him that an unidentified group is planning to castrate him. Before long, Griffin moves his family to Mexico, but he himself stays in order to give the racists a chance to attack him like they promised. This, he writes, is because he doesn't want them to be able to say they "chased" him away. And although the racists promised to castrate him on August 15, they never actually arrive.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Howard Griffin – The author and protagonist of *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin is a white journalist who disguises himself as a black man to understand the experience of African Americans in the South during the late 1950s. A religious man and an active journalist, Griffin turns to George Levitan, the editor of *Sepia* magazine, for help with his endeavor. Although Levitan thinks the idea is crazy, he agrees to pay for Griffin's expenses in return for a number of articles about the experience. Setting off from his home in Mansfield, Texas—and leaving behind his wife and small children—Griffin goes to New Orleans, where he stays with a friend without telling him what, exactly, he's doing (he does this because he wants to protect this companion from any negativity that might come his way as a result of the project). Griffin consults a dermatologist in the city, and the doctor gives him medication that will darken his pigmentation. Before long, his skin is dark enough that he can

pose as a black man, and he begins going around the city, speaking to black people, trying to find decent hotels, and enduring constant racism. An adventurous man, Griffin makes his way throughout the South, eventually visiting Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia before returning home as a white man and enduring threats from racists who want to harm him for "stir[ring]" things up. Nevertheless, Griffin doesn't succumb to his fears, instead remaining true to his principles and continuing to work as a civil rights activist.

George Levitan – The owner of *Sepia* magazine, whom Griffin turns to for support for his project. When Griffin first tells him about his plan to pose as a black man in the South, Levitan (who is white) tries to dissuade him from going through with the idea, knowing it will only invite venomous hatred and scorn from racists. Concerned that his friend will be putting himself in grave danger, he urges Griffin to fully consider the implications and effects of his experiment. At the same time, though, Levitan agrees it's a good idea. As such, he decides to pay for Griffin's expenses if Griffin writes a handful of stories about the experience for the magazine.

Adelle Jackson – The editorial director of *Sepia* magazine. Like George Levitan, Adelle is someone Griffin trusts greatly, which is why he meets with her before going through with his plan to darken his skin. Adelle tries to tell him the many dangers related to this project, saying he'll be going against the country's deeply ingrained strains of racism. This, Adelle says, is why it's so risky to pose as a black man in the segregated South, for many whites will resent him for "stir[ring]" things up. However, Griffin decides to go through with his plan despite these dangers.

P.D. East – A white journalist who lives in Mississippi and runs a newspaper called *The Petal Paper*. At first, East tries to "fence-straddle all major issues" about race, ultimately placating his racist readers by refusing to write about inequality. However, he soon finds himself unable to continue ignoring his conscience, so he begins publishing what he really thinks about the injustice black people face in Mississippi. Unfortunately, his readers stop subscribing, and local advertisers take their business elsewhere. Worse, East begins to fear for his and his family's safety. However, he doesn't let this stop him from speaking his mind, as he goes on to write a memoir about the entire experience. When Griffin arrives in Hattiesburg and finds himself unable to emotionally withstand the fear of spending the night within the tense atmosphere of the African American part of town, he calls East and asks if he can stay at his house. As such, East picks him up and takes him home, and the two men spend the majority of their time talking about what it's like to be a nonracist white person advocating for equality.

Cristophe – A young black man Griffin meets on the bus from New Orleans to Mississippi. Cristophe is well-dressed and courteous in the presence of white people, but rude and confrontational when he interacts with black people. As such, he nearly gets into a physical fight with one of the passengers in the back of the bus, eventually moving to sit next to Griffin. Soon enough, Griffin finds out quite a lot about Cristophe, including that he thinks of dark-skinned black people as "punks" and takes pride in his own light skin. Before long, Cristophe admits that he misses the feeling of belonging to a church community, but when Griffin suggests that he return to God, Cristophe admits that he can't because he plans to murder several people (he also reveals that he's just gotten out of prison). After inviting Griffin to come help him murder the men he wants to kill, Cristophe gets off the bus, and all of the other black passengers are relieved he's gone.

Bill Williams – A friendly man who sits next to Griffin in the black section of the bus on the way to Mississippi. In contrast to Cristophe, who is abrasive and menacing, Bill is warm and empathetic, eventually giving Griffin tips about how best to navigate the hazardous streets of Hattiesburg, where a black man can quickly find himself in grave danger at the hands of racists. What's more, Bill becomes a model of courage when he refuses to let the bigoted bus driver keep him from getting off at a rest stop to use the bathroom. While the driver yells at him to come back, Bill simply pretends he can't hear, and when he returns, he points out that he heard the driver calling somebody named "Boy," which is not his name. He then triumphantly returns to his seat, and all of the black passengers regard him as a "hero."

Sterling Williams – An African American shoeshine living in New Orleans. When Griffin arrives in the city (and before he darkens his skin), he visits Sterling's shoeshine stand on a regular basis, and the two men form something of a friendship. Later, after Griffin begins posing as a black man, he visits Sterling's stand once more, but Sterling doesn't recognize him. After a moment, Griffin asks if he recognizes his shoes, and Sterling says that he's been shining similar shoes for a white man. At this point, Griffin reveals that *he* is that white man, and then he explains his entire project to Sterling. This is notable, since Sterling is one of the only people Griffin confides in throughout *Black Like Me*. Indeed, part of the reason he decides to tell Sterling about his project is because he wants someone to help him gain "entry" into the black community. Fortunately for him, Sterling is more than willing to help him, finding the idea so intriguing and entertaining that he even gives Griffin pointers about how best to present himself in everyday conversation so that people won't suspect anything about his true racial identity.

The Dermatologist – A white dermatologist whom Griffin visits in New Orleans when he wants to darken his skin. Griffin explains the entire project to the dermatologist, who is onboard with the idea at first but grows increasingly hesitant as time goes by, eventually coming to regret his decision to help. However, by the time he realizes that he wishes he hadn't

helped Griffin darken his skin pigmentation, it's already too late. As such, he issues a number of "warnings" to Griffin about the danger he's likely to encounter. Although the dermatologist claims to be in favor of racial equality, he says a number of bigoted things without seeming to understand the prejudice that has seeped into his language. Indeed, the dermatologist has formed many implicit biases against black people, making vast generalizations about all African Americans and suggesting that light-skinned black people are somehow superior to dark-skinned black people. In this way, the dermatologist is the first person Griffin encounters who thinks of himself as magnanimous and enlightened while simultaneously setting forth harmful, bigoted viewpoints.

Mack Parker – A young black man who was accused of raping a pregnant white woman and subsequently thrown in jail in Mississippi to await trial. However, a band of angry white men kidnapped him before his trial and killed him. Despite the fact that some of the murderers confessed, the entire group of killers was released without an indictment by the Mississippi state jury. This event took place in 1959 and is what encourages Griffin to travel from New Orleans to Mississippi. Wanting to gain firsthand insight into what it's like to exist as a black man in what people considered at the time to be the most racist state in the South, he takes a bus that passes through Poplarville, the town in which Mack Parker was killed.

Griffin's Host – A friend with whom Griffin stays when he first arrives in New Orleans. Because he doesn't want his friend—who is white—to suffer the possible negative consequences of hosting him, Griffin decides that he won't tell him what he's doing. This way, nobody will be able to accuse his friend of anything controversial when news of the project reaches the public. Once Griffin darkens his skin, he leaves his friend's house to live in local hotels.

The Café Owner – An elderly black man who owns a café near the local YMCA in New Orleans. The café owner engages in discussions about race with Griffin, Mr. Gayle, and Reverend A.L. Davis, making especially noteworthy points about the pervasive economic injustice that racists use to ensure that it's difficult for black people to attain upward mobility.

Billie East – A white woman living in Mississippi, and P.D. East's wife. When Griffin calls the Easts to ask if they can pick him up from the African American section of Hattiesburg, Billie is the one who answers the phone and tells him it won't be a problem for him to stay with them. However, she does ask him to refrain from working on his project while he's with them, since their family already suffers enough harassment at the hands of racists.

The Boy Who Helps Griffin Clean – A young black child whom Griffin hires to help clean out his parents' house after they move to Mexico. As they work together, the boy asks if Griffin's children hate black people, and Griffin assures him that kids have to be taught such hateful viewpoints and that he and his wife would never teach their children these things.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Griffin's Wife – A woman whose name Griffin never reveals. In fact, Griffin writes very little about his wife, though he does mention that she's enthusiastic about his project and that she contributes to it by agreeing to take care of their children as a single mother while he's gone.

Joe – A black man who owns the shoeshine stand, and Sterling's business partner. Like Sterling, Joe is a kind man who doesn't mind letting Griffin hang around the stand.

Reverend A. L. Davis – A black reverend whom Griffin meets in a New Orleans café near the local YMCA. Reverend Davis takes part in the discussions about race that Griffin has with other local community leaders like Mr. Gayle and the café owner.

Mr. Gayle – A black "civic leader and book-store owner" from New Orleans. Griffin meets Mr. Gayle in a café near the YMCA, where the two men take part in discussions about race with people like Reverend A.L. Davis and the café owner.

Don Rutledge – A white photographer who joins Griffin in Atlanta in order to work with him on several assignments for *Sepia* magazine. When they finish this job, Don accepts Griffin's invitation to return to New Orleans, where he takes pictures of Griffin disguised as a black man.

THEMES

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APPEARANCE, IDENTITY, AND BIGOTRY

In *Black Like Me*, John Howard Griffin emphasizes the profound effect that physical appearance has on the way a person moves through society. A white man, Griffin darkens his skin by taking pills that enable him to present as a black man. This, of course, is a fraught premise, especially with today's understanding of the problematic implications of blackface and the offensive stereotypes white people advance by disguising themselves as African Americans. But Griffin's intentions in *Black Like Me* aren't to imitate, ridicule, or appropriate black culture, but rather to show his fellow white Americans that their bigotry is rooted in something superficial: physical appearance. Indeed, Griffin hopes to debunk the racist notion that there is a fundamental difference between whites and blacks. To do this, he changes his skin color without changing anything else about

himself, retaining his real name, his professional credentials, and everything about his identity. When he experiences discrimination, then, it's clear it has nothing to do with the person he is and everything to do with the way he looks. In this way, *Black Like Me* invites racists to consider the fact that their superficial beliefs about appearance are arbitrary, hateful, and misinformed. And though this may seem like an obvious point, it was an unfortunately necessary one to make in the 1950s and '60s—an idea that, sadly enough, only a white man could express without putting his life in immediate danger.

Griffin begins his study of race and identity with a rather straightforward question: "If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make? What is it like to experience discrimination based on skin color, something over which one has no control?" (Note that "Negro" was a generally accepted term at the time.) By using the word "adjustments" in this question, Griffin highlights the fact that whites and blacks have completely different experiences in America simply because of their "skin color." Although no one has "control" over the shade of his or her pigment, this tiny aesthetic detail determines the ways in which a person experiences life itself—an idea Griffin seems to understand before conducting his experiment, given that he's already thinking about how his life will change as a result of his newly darkened skin. Of course, this frustrating reality is already overwhelmingly clear to African Americans, who experience lesser treatment on a daily basis on account of the way they look. However, Griffin wants to show whites—and specifically racists—how ridiculous it is to persecute an entire group of people based on something as insignificant as skin pigmentation. "How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?" Griffin asks, going on to say that "the Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth" because "he long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life more miserable for him." Because of this, Griffin tries to show his fellow white Americans the absurdity of their own bigotry by attacking the idea that there is a fundamental difference between whites and blacks.

Although Griffin's primary argument is that there exists no significant difference between white people and black people, he finds himself plunged into an identity crisis when he first assumes the appearance of a black man. Looking at himself in **the mirror**, he is unpleasantly shocked by how out of touch he feels with himself. "I had tampered with the mystery of existence and I had lost the sense of my own being," he writes, feeling "devastated" at this sudden loss of self. In this moment, Griffin acknowledges that even superficial appearances have profound effects on a person's internal emotional landscapes, as his entire identity seemingly shifts as a result of this aesthetic transformation. This is an important moment in *Black Like Me* because it complicates the rather two-dimensional notion that race is nothing more than appearance. Indeed, skin color is arbitrary, but it still profoundly affects how a person interfaces not only with the outside world, but with his or her own identity, too.

Despite the complex influence that physical appearance has on identity, Griffin wants to spotlight how trivial it is to treat people differently based on skin color. This is because he understands that segregated society fails to recognize anything other than a person's coloration (that is, of course, unless that person is white). Staring at himself in the mirror and feeling the loss of his identity, Griffin notes, "I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me." When Griffin says that a black man is "wholly a Negro" despite "what he once may have been," he shows readers that African Americans are denied complex identities by segregated society, flattened into a stereotype that ignores the subtleties of human identity. And because Griffin himself now presents as a black man, he will be stripped of everything that makes him who he is. Indeed, he has no choice but to experience an "unfamiliar" world, since no one will stop to consider him beyond noting his blackness. Appearance, then, is the only thing that determines how a black person is treated in the segregated South.

By writing this account, Griffin invites racists to interrogate what, exactly, differentiates them from the people they oppress. Of course, Griffin does this from a place of privilege, since he can lighten his skin at any moment and transition back into life as a white person. However, the author understands that, at the time of this experiment, racists are unwilling to listen to black people when they talk about injustice and prejudice. In this way, *Black Like Me* is an important document because it showcases a white man's attempt to force racists to grapple with the relationship between appearance and identity, ultimately leaving them no choice but to admit that they use trivial aesthetic notions as an excuse to propagate false and hateful ideas about African American identity.

UNITY, DIVISION, AND COMMUNICATION

In *Black Like Me*, Griffin suggests that the only way to overcome division is by finding ways to effectively communicate both across and within cultural boundaries. First and foremost, he considers the division between white and black Americans and laments the lack of understanding between the two groups, intimating that the country's racial problems have to do with an unwillingness on the part of whites to establish a fair dialogue with black people. What's more, Griffin outlines smaller instances of division, calling attention to the ways in which African Americans sometimes oppress one another in order to conform to white

society. Lastly, Griffin discusses the hatred and ostracization white people often face when they speak out against racism and segregation, thereby revealing the ways in which they sow division within their own ranks. Unfortunately, none of these forms of division are openly acknowledged by white society, which instead makes bold claims about racial unity without bothering to investigate the accuracy of such assertions. As such, Griffin identifies America's lack of communication as one of the country's most pressing concerns. In doing so, he fights the kind of isolation and societal partitioning that arises when people come to an impasse and are unable to create unified communities.

There are—of course—many white people who are openly racist, but Griffin also encounters bigoted Southerners who promote racial division simply by avoiding genuine communication between the white and black communities. These people pretend to have good relationships with African Americans when, in reality, they remain bigoted and prejudiced. Griffin notices this in Alabama, where he sees that white people are "simply unaware of the situation with the Negroes."

"I talked with some [white people]—casual conversations here and there," he writes. "They said they knew the Negroes, they had had long talks with the Negroes. They did not know that the Negro long ago learned he must tell them what they want to hear, not what is." Articulating that it is dangerous for black people in segregated states to express their opinions about race, Griffin puts his finger on how racists justify their oppressive and divisive ways: they pretend to be benevolent people willing to listen to others. Fashioning an image of themselves as kind and open, these people craft an alternate reality, one in which black people are *happy* with their oppressive living conditions. In turn, this lie makes it easier for segregationists to tell themselves it's unnecessary to establish any kind of legitimate communication with the people they suppress. Meanwhile, African Americans know that speaking up about injustice in the South means opening oneself up to danger. As such, true communication becomes virtually impossible, since the white population actively avoids the truth while the black population is discouraged from speaking out. In turn, the two groups are unable to relate, making it even harder to bridge the gap racism has already created.

In addition to the division between blacks and whites, there also exist unfortunate rifts within the African American community itself. Griffin discusses this dilemma with an elderly black man in New Orleans, who agrees that a "lack of unity" is the "biggest problem" facing black Americans. "Until we as a race can learn to rise together, we'll never get anywhere," he says. "That's our trouble. We work against one another instead of together." Going on, he bemoans the influence of colorism on the African American population. "[Dark-skinned blacks] are old Uncle Toms to our people, no matter how much education and morals we've got," he says (the term Uncle Tom refers to a black person who is, according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, "overeager to win the approval of whites"). "No, you have to be almost a mulatto, have your hair conked and all slicked out and look like a Valentino. Then the Negro will look up to you. You've got *class*."

In this moment, the elderly man references the fact that racist notions about skin color have made their way into the black community from the white community. Indeed, racists have successfully advanced the idea that light skin is superior to dark skin, a notion many African Americans have unfortunately accepted and propagated. "Why, if we'd work just half as hard to boost our race as we do to please whites whose attentions flatter us, we'd really get somewhere," the old man says. In turn, readers see that the white population and its racist ideas have overwhelmingly detrimental effects on the black population, ultimately dividing African Americans from one another and making it even more difficult for them to oppose bigotry.

Interestingly enough, Griffin shows that the white community also experiences division, as racists scorn anyone who promotes equality and unity. In keeping with this, Griffin's journalist friend P.D. East serves as a perfect example of someone who is ostracized from white society for opposing racism. Using his newspaper as a platform, East urges his fellow white Americans to leave behind their bigoted ways. As a result, he is forced to live a life of solitude on the fringe of society. This is because the white community is largely unwilling to communicate openly about racial issues.

To illustrate this point, Griffin writes about a young white man from Massachusetts who finds himself discouraged by the fact that none of his new neighbors in Mississippi will listen to his ideas about equality. "They can't discuss it," he tells Griffin. "It's a shame but all they do is get mad whenever you bring [race] up. […] They're blocked on that one subject. […] if I mention race with any sympathy for the Negro, they just tell me I'm an 'outsider' and don't understand about Negroes." Once again, then, readers see how racists actively discourage any kind of communication about the subject. Even amongst themselves, they avoid the topic because they surely know that an open discourse about racial equality will force them to examine their absurd notion that black people are happy with the way things are. This unwillingness to talk about difficult subjects, Griffin intimates, lies at the heart of America's division. This, it seems, is why he has chosen to conduct this experiment and write a book about his experience, for he clearly believes that the only way to fully understand the country's division is by transcending the very social boundaries that keep people apart.

IMPLICIT BIAS AND SYSTEMIC RACISM

Black Like Me documents the many kinds of overt racism that play out in everyday life, but it also looks at the ways in which black Americans are oppressed on a broader, institutional level. Indeed, Griffin

upholds that racism manifests itself in the very structures of power in the United States, working its way into the country's economic, educational, judicial, and religious institutions. What's more, because these forms of discrimination aren't as apparent as the kind of overt bigotry that occurs when a person says something hateful, they often go undetected in white society. In fact, many white people manage to ignore their own implicit biases against black people while simultaneously perpetuating policies that actively oppress African Americans. Griffin, for his part, is cognizant of these broader forms of prejudice. He focuses particularly on the educational and economic effects of systemic racism, ultimately demonstrating that these kinds of disenfranchisement create cycles of poverty and hardship that make it more and more difficult for black Americans to attain upward mobility. Worse, racists often point to African American failure as evidence that black people are intrinsically inferior to whites, ultimately refusing to consider that it's nearly impossible for a black person to succeed in such an unjust system in the first place. In turn, readers see that African Americans are forced to confront not only the pain of everyday bigotry, but also unexamined forms of systemic racism that turn failure into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For a white person, education is often a viable path toward upward mobility. However, Griffin discovers that this isn't necessarily the case for young African Americans, who often find themselves at a loss after college. He learns this in a conversation with an elderly black café owner, who says, "You take a young white boy. He can go through school and college with a real incentive. He knows he can make good money in any profession when he gets out. But can a Negro—in the South? No, I've seen many make brilliant grades in college. And yet when they come home […] they have to do the most menial work." It's especially worth noting the café owner's point that young black students don't have a "real incentive" to pursue education, since doing so won't help them in the job market. Furthermore, it's important to remember that it's quite difficult for a black Southerner to even get into a good college in the first place, since there aren't many resources to help him or her achieve academic success. As such, it becomes clear that African Americans face difficulties in the country's educational and economic systems that white people simply don't experience.

The challenges black Americans face when it comes to education are essentially economic challenges, since even an educated black person is at a disadvantage when trying to seek gainful employment. The café owner makes this clear in his conversation with Griffin, saying, "The economic structure just doesn't permit [upward mobility] unless [a black man] is prepared to live down in poverty […]. Our people aren't educated because they either can't afford it or else they know education won't earn them the jobs it would a white man." By saying this, the café owner calls attention to the fact that there is a disincentive for African Americans to seek out education, whereas white people have legitimate reasons to go to college because it will help them become upwardly mobile. Continuing his consideration of the ways in which this kind of large-scale racism influences young blacks, the café owner says, "They make it impossible for us to earn, to pay much in taxes because we haven't much in income, and then they say that because they pay most of the taxes, they have the right to have things like they want. It's a vicious circle, Mr. Griffin." In this moment, the café owner highlights the cyclical nature of systemic racism, which disenfranchises people and then faults them for their inability to overcome disenfranchisement in general.

Unfortunately, systemic racism creates a false narrative about African Americans and their ability to contribute productively to society. In turn, this narrative works its way into white society's unconscious beliefs, forming an implicit bias that enables people to disregard how hard it is for black people to succeed in America. This, the café owner upholds, takes an emotional toll on young African Americans. "A lot of them, without even understanding the cause, just give up," he says, referring to the ways in which young black people respond to disenfranchisement. "They take what they can—mostly in pleasure, and they make the grand gesture, the wild gesture, because what have they got to lose if they do die in a car wreck or a knife fight or something else equally stupid?" Denied support or a path toward upward mobility, young African Americans seek emotional refuge in worldly pleasures, which whites then hold against them.

Part of the implicit bias whites develop against blacks has to do with their failure to see that the behavior they think is disreputable is actually a very human and understandable response to systemic racism. Griffin encounters this ignorant viewpoint in a conversation with his dermatologist, who claims that he has no problem with African Americans but that he believes they're naturally "destructive." "How can you render the duties of justice to men when you're afraid they'll be so unaware of justice they may destroy you?—especially since their attitude toward their own race is a destructive one," he says. What the dermatologist fails to grasp is that African Americans are (obviously) not naturally predisposed to destruction. Rather, this is a response to widespread oppression that has worked its way into the very structures of society. If white society "render[ed] the duties of justice" to African Americans in the first place, nobody would feel the need to make the "wild gesture[s]" of recklessness the café owner suggests are reactions to economic injustice. Unfortunately, the dermatologist doesn't see this because he has cultivated an implicit bias against black people, one that allows him to say he's not racist while simultaneously setting forth bigoted generalizations. In this way, Griffin shows readers that systemic racism and implicit bias feed off of one another, as institutional oppression puts black people in difficult positions

that sometimes lead to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about African Americans as a group—stereotypes that bigots use to justify systemic racism.

FEAR AND VIOLENCE

John Howard Griffin experiences many emotional moments while disguised as a black man, but nothing he encounters compares to the fear he begins to feel on a daily basis. A white man who normally feels safe at all times, after altering his skin color he suddenly finds himself terrified and in a state of constant self-defense, as white people antagonize him in any way possible. Although he's never physically harmed during the project, he faces countless microaggressions with violent undertones, proving that even the smallest, most meaningless interactions are often shot through with hateful menace predicated on racial animosity. Unsurprisingly, this ever-present fear affects everything about a person's life, coloring not only their interactions with racists, but the entire way they move through the world, altering their friendships, family life, and personal security. What's more, Griffin ends up feeling this way even after he stops presenting himself as a black man, a fact that proves racists are eager to intimidate other whites who empathize with black people. After a group of angry whites publicly sets a date to castrate Griffin because of his civil rights advocacy, he moves his family to Mexico, though he himself stays until the day of the promised attack. When the day comes, though, nobody arrives to hurt him. Nevertheless, his decision to stay suggests that he believes the only way to respond to violent threats is to embody courage and resilience, for he understands that fear will otherwise undermine any attempt to stand up for what's right.

Griffin travels to Mississippi shortly after the state's jury fails to indict an obviously guilty group of violent white men who lynched a black man, so it's unsurprising that he enters into an atmosphere laced with fear, hopelessness, and dread. While he's walking down the street in the African American section of Hattiesburg, a group of white men drive by, scream at him, and hurl a piece of fruit at his head before speeding away. "I felt the insane terror of it," Griffin writes, acknowledging the raw panic of simply existing as a dark-skinned man in Mississippi. After only half an evening, Griffin decides that this horror is too much to stand, so he calls P.D. East—a white friend of his who lives in the area—and asks him to pick him up. Considering that Griffin is otherwise rather brave when it comes to putting himself in dangerous situations, this decision to flee is quite significant, as it suggests that the town's entire atmosphere is so saturated with violence and dread that it's impossible to ignore.

The fear Griffin experiences as someone who looks like a black man in a racist community is not something that easily goes away. In fact, it "hangs" around him even after he escapes Hattiesburg's hostile environment. This is evident when he rides in P.D. East's car and senses tension in the air. "We drove through the darkened streets to his home, talking in a strangely stilted manner," he writes. "I wondered why, and then realized that I had grown so accustomed to being a Negro, to being shown contempt, that I could not rid myself of the cautions." Although Griffin has at this point only been disguised as a black man for a couple of weeks, he can't fully shake off the various defense mechanisms he's developed in order to protect himself from the threat of racially motivated antagonism.

In fact, even P.D. East—a white man—seems to experience a similar kind of fear, since he himself has been threatened by racists for being a civil rights activist. "What did we fear?" Griffin writes. "I could not say exactly. […] We merely fell into the fear that hangs over the state, a nameless and awful thing." Comparing this fear to the "focusless terror" of Nazi Germany, Griffin goes on to say, "For the Negro, at least, this fear is ever-present in the South." This awareness of the effect of fear on the human psyche is one of the most valuable things Griffin gleans from his social experiment, as it helps him understand the inescapable emotional toll that racism takes on black people. Indeed, although he himself can run away from Hattiesburg and eventually resume his life of relative safety, African Americans have no choice but to face the "ever-present" fear of racism and violence.

Although Griffin's fear is no doubt different than the kind of terror African Americans experience—since he can easily resume his life of privilege—he actually does end up getting a temporary firsthand experience of what it feels like to be targeted by hateful, dangerous racists. Not long after news of his project breaks, someone lynches a dummy version of him in his hometown. Worse, a man drives up to him and tells him that a group of people are planning on coming to castrate him on July 15. "My parents, unable to bear the hostility, had sold their home and all their furniture and left for Mexico where they hoped to find a new life," Griffin writes. "We, too, were going, since we had decided that it was too great an injustice to our children to remain." However, Griffin decides to stay behind until the day the racists said they would castrate him. "I felt I must remain a while longer, until the bullies had a chance to carry out their threats against me," he says. "I could not allow them to say they had 'chased' me out." This is an intelligent decision, for Griffin knows that fleeing would send a harmful message to other nonracist whites, ultimately discouraging them from speaking out against injustice. This, in turn, would enable racists to continue their campaign of fear. In this way, Griffin demonstrates how important it is for nonracist white people to adopt the resilience that African Americans have no choice but to embody themselves in everyday life. After all, as he outlines in an epilogue written after the publication of *Black Like Me*, it is "possible" to "function even when you are frightened." Indeed, if it's possible to "function" in the face of fear, it must also be possible to stand up for justice and equality.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE MIRROR

Whenever Griffin looks in the mirror while disguised as a black man, he's forced to consider the ways in which appearance affects identity. As such, the mirror itself comes to stand for the complicated relationship people have with their own personas, especially regarding how people think about their racial identities. Looking at his reflection for the first time after making his initial transformation, Griffin notes, "I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been." By saying this, Griffin calls attention to the fact that white society only cares about the color of a person's skin. Since Griffin has already decided not to change anything about his actual identity, any discrimination he experiences moving forward will be completely based on the dark color of his skin. Interestingly enough, this is not a new realization, as one of the police officers Griffin consulted before this project insisted that nobody will stop to "ask [him] any questions" about his identity. "As soon as they see you," the officer said, "you'll be a Negro and that's all they'll ever want to know about you." Griffin's sudden existential crisis in the mirror is still significant, as it denotes how tragic it is that people judge one another by such superficial standards. In turn, the mirror represents the sad reality that aesthetic features dictate how a person moves through the world, even though such matters have little to do with who a person actually is.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *Black Like Me* published in 1960.

Preface Quotes

This may not be all of it. It may not cover all the questions, but it is what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down.

Some whites will say this is not really it. They will say this is the white man's experience as a Negro in the South, not the Negro's.

But this is picayunish, and we no longer have time for that. We no longer have time to atomize principles and beg the question. We fill too many gutters while we argue unimportant points and confuse issues.

The Negro. The South. These are details. The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: i

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening paragraphs of *Black Like Me*. By beginning with the sentence, "This may not be all of it," Griffin acknowledges the potential gaps in his account of what it's like to be a black man in the South in the late 1950s. Indeed, he's aware that his book might "not cover all the questions," especially since discrimination is a complex issue. And yet, despite his cognizance of the fact that there might be gaps in his knowledge, he confidently goes on to assert that the text communicates "what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down." This is a rather bold statement, since Griffin is a white man and will always view the world through the lens of his own life. However, it's important for him to fend off the possible counterarguments that racists could make when trying to discount his book. This is why he so assuredly states that he now knows what it's like to be an African American in the United States, and why he goes out of his way to say that it is "picayunish" (something of little importance) to nitpick the particulars of his claims. After all, his main goal is to tell a "universal" "story" about "men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves" by practicing racism. In order to tell this story, Griffin believes he must show white people what it feels like to move through the world as a black man. As such, he adamantly insists that his experience as a dark-skinned man is genuine, since this is the only way he'll be able to convince a reluctant white readership of the horrors of racism and discrimination.

October 28, 1959 Quotes

❝ How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth? Though we lived side by side throughout the South, communication between the two races had simply ceased to exist. Neither really knew what went on with those of the other race. The Southern Negro will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

The question that opens this passage—"How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?"—is one that Griffin asks himself shortly after deciding to disguise himself as a black man and travel throughout the South. His desire to find the "truth" is an interesting one, for it bears complicated implications about his capacity for empathy. On the one hand, his willingness to put himself in the shoes of southern African Americans suggests that he is eager to empathize with them, since empathy is nothing if not a projection of oneself into somebody else's experience. On the other hand, though, this determination to "become" a black person in order understand the "truth" might also be read as a *failure* of empathy, since Griffin is apparently incapable of believing that racism is bad without first seeing for himself. Why, one might wonder, does he need to pose as an African American in order to see that the South's tense racial dynamics are harmful?

This, of course, is only something contemporary readers would ask themselves, since at the time of Griffin's experiment, his desire to find the "truth" about the country's race problems was seen as a brave step toward equality—after all, very few people were even asking such questions, let alone putting themselves in danger in order to find answers. Indeed, although Griffin's entire project is rather fraught—especially since it unavoidably taps into the turbulent history of blackface—his main goal is to establish a line of "communication between the two races." This is because he understands that African Americans put themselves in danger whenever they speak truthfully about what it's like to live under racial oppression. As such, he seeks to validate what black people have been saying all along about racism, since he—as a white man—has the privilege to do so without risking immediate physical danger.

October 29, 1959 Quotes

❝ "You don't know what you'd be getting into, John," she said. She felt that when my book was published, I would be the butt of resentment from all the hate groups, that they would stop at nothing to discredit me, and that many decent whites would be afraid to show me courtesies when others might be watching. And, too, there are the deeper currents among even well-intentioned Southerners, currents that make the idea of a white man's assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down. And other currents that say, "Don't stir up anything. Let's try to keep things peaceful."

Related Characters: Adelle Jackson (speaker), John Howard Griffin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

After Griffin decides to go through with his plan to disguise himself as a black man, he visits *Sepia* magazine, where he and George Levitan agree that he'll give the magazine a number of articles about the experience. After speaking with George, he visits Adelle Jackson, the editorial director. Like Levitan, she tries to warn him about the dangers he'll "be getting into" if he does this experiment. Notably, she points out that he'll become "the butt of resentment from all the hate groups." Indeed, she says that these angry whites will "stop at nothing to discredit" Griffin. In fact, hate groups won't be the only white people who "resent" him, as "even well-intentioned Southerners" will shun him because he will have offended "the deeper currents" of the South. These "deeper currents" "make the idea" of such a project rather unthinkable, since it is seen as a "somewhat repulsive step down" for a white man to inhabit a "nonwhite identity." By outlining these probable repercussions, Jackson forces Griffin—and, in turn, readers—to consider the many ways in which racists try to intimidate nonracist whites so that they won't stand up for racial justice. There are quite clearly a number of reasons why Griffin shouldn't do this project if he wants to go on living a safe and peaceful life, since his entire community (even people who claim to be "well-intentioned" when it comes to matters of race) sends a firm message: "Don't stir up anything." This, it seems, is how racism perpetuates itself—by always keeping people from acting in accordance with their morals.

October 30, 1959 Quotes

"Do you suppose they'll treat me as John Howard Griffin, regardless of my color—or will they treat me as some nameless Negro, even though I am still the same man?" I asked.

"You're not serious," one of them said. "They're not going to ask you any questions. As soon as they see you, you'll be a Negro and that's all they'll ever want to know about you."

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before leaving for New Orleans to begin his project, Griffin meets with George Levitan and Adelle Jackson of *Sepia* magazine once more. This time, they are joined by officers from the local police department, since Griffin wants people from law enforcement to know about his plans in case anything goes terribly awry. During this conversation, Griffin asks a reasonable question about how the officers think he'll be treated by white people. Because he has decided to maintain his full identity and only change the way he looks, this is an important question, since it addresses what is arguably the most important element of the entire project—namely, how people view identity and whether or not they believe race has a profound effect on who a person is or what he or she is like. In response, one of the officers provides a straightforward and bleak answer, saying that nobody is "going to ask […] any questions" about Griffin's identity. In other words, no white person will ever get the chance to know *who* Griffin is, since everyone will immediately write him off because of his skin color. "You'll be a Negro and that's all they'll ever want to know about you," the officer says, already answering one of the experiment's central questions by suggesting that the majority of white Americans assume that appearance has a fundamental impact on identity.

November 6, 1959 Quotes

I believe in the brotherhood of man. […] I respect the race. But I can never forget when I was an intern and had to go down on South Rampart Street to patch them up. Three or four would be sitting in a bar or at a friend's house. They were apparently friends one minute and then something would come up and one would get slashed up with a knife. We're willing enough to go all the way for them, but we've got this problem—how can you render the duties of justice to men when you're afraid they'll be so unaware of justice they may destroy you?—especially since their attitude toward their own race is a destructive one.

Related Characters: The Dermatologist (speaker), John Howard Griffin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Griffin's dermatologist says this to him during one of his appoints. Although the dermatologist has agreed to help him darken the color of his skin, he slowly begins to regret his involvement in the entire project. Because it's too late for him to take back what he's done, though, he instead tries to warn Griffin about what he believes are the dangers of associating with African Americans. Because he sees himself as someone who believes in equality, he begins this racist monologue by saying, "I believe in the brotherhood of man. I respect the race." However, he then says a very important word: "But." By saying this, he immediately discredits the notion that he's an empathetic man who truly believes in racial equality. What's more, he goes on to insinuate that black people are somehow inherently dangerous, making an unfair generalization about the entire race based on one group of people.

In addition, the dermatologist fails to see that violent behavior is often a *reaction* to oppression, not the other way around. In this moment, the dermatologist assumes that society discriminates against black people because they're incapable of handling true "justice." In reality, though, violence is often a symptom of discrimination and disenfranchisement, as made evident later in the text when an elderly black man says that disempowered black youths often make "wild gesture[s]" in order to cope with their trying circumstances. Instead of acknowledging the ways in which poor treatment inspires violence and calamity, though, the dermatologist is all too eager to write black people off as naturally "destructive." And yet, he doesn't see

himself as a racist, ultimately proving that many people are capable of telling themselves they're proponents of equality even as they advance racist and deeply problematic ideas.

He also told me things that Negroes had told him—that the lighter the skin the more trustworthy the Negro. I was astonished to see an intelligent man fall for this cliché, and equally astonished that Negroes would advance it, for in effect it placed the dark Negro in an inferior position and fed the racist idea of judging a man by his color.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker), The Dermatologist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

After his dermatologist goes on a racist rant about how black people are "destructive" and dangerous, he declares his belief in the notion of colorism, which is a kind of discrimination based on the tone of a person's skin. Saying that African Americans with "lighter" skin are "more trustworthy" than those with "dark" skin, the dermatologist reveals his investment in the importance of appearance. Although he has already tried to present himself as an enlightened man who believes in the "brotherhood of man"—and, thus, in equality—he now commits himself to an extremely racist idea, ultimately making it clear that he only cares about what people look like rather than who they are or what they are like. In turn, he casts "dark" black people as "inferior," thereby fueling "the racist idea of judging a man by his color," an idea that Griffin will later see has unfortunately worked its way into the black community itself, perpetuating amongst African Americans and sowing division amongst the black population.

November 7, 1959 Quotes

All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence. Even the senses underwent a change so profound it filled me with distress. I looked into the mirror and saw reflected nothing of the white John Griffin's past. No, the reflections led back to Africa, back to the shanty and the ghetto, back to the fruitless struggles against the mark of blackness. Suddenly, almost with no mental preparation, no advance hint, it became clear and permeated my whole being.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears when Griffin looks into the mirror for the first time after fully disguising himself as a black man. As he stares at himself, he undergoes a complete upheaval of identity, feeling as if he has been "wiped from existence" and replaced by an unknown man with an unfamiliar history. Saying that the "reflections" he sees lead "back to Africa," it becomes rather clear that he is overplaying this moment to a certain extent. Of course, it's understandable that he would be startled to see himself in the guise of an African American, but he acts as if he has truly "become" a black man. This is simply not true. No matter how thorough his disguise might seem, there's no changing the fact that he's a white man who can decide at any moment to transition back into white society and lead a life of privilege and safety. This, unfortunately, is not the case for African Americans in the South in the late 1950s, and Griffin's belief that blackness and the black experience have "suddenly" "permeated [his] whole being" begins to seem like a rather uncomfortable form of cultural appropriation.

My inclination was to fight against it. I had gone too far. I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me.

[...]

I had tampered with the mystery of existence and I had lost the sense of my own being. This is what devastated me. The Griffin that was had become invisible.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Still looking in the mirror, Griffin feels like "fight[ing] against" the person he sees standing before him. Simply put, he isn't ready to give himself over to a new identity, which he knows he must do because white society conflates physical appearance with identity. In this way, Griffin considers the ways in which appearance influences a person's life. Although he has co-opted an African American identity in a somewhat uncomfortable way, it *is* true that he'll be treated as a black man "regardless of what he once may have been." As such, he will be forced to "live in a world unfamiliar to" him simply because he looks black, a fact that emphasizes just how much importance white society places on physical appearance. Because of how profoundly his life is about to change as a result of his new look, Griffin feels as if he has "tampered with the mystery of existence," ultimately losing his "sense of" self. After all, if he is going to be treated as a different person simply because he has changed the way he looks, then it won't matter that he's decided to keep the rest of his identity the same—indeed, "the Griffin that was ha[s] become invisible."

November 8, 1959 Quotes

❝ I realized I was "going against the race" and the subtle tug-of-war became instantly clear. If the whites would not sit with us, let them stand. When they became tired enough or uncomfortable enough, they would eventually take seats beside us and soon see that it was not so poisonous after all. But to give them your seat was to let them win. I slumped back under the intensity of their stares.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

While disguised as a black man and riding a bus in New Orleans, Griffin sees a white woman looking for a seat. Although there are empty spaces next black people, Griffin starts to get up out of a sense of politeness that has nothing to do with racial dynamics—this is simply his reaction to seeing a woman looking for a seat. However, as he does this, he realizes that he is "going against the race" by enabling a white woman to avoid sitting next to a black passenger. "If the whites wouldn't sit with us, let them stand," Griffin says, using the first person plural pronoun "us" in a rather uncomfortable way, since it's not actually the case that he is a black man. Still, he is right to identify this problem, since "to give [white people a] seat was to let them win." As such, he "slump[s] back" into his own seat as the black passengers stare at him with "intensity." The tension in this moment is worth noting, since it becomes clear that Griffin has a responsibility to avoid making mistakes that might harm the black community. Because he has lived his entire life as a privileged white man, he has never had to think about the nuanced implications of giving a white woman a seat instead of leaving her no choice but to sit with a black passenger. Now, though, he has to think about these matters, and when he makes this error, he realizes that he'll be doing the black community a disservice if he continues to blunder in similar ways.

❝ I learned a strange thing—that in a jumble of unintelligible talk, the word "nigger" leaps out with electric clarity. You always hear it and always it stings. And always it casts the person using it into a category of brute ignorance. I thought with some amusement that if these two women only knew what they were revealing about themselves to every Negro on that bus, they would have been outraged.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

After Griffin decides to remain seated after standing for a white woman on the bus, he sits there and feels bad both about the fact that he almost went "against the race" as a dark-skinned man *and* the fact that he has failed to be polite to the woman. As he thinks about this, he makes eye contact with the woman and thinks she seems sympathetic to his situation, so he smiles at her. Unfortunately, she responds terribly, turning away and talking to another white woman, saying racist things about black people as if Griffin can't hear her. At one point, she uses the word "nigger," and Griffin realizes that this hateful term "leaps out with electric clarity," rising out of a sea of words and "sting[ing]" the ears. Interestingly enough, though, he begins to feel as if this white woman is doing nothing but harming herself by using such vitriolic language. Indeed, he thinks that the white women would be "outraged" if they knew how negatively they present themselves by embodying racism and hatred. In this way, Griffin reminds readers of what he wrote in the preface about how people "destroy themselves" in the "process" of practicing bigotry. After all, when this white

woman uses hateful language, she does nothing but make herself seem petty and bitter, thereby diminishing her public image without even knowing it.

"An odd thing happened. Within a short time he lapsed into familiarity, forgetting I was once white. He began to use the "we" form and to discuss "our situation." The illusion of my "Negro-ness" took over so completely that I fell into the same pattern of talking and thinking. It was my first intimate glimpse. We were Negroes and our concern was the white man and how to get along with him; how to hold our own and raise our selves in his esteem without for one moment letting him think he had any God-given rights that we did not also have.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker), Sterling Williams

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs shortly after Griffin reveals to Sterling Williams that he is actually a white man in disguise. Sterling, for his part, is quite entertained by the entire idea, immediately laughing and then expressing his approval of the project. During this conversation, Sterling begins to use the first-person plural pronoun "we," referring to both Griffin and himself—and, perhaps, the entire southern black population. This is an important moment, considering that Griffin is eager to gain "entry" into the black community. Indeed, it's important to him that he find a way to transcend the divide between whites and blacks, since his entire goal is to find out the "truth" about what it's like to live as an African American in the South. Because of this, it's a big deal that Sterling accepts him as a black man so easily, especially considering that Sterling knows he's not really black. In turn, Griffin once again learns the importance of physical appearance when it comes to how people perceive somebody's racial identity. What's more, the fact that Sterling comes to see Griffin as a fellow black man suggests that Griffin won't have any problems trying to transition into African American culture, since Sterling—unlike the other people Griffin will meet—but doesn't let this affect how he treats him.

"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 like you, Mr. Griffin, and me," he went on. "We're old Uncle Toms to our people, no matter how much education and morals we've got. No, you have to be almost a mulatto, have your hair conked and all slicked out and look like a Valentino. Then the Negro will look up to you. You've got *class*. Isn't that a pitiful hero-type?"

"And the white man knows that," Mr. Davis said.

"Yes," the cafe-owner continued. "He *utilizes* this knowledge to flatter some of us, tell us we're above our people, not like most Negroes. We're so stupid we fall for it and work against our own. Why, if we'd work just half as hard to boost our race as we do to please whites whose attentions flatter us, we'd really get somewhere."

Related Characters: The Café Owner (speaker), John Howard Griffin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Griffin, Reverend A.L. Davis, and the owner of the YMCA café. Sitting in the café and discussing the "lack of unity" amongst black people in the South, the owner underlines the importance of "ris[ing] together" to resist racism and discrimination. However, he's aware that this will be a difficult thing to do, especially since so many African Americans have subscribed to the unfortunate notion of colorism, which ultimately keeps the black community divided. Thinking that Griffin is a dark-skinned black man, the owner points out that such people are often assumed to be "old Uncle Toms," or people who are overly subservient to white people. This, of course, is an unfair assumption, one that springs from the divisive thinking that accompanies colorism. Unfortunately, though, white people are cognizant of this division within the black community, and the owner insists that they "utilize" this to further drive black people apart. In turn, it's even harder for African Americans to unite against racism.

November 10-12, 1959 Quotes

Our people aren't educated because they either can't afford it or else they know education won't earn them the jobs it would a white man. Any kind of family life, any decent standard of living seems impossible from the outset. So a lot of them, without even understanding the cause, just give up. They take what they can—mostly in pleasure, and they make the grand gesture, the wild gesture, because what have they got to lose if they do die in a car wreck or a knife fight or something else equally stupid?

Related Characters: The Café Owner (speaker), John Howard Griffin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

During his discussion with Griffin about "economic injustice," the café owner points out the cyclical nature of disenfranchisement in the black community. Calling attention to the fact that many African Americans aren't "educated," he explains that this is largely because academia is often financially out of reach for African Americans living in poverty. What's more, even if a young black person does manage to secure an education, there's no guarantee that a college degree will help him or her get a good job. Simply put, there isn't the same kind of incentive for young black people to thrive academically as there is for young white people, whose scholastic efforts are rewarded with prosperous jobs. According to the café owner, many black people understand that this is the case, and—unfortunately—a good number of young African Americans "give up" trying to attain upward mobility, instead making "the wild gesture" because "pleasure" is the only thing society makes available. This, in turn, is used against them by white people who want to disparage the race, ultimately creating a pattern of disenfranchisement that is difficult to transcend.

They make it impossible for us to earn, to pay much in taxes because we haven't much in income, and then they say that because they pay most of the taxes, they have the right to have things like they want. It's a vicious circle, Mr. Griffin, and I don't know how we'll get out of it. They put us low, and then blame us for being down there and say that since we are low, we can't deserve our rights.

Related Characters: The Café Owner (speaker), John Howard Griffin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

The café owner says this to Griffin during their discussion about "economic inequality" and the ways in which this kind of financial disenfranchisement makes it especially hard for African Americans to attain upward mobility. When he uses the word "they," he refers to white Americans, ultimately outlining the fact that the vast majority of the country's economic power lies in the hands of white people who actively force black people into financial instability by making it "impossible for [them] to earn" decent wages. Because of this, many African Americans are unable "to pay much in taxes." This, in turn, enables white people to claim that they "have the right to have things like they want" because they are the ones contributing the most money to the government. In this way, the café owner illustrates how "economic inequality" leads to a pattern of systemic racism, as racists justify bigoted policies by pointing out that they are the ones paying the most taxes. When the owner says, "They put us low, and then blame us for being down there and say that since we are low, we can't deserve our rights," he articulates the sad reality that this kind of disenfranchisement easily becomes a "vicious circle," one that is very difficult to escape.

November 14-15, 1959 Quotes

Would they see the immense melancholy that hung over the quarter, so oppressive that men had to dull their sensibilities in noise or wine or sex or gluttony in order to escape it? The laughter had to be gross or it would turn to sobs, and to sob would be to realize, and to realize would be to despair. So the noise poured forth like a jazzed-up fugue, louder and louder to cover the whisper in every man's soul. "You are black. You are condemned." This is what the white man mistook for "jubilant living" and called "whooping it up." This is how the white man can say, "They live like dogs," never realizing why they must, to save themselves, shout, get drunk, shake the hip, pour pleasures into bellies deprived of happiness.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Griffin considers the atmosphere of the African American section of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where he's struck by the tension and palpable sense of fear that floats through the air. While looking at the chaos of his surroundings, he wonders if the white people in the city would recognize this "immense melancholy that [hangs] over the quarter." In this moment, he sees a real-life manifestation of the café owner's previous assertion that many African Americans have to make a "wild gesture" in order to cope with otherwise abysmal circumstances. This, Griffin thinks, is why the people around him "dull their sensibilities in noise or wine or sex or gluttony." However, this doesn't mean that the people in this "quarter" have simply forgotten their hardships. Rather, their "laughter" is an expression of their "despair," which is inextricably intertwined with everything they do. Indeed, Griffin maintains that it's impossible to fully "escape" the sorrow of oppression, since everywhere a black person goes he or she hears the soul "whisper[ing]," "You are condemned."

Unfortunately, Griffin upholds, white people often think the "wild gesture" is evidence that African Americans are happy with their lives, foolishly mistaking this apparent "jubilan[ce]" for true contentedness. What they don't see, though, is that certain black people only make these "wild gestures" of "pleasure" in order to "save themselves" from the turmoil of intense oppression. By putting this dynamic on display, then, Griffin once again highlights the lack of understanding between the white and black communities.

November 19, 1959 Quotes

❝ 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. These characteristics don't spring from whiteness or blackness, but from a man's conditioning.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Griffin speaks these words one night to a driver who has picked him up in Mississippi. Like the vast majority of Mississippian drivers who give him a ride that night, this young man is interested in only one thing: talking about the sex lives of black people. Although he is well-educated and claims to believe in equal rights, the driver assumes that African Americans have different love lives than whites, so Griffin tries to help him see that this is a flawed opinion, one predicated on the notion that there is a fundamental difference between blacks and whites. To illustrate the fact that there isn't any kind of essential difference between the two races, then, Griffin stresses the effect of a person's environment on his or her identity. To do this, he invites the driver to imagine what it would be like for a white man to live in "the ghetto" without any "educational advantages" or "self-respect." "He would after a time assume the same characteristics you attach to the Negro," Griffin says, thereby insisting that there are no inherent traits that come along with either race. "These characteristics don't spring from whiteness or blackness, but from a man's conditioning," he says, making the important point that the things that define a person have nothing to do with race and everything to do with how society treats him or her. Unfortunately, though, society is biased toward white people and therefore puts black people at a disadvantage, which is why people like the driver think there actually *is* a meaningful difference between the two races.

November 21, 1959 Quotes

❝ I concluded that, as in everything else, the atmosphere of a place is entirely different for Negro and white. The Negro sees and reacts differently not because he is Negro, but because he is suppressed. Fear dims even the sunlight.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

When Griffin goes to Mobile, Alabama, he spends his time looking for work but is depressed to find that it's nearly impossible for him to find any good prospects. As he walks around feeling hopeless, he realizes yet again that life is completely different for black and white people in the South. Although he has visited Mobile before, he has never experienced it as a dark-skinned man, which changes everything. In fact, it's not even just the lack of opportunity that he notices in the city, but also that the entire "atmosphere" has changed for him now that he looks like a black man. "The Negro sees and reacts differently not because he is Negro, but because he is suppressed," he writes, once again emphasizing the fact that people don't act a certain way because of their race but because of how

they're forced to experience life. And when he says that "fear dims even the sunlight," he reminds readers that African Americans in the South in the late 1950s must constantly deal with an ominous sense of "fear," one that alters the way they move through the world.

November 24, 1959 Quotes

❝ The nightmare worried me. I had begun this experiment in a spirit of scientific detachment. I wanted to keep my feelings out of it, to be objective in my observations. But it was becoming such a profound personal experience, it haunted even my dreams.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

While sleeping one night in the house of a friendly black family who has taken him in, Griffin wakes up screaming. This is because he has just had a nightmare, one he's been having quite frequently. In the dream, a crowd of white people closes in on him, trapping him against a wall. It's easy to see the significance of this dream, since it communicates a clear feeling of dread and isolation. Indeed, the stress of constantly worrying about malicious racists has obviously gotten to Griffin, despite his desire to conduct this "experiment in a spirit of scientific detachment." Of course, it's hard to imagine that anyone would be able to do what Griffin's doing without becoming emotionally invested, but Griffin is apparently shocked by just how viscerally frightening his experience as a dark-skinned man has been. Because this project is "becoming such a profound personal experience," he finds it nearly impossible to "detach" himself from the turbulent emotions that arise as a result of undergoing discrimination. As such, readers see just how thoroughly racism and hatred disturb people and disrupt their peace of mind.

November 29, 1959 Quotes

❝ I talked with some—casual conversations here and there. They said they knew the Negroes, they had had long talks with the Negroes. They did not know that the Negro long ago learned he must tell them what they want to hear, not what is. I heard the old things: the Negro is this or that or the other. You have to go slow. You can't expect the South to sit back and let the damned communist North dictate to it, especially when no outsider can really "understand." I listened and kept my tongue from giving answer. This was the time to listen, not to talk, but it was difficult. I looked into their eyes and saw sincerity and wanted to say: "Don't you know you are prattling the racist poison?"

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In Montgomery, Alabama, Griffin makes a point of speaking to white people to get a sense of how they view their relationship with the city's African American population. Because he does this without disguising himself as a black man, he is able to get these people to speak candidly about their views regarding race. Unfortunately, what he learns is that the majority of white people in Montgomery think they have a good understanding of what it's like for black people in their city. However, Griffin points out that they don't know that African Americans often refrain from speaking honestly about race in the presence of whites, since doing so often invites danger. Without stopping to consider this, these white people uphold that the situation shouldn't be disrupted by any fast-moving reforms. Indeed, the white citizens of Montgomery want things to progress "slow[ly]" when it comes to integration. Unsurprisingly, this bothers Griffin, but he decides not to interrupt them, thinking that it is the "time to listen, not to talk." He most likely decides to conduct himself in this manner because he knows it will be valuable to write an account of what these white people think—an account unencumbered by his own interjections. By showing the country the deeply entrenched racism that still exists in most places in the South, he will ultimately be able to address the matter more effectively than if he spoke up and told these people that they're "prattling the racist poison."

December 1, 1959 Quotes

❝ I was the same man, whether white or black. Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly-love smiles and the privileges from whites and the hate stares or obsequiousness from the Negroes. And when I was a Negro, the whites judged me fit for the junk heap, while the Negroes treated me with great warmth.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Once Griffin decides to alternate his appearance so he can present as a white man one minute and a black man the next, he realizes just how starkly his experience changes depending upon the way he looks. Indeed, he feels a sense of acceptance and "brotherly-love" when he looks like a white man and is amongst other white people. In these moments, he is able to enjoy the many "privileges" available to a white man in American society—"privileges" not afforded to black men, who are forced to suffer "judg[ment]" and scorn from white people.

What's most interesting about this passage, though, is that Griffin doesn't focus solely on the fact that white people treat him badly when he looks like a black man. In fact, Griffin also mentions that he receives "hate stares" from black people when he's a white person, thereby intimating that the racial divide is shot through with animosity that runs in both directions. However, it's worth noting—though Griffin sometimes appears unaware of this dynamic—that the negative reactions he receives from black people when he's white are not the same as the hate-filled bigotry white people show him when he looks black. After all, they are not actively discriminating against him. At the very worst, the black people who look at him scornfully are assuming that all white people are racist. And though this tendency to make negative generalizations is indeed something that stands in the way of establishing productive lines of communication between both races, it is not an active form of oppression and thus cannot be compared to actual racism. What's more, it is up to white society to extend a hand to black society, since it is legitimately dangerous for black people to try to establish connections with white people when doing so might end racist violence.

December 4-7, 1959 Quotes

❝ […] the two economists, recognized that so long as the Negro had to depend on white banks to finance his projects for improvement and growth, he was at the mercy of the white man. They recognized that economic emancipation was the key to the racial solution. So long as the race had to depend on a basically hostile source of financing, it would not advance, since the source would simply refuse loans for any project that did not meet with its approval.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

When Griffin visits Atlanta, he is impressed by the "strides" the black community has made toward achieving something like racial equality. While he's there, he hears about two economists who came to the city and studied the ways in which African Americans are often cut off from upward mobility because white society ensures that black people remain in positions of financial instability. Knowing that "economic emancipation was the key to the racial solution," these economists emphasized the importance of addressing fiscal injustices. For instance, when "white banks" are in charge of issuing loans in predominantly racist areas, it's obvious African Americans will be at a disadvantage, since the black community will never be able to "finance" "projects" that might lead to "improvement and growth." By summarizing this idea, Griffin once again invites readers to consider the patterns of systemic racism that use policy and various power structures to keep black people from breaking out of seemingly unending cycles of oppression.

February 26 – March 14, 1960 Quotes

❝ The news became known. I had spent weeks at work, studying, correlating statistics, going through reports, none of which actually help to reveal the truth of what it is like to be discriminated against. They cancel truth almost more than they reveal it. I decided to throw them away and simply publish what happened to me.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker), Griffin's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In the preface of *Black Like Me*, Griffin admits that his project originally began as a scientific experiment. Later, when he finds himself plagued by nightmares, he realizes that it's nearly impossible to maintain a sense of "scientific detachment" while undergoing such devastating and emotional experiences. Now that he has come home and resumed his life as a white man, he considers how best to present his findings, and though he has always wanted to treat this as an objective study, he understands that "reports" and "statistics" do nothing to "reveal the truth of what it is like to be discriminated against." This is because discrimination is a very human problem, one that people experience on an immediate and visceral level. Of course, "statistics" and "reports" are often helpful when speaking broadly about the nation's overall racial dynamics, but in this case such figures are rather useless, since they only get in the way of Griffin's desire to communicate the "truth." As such, he decides to get rid of these objective claims in favor of a more subjective account that he understands will be more effective when trying to persuade racists to leave behind their prejudices.

April 7 – 11, 1960 Quotes

Our townspeople wanted to "keep things peaceful" at all costs. They said I had "stirred things up." This is laudable and tragic. I, too, say let us be peaceful; but the only way to do this is first to assure justice. By keeping "peaceful" in this instance, we end up consenting to the destruction of all peace—for so long as we condone injustice by a small but powerful group, we condone the destruction of all social stability, all real peace, all trust in man's good intentions toward his fellow man.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

When news of Griffin's project reaches the general public, he braces for the worst. However, nothing happens at first, as his fellow "townspeople" simply avoid talking to him. After a while though, he begins to hear that everyone is talking about him in town, though not to his face. Still, they say that he has "stirred things up" by writing and talking about the discrimination black people face in the South. This illustrates the extent to which these people are uncomfortable talking about race. In fact, it isn't even necessarily that they're *uncomfortable*, but rather that they actively want to avoid the subject because it's most likely clear to them that any kind of open and honest discussion about discrimination will force them to admit their own prejudices. Rather than interrogating their implicit biases, they prefer to go along like normal, acting as if everything is "peaceful" when, in reality, countless African Americans are suffering terrible forms of oppression. This is why Griffin wants to disrupt the "peaceful[ness]" his "townspeople" love so dearly—simply put, he wants to urge them into examining the injustices that they might otherwise ignore, since this ignorance only leads to "the destruction of all social stability" and "all real peace."

August 17, 1960 Quotes

We had a long conversation during which he brought out the obvious fact that whites teach their children to call them "niggers." He said this happened to him all the time and that he would not even go into white neighborhoods because it sickened him to be called that. He said revealing things:

"Your children don't hate us, do they?"

"God, no," I said. "Children have to be taught that kind of filth. We'd never permit ours to learn it."

Related Characters: The Boy Who Helps Griffin Clean, John Howard Griffin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

After Griffin's family moves to Mexico to escape the threats they've received as a result of his project, Griffin stays in Texas to empty out his parents' home. To do this, he hires a young boy to help him, and as they work, the child—who is black—says "revealing" things about what it's like to grow up as an African American in a racist society. Whereas Griffin spent about a month of his life trying to understand the African American experience, it is simply this boy's constant reality, as society essentially conditions him to expect hatred from white people. Indeed, he wonders if Griffin's children "hate" black people—a sad question because it suggests that this young boy might assume (if Griffin didn't tell him otherwise) that all white children "hate" him. Griffin's response is also important to note, since he emphasizes the fact that people "learn" and develop prejudices. Indeed, nobody is born a racist. Rather, all racists

have been "taught" to see the world a certain way. As such, if society can manage to stop racists from passing along hateful ideas, it might be possible to shift away from this widespread bigotry.

> The most distressing repercussion of this lack of communication has been the rise in racism among Negroes, justified to some extent, but a grave symptom nevertheless. 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.

Related Characters: John Howard Griffin (speaker), The Boy Who Helps Griffin Clean

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which appears near the very end of *Black Like Me*, Griffin grapples with the "lack of communication" between the white and black communities. As he does so, though, he treats the matter somewhat problematically.

Indeed, he upholds that, although African Americans are "justified" in their resentment of white people, they ultimately make "the same tragic error" as racists when they make generalizations about white people. This is untrue. To actually make "the same tragic error" as racists, black people would have to not only oppress, but also completely disenfranchise white people—something that is clearly not happening, even if some African Americans are especially scornful toward whites. To be sure, the history of slavery—which set in motion patterns of oppression that are still active today—makes the African American's position in the United States wholly unique. As such, it's unfortunate that Griffin implies that black people subject white people to the same kind of discrimination that they themselves experience, since this comparison fails to take into account an entire history of painful bigotry.

If readers choose to interpret Griffin's message sympathetically, though, it is arguable that his main goal is to discourage violent opposition to racism. Indeed, Griffin is wrong to compare black people's resentment of white people to the racism that African Americans are forced to endure, but he isn't necessarily wrong to point out that an outright show of aggression—a "bar[ing]" of "fangs"—toward racists would exacerbate the tension between the two communities. As such, he advocates for "understanding and compassion" even if his way of conveying this idea is problematic.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

"This may not be all of it," John Howard Griffin begins. "It may not cover all the questions, but it is what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down." Going on, he suggests that some white people won't believe that his experience disguised as a black man is an accurate reflection of what it's like to be African American in the segregated South. However, Griffin insists that this is nonsense, saying that "we no longer have time" to argue insignificant points and ignore the facts. "The real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men (and in the process destroy themselves) for reasons neither really understands," he writes.

Griffin's decision to open Black Like Me *with the sentence, "This may not be all of it" is important, since it addresses the fact that one person's experience—and especially a white man's—cannot necessarily create an all-encompassing portrait of racism and bigotry. By saying that this text might not "cover all the questions," Griffin acknowledges that racism and discrimination are very complex, nuanced subjects. At the same time, though, he does claim that he has captured "what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down" (it's worth noting here that "Negro" was a widely accepted term when Griffin was writing this book). Of course, this claim is rather bold and will be put to the test in the following pages. Whether or not it's true that Griffin has succeeded to convey the African American experience, though, it's clear that what he really wants to communicate is that racism "destroy[s]" "souls" and "bodies"—a message that transcends whether or not he has successfully portrayed what it's like to be black in America.*

OCTOBER 28, 1959

The following question has haunted Griffin for a number of years: "If a white man became a Negro in the Deep South, what adjustments would he have to make?" Furthermore, Griffin wants to know what it's like "to experience discrimination based on skin color, something over which one has no control." Sitting one night in his personal office in Mansfield, Texas, he reads a report about the high suicide rate of black people in the South. Griffin knows that, despite these statistics, white society insists it has a "wonderfully harmonious relationship" with African Americans. Disheartened by this discrepancy, Griffin decides to change his skin color. "How else except by becoming a Negro could a white man hope to learn the truth?" he writes.

Griffin's initial question is worth paying attention to because it articulates an obvious but important idea—namely, that black people are forced to lead drastically different lives than white people in America. After all, why else would Griffin want to know what "adjustments" a white man would need to make if he were suddenly to become a black man? Indeed, the only reason Griffin has the good sense to ask this question in the first place is that he is already aware of a great disparity between how whites and blacks experience everyday life in the country. What's more, his decision to darken his skin color suggests he believes that physical appearance is the only difference between whites and African Americans—an important point, considering that many people at the time believed there was a fundamental difference between the two races, an idea that bigots used to promote the absurd concept of white superiority.

Griffin believes it's necessary to "become" a black man in order to fully understand what it's like to be African American in the South. Indeed, he knows that the communication between whites and blacks is stilted and misleading, since "the Southern [black man] will not tell the white man the truth. He long ago learned that if he speaks a truth unpleasing to the white, the white will make life miserable for him."

Griffin articulates the unfortunate fact that African Americans aren't able to honestly communicate with white people. Indeed, there is a disincentive for blacks to speak openly about what it's like to live under racism, since doing so often leads to violent repercussions. As such, white people are able to tell themselves the lie that black people are happy with the current racial dynamics, thereby enabling themselves to go on oppressing African Americans. By making this point early in the text, Griffin subtly explains why he has chosen to write this book, since only a white man could undertake such a project without putting himself in immediate danger.

OCTOBER 29, 1959

Having made the decision to disguise himself as a black man, Griffin drives to Fort Worth, Texas and meets with his friend George Levitan, the owner of *Sepia* magazine, which is popular amongst African Americans. Levitan is a kind man who believes in racial equality, so Griffin wants to hear what he has to say about his plan. "It's a crazy idea," Levitan says. "You'll get yourself killed fooling around down there." At the same time, though, he can't deny that it's a worthwhile project. Still, he urges his friend to consider the fact that he'll become "the target of the most ignorant rabble in the country" and that racists will likely "make an example" out of him. "But you know—it is a great idea," he says. "I can see right now you're going through with it, so what can I do to help?"

Levitan wants to dissuade Griffin from posing as a black man because he cares about him as a friend, not because he fails to grasp the importance of such a project. At the same time, his fears exemplify the fact that many white people often fail to do the right thing when it comes to racial justice. Indeed, if all whites let their fears of becoming "target[s]" stop them from acting according to their consciences, there would be no white civil rights advocates. This, it seems, is why Levitan ultimately thinks the plan is "a great idea."

Griffin and Levitan agree that *Sepia* will pay for all of Griffin's expenses in return for a handful of articles about what it's like for a white man to experience life as an African American in the South. On his way out of the office, Griffin has a similar conversation with *Sepia*'s editorial director, Adelle Jackson. "You don't know what you'd be getting into, John," she says, pointing out that "all the hate groups" will descend upon him after he publishes his book. She also reminds him that there are "the deeper currents among even well-intentioned Southerners, currents that make the idea of a white man's assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down." What's more, there are also "other currents that say, 'Don't stir up anything. Let's try to keep things peaceful.'"

When Jackson references the "currents" in America that Griffin will surely disturb if he goes through with his project, she calls attention to the fact that the country's racial dynamics are deeply ingrained. What's more, she intimates that many white people are committed to preserving these dynamics at all costs, which is why they don't want anybody to "stir [them] up." Once again, then, Griffin comes face to face with the many reasons that often keep nonracist white people from speaking out against bigotry.

Maintaining his resolve to go through with the plan, Griffin goes home and tells his wife, who agrees to look after their three children because she thinks it's important for him to do this project. That night, Griffin goes back to his office (which is in a barn five miles from his house) and listens to the faint sound of crickets outside his window. "I felt the beginning loneliness, the terrible dread of what I had decided to do," he writes.

Even before Griffin disguises himself as a black man, he begins to feel the intense and isolating "loneliness" of what it's like to exist outside a life of privilege. Given that he's about to leave his family to do this, it's rather unsurprising that he suddenly feels an overwhelming sense of aloneness, one that will no doubt be exacerbated by the discrimination he's sure to face.

OCTOBER 30, 1959

Griffin has lunch with Adelle Jackson and George Levitan, plus three Dallas FBI officers, since he wants them to be aware of the project in case anything goes wrong. Together, they decide he shouldn't change his "name or identity," but "merely change [his] pigmentation and allow people to draw their own conclusions." Griffin asks, "Do you suppose they'll treat me as John Howard Griffin, regardless of my color—or will they treat me as some nameless Negro, even though I am still the same man?" In response, one of the officers gives him a bewildered look. "You're not serious," the man says. "They're not going to ask you any questions. As soon as they see you, you'll be a Negro and that's all they'll ever want to know about you."

The decision to maintain Griffin's current identity is a significant one, since it emphasizes the importance of physical appearance when it comes to racial discrimination. If Griffin experiences bigotry even while remaining honest about who he is, then, it will be unavoidably clear that his skin color is the only thing inviting such hatred. This, in turn, will enable him to show ignorant white people the extent to which their implicit biases are rooted in arbitrary matters that have nothing to do with identity and everything to do with superficial aesthetic notions.

NOVEMBER 1, 1959

Griffin arrives in New Orleans, checks his bags at a hotel, and goes out to walk the streets, eventually having a splendid meal in an upscale restaurant. He marvels at the sights of the city, since he once visited New Orleans during the ten year period in which he was blind. Now he feels that "every view [is] magical." Enjoying his plate of *huîtres variées* (oysters), he wonders what life will be like once he looks like a black man. "Was there a place in New Orleans where a Negro could buy *huîtres variées*?" he wonders. Finishing his meal, he calls his friend, who has invited him to stay at his house—something that relieves Griffin because he anticipates "all sorts of difficulties staying in a hotel" while he goes through the process of darkening his skin.

Griffin was temporarily blinded after an accident in the 1940s. As such, he knows what it's like to move around without sight—a point worth noting when considering Black Like Me, *since Griffin is so interested in how people judge one another based on how they look. Now, as he prepares to change his physical appearance, he braces for an entirely different life, one in which he won't even be able to buy certain dishes because people won't allow him into upscale restaurants.*

NOVEMBER 2, 1959

The next morning, Griffin visits a dermatologist. After Griffin explains what he wants to do, the doctor excuses himself so that he can call his colleagues to talk about the best and safest method to go about darkening Griffin's pigmentation. Upon returning, he says that everyone he spoke to agreed it would be best for Griffin to take a certain oral medication that changes the shade of a person's skin. In addition, he instructs Griffin to expose himself to ultraviolet rays each day and says he wants to monitor his liver in the for the first few days. After obtaining the pills, Griffin goes back to his friend's house and takes his daily dosage before lying under a sun lamp.

By describing the details of how he will darken his pigmentation, Griffin shows readers how arduous it is to change one's physical appearance. This project, he intimates, is not one to be taken lightly, but rather something that requires diligent focus and attention to detail. After all, Griffin knows how much people—and especially white people—pay attention to skin color, so he needs to make sure that he looks convincingly African American in order for him to truly experience what it's like to be a black person in the South.

NOVEMBER 6, 1959

Griffin follows his regiment for four days and visits the dermatologist for blood tests. Thankfully, the dermatologist determines that his body isn't being harmed by the medication. Nevertheless, he tries to "warn" Griffin, though not about the medical particulars. Rather, he tells him about "the dangers of this project." The dermatologist insists that he believes "in the brotherhood of man," yet expresses "can never forget" having to tend to African Americans years before as an intern. "Three or four would be sitting in a bar at a friend's house," he says. "They were apparently friends one minute and then something would come up and one would get slashed up with a knife."

Once again, Griffin is forced to listen to yet another white person outlining the many reasons why it's dangerous for him to pose as a black man. Unlike Levitan and Jackson's comments, though, the dermatologist's remarks have a certain racist undertone, even if he doesn't notice it himself. Whereas Levitan and Jackson wanted to warn Griffin about the fact that he might become the target of bigots once people find out what he's done, the doctor thinks he must warn him about the dangers of black people, making vast generalizations about African American violence that ultimately reveal his own prejudices.

Continuing his warning, the dermatologist says, "We're willing enough to go all the way for [black people], but we've got this problem—how can you render the duties of justice to men when you're afraid they'll be so unaware of justice they may destroy you?—especially since their attitude toward their own race is a destructive one." In response, Griffin tells him that many black people he has spoken to are "aware of this dilemma" and are "making strong efforts to unify the race, or to condemn among themselves any tactic or any violence or injustice that would reflect against the race as a whole." Unfortunately, though, the doctor seems "unconvinced" by this.

In this moment, the dermatologist takes a patronizing tone, posing as if he wants to help African Americans when, in reality, he clearly believes that they're inferior to white people. Thinking that black people don't have the capacity to recognize "justice," he sees African Americans as "destructive." However, it's quite obvious that he doesn't see himself as a racist, despite these prejudiced viewpoints. Rather, he thinks of himself as someone "willing to go all the way" for black people. Unfortunately, though, this only enables him to clear his conscience so that he can go on advancing racist stereotypes without owning up to his own implicit biases.

In addition to his warning, the dermatologist also tells Griffin things he has heard from black people, like that lighter skin makes an African American "more trustworthy." "I was astonished to see an intelligent man fall for this cliché," Griffin writes, "and equally astonished that Negroes would advance it, for in effect it placed the dark Negro in an inferior position and fed the racist idea of judging a man by his color."

Unsurprisingly, the dermatologist subscribes to the racist notion of colorism, which upholds that there are fundamental differences between light-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans. Griffin, of course, knows that this is ridiculous, but he's disappointed to see that an "intelligent man" would accept such nonsense. This, it seems, demonstrates the extent to which these racist ideas have made their way into society, somehow convincing not only "intelligent" white people, but some black people, too.

When Griffin isn't spending his time under the sun lamp or in the dermatologist's office, he walks around New Orleans, often stopping at a shoeshine stand run by an old black man who lost his leg in World War I. His name is Sterling Williams, and he is extremely kind. Griffin tells Sterling that he's writing about "civil rights," though he doesn't divulge that he'll be doing so while disguised as a black man. "I decided he might be the contact for my entry into the Negro community," Griffin writes.

Griffin knows that white people will instantly write him off as soon as he darkens his skin. However, he's also aware that the mere color of his skin won't necessarily gain him "entry" into the African American community, since only racists invest themselves in skin color alone. As such, he decides he needs a "contact" to help him enter into black society.

NOVEMBER 7, 1959

Griffin's "treatment" doesn't work quite as quickly as he originally hoped, but he decides that his skin is dark enough at this point, especially if he uses "stain" to "touch [it] up." After deciding with the dermatologist that he ought to shave his head, he goes to leave the office one last time, though not before the dermatologist issues a number of "firm warnings," expressing a certain amount of "regret" that he helped in this project. Just as Griffin is about to leave, the dermatologist shakes his hand and says, "Now you go into oblivion."

The dermatologist is a perfect example of somebody who is prejudiced without being blatantly racist. Indeed, it's clear that the doctor is a somewhat compassionate man, as made evident by the fact that he seemingly understands how hard it will be to live as an African American. At the same time, though, he also makes a number of generalizations about black people, thereby advancing stereotypes while claiming to be empathetic. In this way, readers see that even supposedly nonracist white people are capable of perpetuating harmful narratives about black people.

That afternoon, Griffin's host looks up at him and says, "I don't know what you're up to, but I'm worried." In response, Griffin tells him not to worry and then says that he'll be leaving that night. "What are you going to do—be a Puerto Rican or something?" his host asks. "Something like that," Griffin replies. "There may be ramifications. I'd rather you didn't know anything about it. I don't want you involved." That evening, the host says goodbye and goes out for the night, leaving Griffin to prepare for his first outing as a black man.

Griffin's desire to hide his project from his host underlines the possible dangers of this experiment. Indeed, Griffin knows that people associated with this project could very well become "targets" themselves—a notion that only emphasizes how frightening it would be to undertake something like this in the segregated South, where racists are all too eager to make examples of people working toward equality.

After eating dinner, Griffin calls his family, but nobody answers. With nothing left to do, he shaves his head and "grind[s] in the stain," showering to "wash off all the excess." Purposefully avoiding the mirror, he gets dressed and packs his things into a duffel bag. Finally, he goes back into the bathroom and looks in **the mirror**. "The transformation was total and shocking," he writes. "I had expected to see myself disguised, but this was something else. I was imprisoned in the flesh of an utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship. All traces of the John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence."

In this moment, Griffin undergoes an unexpected identity crisis, staring at himself in awe and feeling utterly disconnected with the person he sees looking back at him in the mirror. Although he wants to demonstrate to racists that appearance is arbitrary and superficial—and has no bearing on identity itself—he can't help but feel profoundly transformed by this aesthetic change. Of course, this makes sense, considering the fact that he lives in a world that defines people based on their physical appearances. Because of this, it is shocking for him to see himself in this renewed way.

Griffin's first instinct is to "fight against" the experience of seeing himself as a black man. "I had gone too far," he notes. "I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been. I was a newly created Negro who must go out that door and live in a world unfamiliar to me." Staring at his reflection in **the mirror**, he feels like he has become "two men." He becomes lonely, "not because I was a Negro but because the man I had been, the self I knew, was hidden in the flesh of another." Going on, he suggests that he has "tampered with the mystery of existence" and, as a result, "lost the sense of [his] own being."

*When Griffin says that "the black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been," he calls attention to the fact that white Americans only take note of a person's skin color, flattening African Americans' identities into one all-encompassing way of being. Now that he himself is disguised as a black man, then, he knows that he is—according to white society—*nothing more *than that. This, in turn, is why he feels as if he has "lost the sense of [his] own being."*

Feeling a lack of "companionship" with the person he has "become," Griffin ventures out into the streets at midnight with "enormous self-consciousness." Passing a white man, he wonders if he should "nod" or say "Good evening" or "simply ignore him." Waiting for the streetcar, he feels himself begin to sweat in nervousness, realizing that this experience feels the same—both the new and the old Griffins sweat in the same way. "As I had suspected they would be, my discoveries were naïve ones, like those of a child," he writes. When the streetcar finally arrives, he gets on and sits in the back despite the fact that public transportation isn't technically segregated in New Orleans.

Not all of Griffin's "discoveries" will be profound. However, that doesn't mean that even his simple realizations won't provide insight into the ways in which white people approach the idea of race. Of course, contemporary readers will possibly find it offensive that Griffin perhaps expected himself to sweat differently as a black man, but his sudden understanding that nothing fundamental about his body will change is an important one for him to come to, since the prevailing conversation about race in the United States at this time is predicated on the notion that there is a true difference between black and white humans. As such, Griffin chooses to include even his most banal "discoveries," since they might encourage his white readers to examine their own illogical assumptions about the supposed difference between whites and blacks.

A black man on the streetcar tells Griffin about a good hotel for African Americans, so Griffin gets off and makes his way to the establishment. On his way, he goes to a drugstore to buy cigarettes. He has visited this store every day since arriving in New Orleans, but now the cashier declines to speak to him, instead rudely handing him cigarettes without a word. At the hotel, he waits in the lobby and talks to another black patron, who tells him of another hotel that is even better. As such, Griffin picks up his bag and turns to leave. "See you around, Slick," the man says as he leaves. At the next hotel, Griffin is led to a windowless room that is clean but "desolate," and he feels immediately depressed.

It's worth noting that Griffin has received money from Sepia *magazine to use throughout the project. As such, it's clear that the depressing options he has when it comes to finding a place to stay have nothing to do with his inability to pay for nicer lodgings. In this way, readers see that nice hotels simply aren't available to a black person in the South, regardless of how much money he or she has.*

Griffin tries to fall asleep despite the loud noise of the streets. After a while, he walks to the bathroom—which is located down the hall—and finds a naked man sitting against the wall waiting for the shower. Although Griffin is uncomfortable at first, he makes small talk with the man, who is quite friendly. As they smoke cigarettes together, they discuss "local politics," and the man tells Griffin that the mayor has "a good reputation for fairness" and that black citizens are hoping he will become governor. "I sensed the conversation made little difference, that for a few moments we were safe from the world and we were loath to break the communication and go back to our rooms," Griffin writes.

In this scene, Griffin emphasizes the kindness of this black stranger, who is willing to simply pass the time talking to him despite the fact that they don't know each other. There is, it seems, an unspoken sense of unity in this moment, as the two men discuss "local politics" simply to talk about something to which they can both relate (though Griffin isn't from New Orleans and isn't, obviously, black). In this way, Griffin suggests that there is a certain kind of unity that develops between people when they are oppressed, as idle conversation and camaraderie become ways of escaping the hostility of everyday life.

NOVEMBER 8, 1959

The next day, Griffin leaves the hotel and walks through the "ghetto," which he sees in a different light now that he looks like a black man. Ducking into a small café, he orders breakfast as a nearby black man starts talking to him, asking if he's new in town. When Griffin asks if there's a better place in the city for him to find a new room, the man says, "Ain't this awful?" He then tells Griffin to try the Y, which is "the best place" because it's "clean" and always full of nice people. As their conversation continues, the two men become increasingly friendly, and Griffin buys the man a cup of coffee.

Once again, Griffin emphasizes the unity and camaraderie that he experiences with black people, ultimately suggesting that this kind of easygoing conversation with strangers helps people cope with the hatred and bigotry that otherwise constantly encroaches upon their lives.

After leaving the café, Griffin boards a bus and sits in a seat "halfway to the rear." Gradually, the bus becomes more and more crowded with white people, who stand in the aisle rather than sitting in empty seats next to black people. Eventually, a small white woman boards, and Griffin begins to get up to give her his seat out of a sense of "gallantry." However, he then sees the black passengers "frown[ing] disapproval" because he's "going against the race," so he sits down again. "If the whites would not sit with us, let them stand," Griffin writes. "When they became tired enough or uncomfortable enough, they would eventually take seats beside us and soon see that it was not so poisonous after all. But to give them your seat was to let them win."

In this scene, Griffin realizes that it's important for him to align with the black people surrounding him, now that he looks like an African American himself. As such, he senses that he shouldn't do anything to give white people an advantage, which would be like going "against the race" by perpetuating segregationist policies. What's more, it's worth noting the somewhat uncomfortable fact that Griffin uses—and will continue throughout the book to use—the pronoun "us" when referring to African Americans. Indeed, Griffin acts like he is actually a black man, when in reality he has only darkened his skin. In doing so, he fails to recognize his own privilege, which allows him to retreat to the safe life of a white person whenever he wants. At the same time, though, his entire experiment is based on the idea that he must "become" a black man in order to understand what it's like to live as an African American in the South. As a result, he completely immerses himself in the experience, and though it is certainly uncomfortable by today's standards to see a white man appropriating an African American identity, it's worth remembering that his primary goal is to encourage racists to reconsider their prejudices.

Because he originally started to stand up, the white woman looks at Griffin. At first, he thinks he senses "sympathy in her glance," believing for a moment that their "exchange" might "blur the barriers of race […] long enough for [him] to smile and vaguely indicate the empty seat beside [him]." However, as soon as he does this, her face changes and she says, "What're you looking at me like *that* for?" As he looks down, he hears her turn to other white people and say, "They're getting sassier every day." Trying to appear undisturbed by the interaction, Griffin feels ashamed, since he knows that the other black people on the bus have every right to "resent" him for "attracting such unfavorable attention."

When Griffin feels ashamed for "attracting such unfavorable attention," readers come to understand that his experiment could potentially harm black people instead of helping them. Indeed, since Griffin isn't used to living the life of a black man in the South, he's likely to make all sorts of social mistakes that risk exacerbating the relationship between white people and black people. In this moment, then, he feels remorseful for eliciting such a hateful remark from this white woman, though the bigger problem is obviously that she is a racist.

As Griffin sits silently in his seat, the woman talks to another white woman. Suddenly, Griffin hears them use the word "nigger" with "electric clarity." "I thought with some amusement that if these two women only knew what they were revealing about themselves to every Negro on that bus, they would have been outraged," he notes.

After hearing the woman on the bus use hateful, vitriolic language, Griffin realizes that racists ultimately "reveal" the ugliest parts of themselves when they use racial epithets. In this way, he suggests that racism actually harms those who practice it, making them look emotionally small, petty, and bitter.

When Griffin gets off the bus, he visits Sterling Williams's shoeshine stand. Sitting in the seat, he realizes Sterling doesn't recognize him even though he has very distinctive shoes. As Sterling sets to shining the leather, Griffin says, "Is there something familiar about these shoes?" In response, Sterling says he has seen the same shoes on a white man, and Griffin reveals that *he* is that white man. After a moment of initial shock, Sterling breaks into laughter. When Griffin explains his project, Sterling appears "delight[ed]" by the idea and starts "coaching" Griffin about how to act like a black man. Because of his enthusiasm, Griffin asks if he can help at the shoeshine stand, and Sterling says this should be fine, as long as his business "partner," Joe, approves.

Again, Griffin senses how vital it will be to make connections in the black community. After all, if he simply goes around disguised as a black man but doesn't actually interact with anyone, he will never discover what African Americans truly think about the country's racial dynamics. For this reason, he reveals the details of his project to Sterling, clearly hoping that he will help him transition into black culture.

Griffin works for the day with Sterling, noticing that white customers have "no reticence" or "shame" when talking to black shoeshines. "Some wanted to know where they could find girls, wanted us to get Negro girls for them," he writes, adding that such people are remarkably kind and give off a sense of equality. When Griffin points out that these white customers are unashamed to ask such questions, Sterling says, "Yeah, when they want to sin, they're very democratic." Before long, Joe returns to the stand after trying to find peanuts, and he cooks for Sterling, Griffin, and himself, even sharing the leftovers with a homeless man whom he apparently feeds every day.

Yet again, Griffin discovers that racism doesn't always come in the form of outright hatred. Similar to how the dermatologist's bigotry is deeply entrenched in his overall worldview—so that it's rather undetectable at first—the white men who visit the shoeshine stand and ask Griffin to "find girls" for them unknowingly reveal their unexamined assumptions about African Americans. Although they are polite and "democratic," they still treat black men differently than they treat white men, completely unashamed to ask them questions they'd never think to ask a white man. In turn, they demonstrate their implicit biases against black people.


At the end of the day, Griffin stands and prepares to walk to the Y, which is across town. Before he leaves, Sterling urges him to drink water from his bucket, pointing out that he probably won't be able to find a place that will serve him between the shoeshine stand and the Y. After drinking, then, Griffin sets off, eventually stopping in a Catholic church for a moment to rest before forging onward to the YMCA, which he discovers is "filled to capacity." Fortunately, though, the man at the desk secures a room for him in a nearby house. As such, Griffin makes his way to this room, satisfied by its cleanliness and security. After settling in, he goes downstairs and visits the YMCA coffee shop, where he meets the Reverend A. L. Davis and a "civic leader" named Mr. Gayle.

When Sterling offers Griffin his water because he knows he won't be able to find a place to drink between the shoeshine stand and the YMCA, Griffin once again benefits from the unity that exists between black people. Because society at large denies African Americans the right to simply stop into a white shop for a drink, people like Sterling make an effort to help their fellow black people, ultimately forging a sense of camaraderie as a way of counteracting injustice and discrimination.

In the coffee shop, Griffin tells A. L. Davis and Mr. Gayle that he's a writer visiting the South "to make a study of conditions." Hearing this, they share their opinion that New Orleans is a much better place for black people than other places in the South, possibly because it has a "strong Catholic population." When Mr. Gayle asks Griffin what he thinks is the "biggest problem" facing African Americans, Griffin says, "Lack of unity," to which the elderly café owner says, "That's it. 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."

Although Griffin has already noted a sense of camaraderie amongst black people in New Orleans, he still believes that there is a "lack of unity" that makes it harder for African Americans to stand up to racism. Given that he himself has benefitted from unified acts of kindness—like when Sterling gave him water—it seems he must believe that this "lack of unity" exists on a larger scale. Indeed, while people like Sterling show camaraderie with others in an everyday manner, Griffin and the café owner agree that the entire "race" has to "learn to rise together."

Going on, the café owner says, "Now you take dark Negroes like you, Mr. Griffin, and me. We're old Uncle Toms to our people, no matter how much education and morals we've got. No, you have to be almost a mulatto, have your hair conked and all slicked out and look like a Valentino. Then the Negro will look up to you. You've got *class*. Isn't that a pitiful hero-type?" At this point, A. L. Davis chimes in, saying, "And the white man knows that." "Yes," the owner says. "He *utilizes* this knowledge to flatter some of us, tell us we're above our people, not like most Negroes. We're so stupid we fall for it and work against our own. Why, if we'd work just half as hard to boost our race as we do to please whites whose attentions flatter us, we'd really get somewhere."

Once again, the notion of colorism comes to the forefront of Black Like Me, *as the café owner laments the fact that many African Americans discriminate against dark-skinned black people, thereby making it harder for the entire race to unite and "rise together" against injustice. This kind of division is something that has worked its way from the white community into the black community, since racists purposefully promote the notion of colorism as a way of sowing discord amongst African Americans, thereby making it even more difficult for black people to come to together to resist the broader forms of racism at play throughout the country.*

After leaving the café and taking a nap, Griffin goes back into the night in search of dinner. As he walks, though, he becomes aware of two "large white boys" nearby, one of whom begins to follow him. "Hey, Baldy," the "heavyset" boy taunts, but Griffin refuses to turn. But no matter how fast he walks, the boy stays with him, calling him a number of names and saying, "I'm after you. There ain't no place you go I won't get you. If it takes all night, I'll get you—so count on it." Finally, Griffin approaches an elderly couple and turns to see that the boy has stopped about half a block away. "I'm in trouble," he says to the old couple, but they simply ignore him. When he tells them he's being chased, they look at him like he's crazy, for the boy has disappeared.

This is the first time that Griffin finds himself in immediate danger as a result of the color of his skin. Worst of all, he discovers that many people are completely unsympathetic to the perils African Americans face, as made evident by the elderly couple's apathy when he tells them he's being chased. Needless to say, he wouldn't need to deal with this threat of violence if he still looked like a white man.

As soon as the elderly couple leaves, the boy reappears. "Hey, Shithead," he says. "Ain't no nice people on this street for you to hide behind, Baldy." Terrified, Griffin thinks about what a police officer would think upon finding his dead body and looking at his license, which identifies him as a white man. Finally, when the white boy tells him to halt, Griffin decides that he has no choice but to act like he's willing to fight. "You come on, boy," he says. "You follow me, boy. I'm heading into that alley down there. That's right, boy. Now you're doing just like I want you to." As Griffin is about to step into the alley, the boy says, "I don't dig you, daddy," and Griffin replies, "You follow me, boy, 'cause I'm just aching to feed you a fistful of brass knucks right in that big mouth of yours."

Although Griffin is terrified by this white boy, he knows that the only way to protect himself is by pretending to be tough. As such, he speaks hostilely to the boy, threatening to use brass knuckles on him and thus presenting himself as a violent man. In this way, readers see how racism can actually goad a person into acting aggressively when he or she would otherwise avoid violence at all costs. Unfortunately, white society uses this kind of violent behavior as an excuse to continue oppressing African Americans, failing to see that this aggression is nothing but the result of discrimination.

When Griffin ducks into the alley, he stands against the wall and prays that the boy won't follow him. After several moments, he pokes his head around the corner and sees that the bully has disappeared. He then hustles to the Catholic church and tries to calm himself down as the boy's voice echoes in his mind. He also thinks of the dermatologist's remark, *"Now you go into oblivion."* "Seated on the church steps tonight, I wondered if he could have known how truly he spoke, how total the feeling of oblivion was," Griffin writes.

In the aftermath of his frightening encounter with the menacing white boy, Griffin feels utterly alone, as if he has plunged into "oblivion." And this is all because he has simply changed the color of his skin, a fact that shows just how much a person's experience in the South depends upon the ways in which people perceive his or her racial identity.

NOVEMBER 10-12, 1959

For the next two days, Griffin spends his time trying—unsuccessfully—to find work. Discouraged by his prospects, he speaks to the old man who owns the café at the Y, who says that his inability to find work is because of a larger "pattern" of "economic injustice." The owner says that while a white boy has the incentive to go to college since he "knows he can make good money in any profession when he gets out," it's not the same for black people, especially in the South, who can do well in college and still end up with only "the most menial work." Going on, he says that a black man will never earn enough money to stay financially afloat in America.

The café owner urges Griffin to see the difficulties that black people face as instances of systemic racism. Highlighting the fact that there is a "pattern" of "economic injustice," he suggests that young black Americans don't have a good "incentive" to achieve academic success, since it's overwhelmingly apparent that it's nearly impossible to get good, high-paying jobs in the South, even with a college degree. In this way, segregationists make it even harder for African Americans to attain upward mobility.

Going on, the owner says that black people can't afford an education " or else they know education won't earn them the jobs it would a white man." As such, "a lot of them, without even understanding the cause, just give up. They take what they can—mostly in pleasure, and they make the grand gesture, the wild gesture, because what have they got to lose if they do die in a car wreck or a knife fight or something else equally stupid?" This, he upholds, is a "vicious circle," especially because white people point to this "wild gesture" as evidence of the fact that African Americans are "not worthy of first-class citizenship." "They put us low, and then blame us for being down there and say that since we are low, we can't deserve our rights," the owner says.

What the café owner describes in this scene is how disenfranchisement and injustice easily become cyclical. Because young black people don't have the resources to achieve any kind of upward mobility, the owner upholds, they find themselves wanting to make a "grand gesture," which is often "wild" and reckless. Indeed, these "gesture[s]" are how many people cope with hopelessness. Unfortunately, though, white society uses these "gestures" as examples of why African Americans don't "deserve" "rights"—a terrible, incredibly bigoted notion that fails to take into account the fact that the true cause of such behavior is racism. As such, if African Americans were granted their "rights" in the first place, there would be no need to "make the grand gesture."

Griffin wonders aloud what might help people see beyond the hateful messages promoted by racists. "I read recently where one of [these racist groups] said that equality of education and job opportunity would be an even greater tragedy for us," he says. "He said it would quickly prove to us that we can't measure up—disillusion us by showing us that we are, in fact, inferior." The café owner adds that racists often accuse people who believe in equality of being communists. "We've reached a poor state when people are afraid that doing the decent and right thing is going to help the communist conspiracy," he says. "I'm sure a lot of people are held back just on that point." After leaving the café, Griffin identifies "a double problem for "African Americans," realizing that black people are subject to "discrimination" by white people *and* by other black people.

Part of what enables many white Americans to justify their passive racism is that they tell themselves lies about the ways in which black people perceive their own oppression. Indeed, they make claims that equality would be a "tragedy" for African Americans because it would show them their own inferiority. Of course, this viewpoint is rooted in bigotry, since it assumes that there is a fundamental difference between white and black people. This is why Griffin has decided to disguise himself as a black man, ultimately hoping to speak to African Americans and help debunk the notion that black people are content with the way things are. On another note, the café owner addresses the unfortunate fact that racists have conflated equality with communism, since this enables segregationists to align racial justice with a political viewpoint that has been demonized in America.

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After a week of this project, Griffin realizes how emotionally exhausting it is to contend with racism on an everyday basis, even when people mask their bigotry with superficial pleasantries. "Existence becomes a grinding effort," he notes. On the morning of the 14th, Sterling tells him that the Mississippi state jury decided not to indict a group of white men who kidnapped a young black man—Mack Parker—from his jail cell and lynched him. News of the failed indictment has now reached everyone, and the African American community is devastated. "We might as well learn not to expect *nothing* from Southern Justice. They're going to stack the cards against us every time," Sterling laments. With this, Griffin makes up his mind that he must travel to Mississippi because it's the worst place for black people in America. This, he believes, will be the only way to understand the situation.

Mack Parker was accused in 1959 of raping a white woman. He was then sent to jail, but before his hearing took place, a mob of angry white men dragged him from his cell and lynched him. Despite the ample evidence in this case, though, the Mississippi jury decided not to indict the white men. Unsurprisingly, this has a profound effect on Griffin and the people in the black community, as it is a real-life example of the systemic racism plaguing the country. Indeed, it's clear that the judicial system itself is undeniably discriminatory, a fact that emphasizes just how disenfranchised African Americans are in the South.

In the bus station that night, Griffin tries to purchase a ticket to Hattiesburg. "What do you want?" the white woman at the Greyhound window asks, giving him a "hate stare." Taken aback by the viciousness of the glare, he asks if he has done something wrong, but the woman only says she can't make change for his ten dollar bill. "Surely, in the entire Greyhound system there must be some means of changing a ten-dollar bill," Griffin says. In turn, she snatches the money from him, turns around, and then returns with a fistful of loose change, which she flings at him so that it scatters about his feet. "Her performance was so venomous, I felt sorry for her," Griffin writes. "I wondered how she would feel if she learned that the Negro before whom she had behaved in such an unladylike manner was habitually a white man."

In this moment, Griffin finds himself overcome by the hate this woman projects at him. Though he's only trying to buy a ticket, she treats him as if he has wronged her, and when he tries to connect with her, she lashes out and throws change at him. As such, readers see the enormous gulf between racists and the people they oppress. Interestingly enough, though, Griffin allows himself to empathize with this woman, since he sees that her own "venomous" way of moving through the world is toxic and self-harming.

When Griffin is finally on the bus, he sits in the back and listens to black people talking about Mississippi, calling it "the most lied-about state in the union." At one point, the bus stops and new passengers board. Among them is an "elegantly dressed" black man who nods kindly to the white people in the front and then "sneer[s]" at the black people in the back, saying, "This place stinks. Damned punk niggers. Look at all of them—bunch of dirty punks." As the bus lurches onward, Griffin listens to this man get into a disagreement with someone sitting behind him. The elegantly dressed man's name is Cristophe, and he shouts at the other black man, threatening to fight him until the man's brother tells him to calm down, ultimately urging both of them to refrain from speaking to one another. As a result, Cristophe moves to sit next to Griffin.

Cristophe serves as an example of the unfortunate effect that colorism has had on the African American community. Indeed, Cristophe has clearly internalized the racism that white society champions, ultimately believing that it matters whether or not a person's skin is light or dark. As a result, he turns his scorn on his fellow African Americans, referring to them as "punks" just because they aren't light-skinned. In this way, readers see how the notion of colorism divides the black community.

Although Griffin tries to avoid interacting with Cristophe, he eventually has no choice but to acknowledge his new seat partner, since Cristophe starts singing. "You don't like the blues, do you, daddy?" Cristophe says. He then utters a haunting phrase in Latin, and Griffin "stare[s] at him dumbfounded." Cristophe, Griffin learns, used to be an altar boy. "I came to sit by you because you're the only one here that looks like he's got enough sense to carry on an intelligent conversation," he says, going on to indicate that this is because Griffin has lighter skin than the other black passengers. As for Cristophe, he claims that his father was Indian and his mother was French, though he immediately contradicts himself by saying that his mother was Portuguese. He then tries to guess Griffin's lineage, determining that his mother must have been "part Florida Navaho."

Again, readers see the extent to which Cristophe has invested himself in the idea of colorism. Proudly talking about his lineage, he disparages dark-skinned African Americans, insinuating that only light-skinned black people are capable of "intelligent conversation." Once more, then, readers see the harmful and divisive ways in which racism has worked its way from the white community into the black community.

"I hate us, Father," Cristophe says. "I'm not a Father," Griffin replies, but Cristophe insists that he knows a priest when he sees one. "Look at these punks, Father," he says. "Dumb, ignorant bastards. They don't know the score. I'm getting out of this country." He then confesses that he has just finished four years in the penitentiary and that he's on his way to see his wife. At this point, he unexpectedly breaks into tears, and when Griffin tries to comfort him, Cristophe asks if he'll pray for him the next time he goes to Mass. Griffin reiterates that he isn't a priest, but he nevertheless agrees to pray for Cristophe. "Ah, that's the only peace," Cristophe says. "That's the peace my soul longs for. I wish I could come back home to it, but I can't—I haven't been inside a church in seventeen years."

A religious man himself, Griffin often sees the church as a safe haven from the tense racial dynamics at play throughout the country. Because of this, what Cristophe says in this moment most likely resonates with him, since Cristophe apparently craves the "peace" that comes along with a spiritual life. Unfortunately, though, he feels as if he "can't" rejoin the church's community, leaving him even more isolated and alone.

Griffin tells Cristophe that he can "always go back" to the church, but Cristophe merely says, "Nah. I've got to shoot up a couple of guys." Registering Griffin's surprise, Cristophe tells him that he should get off the bus with him so they can "shoot up this town together." Needless to say, Griffin declines this invitation, and Cristophe gets off in Slidell, Louisiana.

Without any resources or community, Cristophe resigns himself to a life of crime, ultimately making the "wild gesture" the café owner referenced in his conversation with Griffin about why young African Americans often respond to disenfranchisement by acting out. Isolated and angry, Cristophe chooses to behave violently, and though he certainly doesn't have a good excuse to murder someone, there's no denying the fact that his disenfranchisement has contributed to this habit of violence and aggression.

While the bus stops in Slidell, a new driver comes on, as does a black man named Bill Williams, who sits next to Griffin and makes pleasant conversation, eventually offering him advice about how best to navigate through the hateful world of Mississippi. This conversation attracts the attention of the other black passengers, who chime in with their own advice, telling Griffin not to look at white women, to be careful when he walks past an alley so that he doesn't get robbed, and to resist the urge to stop if a white person calls out to him. When Griffin thanks Bill for helping him, Bill says, "Well, If I was to come to your part of the country, I'd want somebody to tell me."

In contrast to Cristophe's confrontational and aggressive persona, Bill Williams is a beacon of kindness. In fact, his affability encourages everyone in the back of the bus to demonstrate their own friendliness, ultimately creating a sense of unity. Coming together in order to teach Griffin how to avoid trouble in Mississippi, this group of people pools their knowledge to help each other survive, demonstrating the ways in which people sometimes band together to form a sense of community in trying times.

The bus stops and the driver tells the passengers they have ten minutes to use the restrooms. After letting the white people off, though, he blocks the door. However, Bill—who is in front of Griffin—quickly slides beneath the driver's arm and strides away. "Hey, boy, where you going?" the driver shouts, but Bill doesn't turn around. After a moment, the driver turns to Griffin and says, "Where do you think you're going?" In response, Griffin says, "I'd like to go to the rest room," but the driver doesn't let him, so he retreats to the back, where he and the black passengers lament this injustice. Fed up, one of the passengers decides to kneel between the seats and pee on the floor, and though everyone else wants to do this, too, they decide not to because it'll reflect badly on their entire race.

One of the difficulties that comes along with facing discrimination is that one is forced to constantly consider how his or her actions will impact the way white people view black people. Unfortunately, racists are all too eager to weaponize anything that might cast African Americans in a negative light. As a result, the black passengers on this bus have to weigh the consequences of committing an act of defiance, wondering if they will ultimately be doing themselves a disservice by asserting their own rights.

When Bill returns to the bus, the driver says, "Didn't you hear me call you?" "I sure didn't," Bill responds. When the driver says he can't believe this, Bill says, "Oh, were you calling me? I heard you yelling 'Boy,' but that's not my name, so I didn't know you meant me." When he takes his seat once more, everyone in the back sees him as a "hero" because of this "act of defiance." Before long, the bus slides through Poplarville, where the jury failed to indict the men who killed Mack Parker, and a palpable tension settles over the black passengers. Pointing to the courthouse, Bill says, "That's where they as much as told the whites, 'You go ahead and lynch those niggers, we'll see you don't get in any trouble.'"

Bill's decision to ignore the driver and then cleverly sidestep his rebuke makes him a "hero" because all of the black passengers know how difficult—and dangerous—it is to stand up for oneself when dealing with a racist. Indeed, this is a risky thing to do, as made abundantly clear by the fact that racist whites have no problem committing extremely violent acts against African Americans—acts that, like in the case of Mack Parker, often have no repercussions whatsoever.

Upon the bus's arrival in Hattiesburg, Bill helps Griffin find a place to stay and hails him a cab. After parting ways with his new friend, Griffin rides in the back of a white man's cab, looking out at the African American section of town and finding himself intimidated by what he sees. "Looks awful wild down here," he says, to which the driver responds, "If you don't know the quarter, you'd better get inside somewhere as soon as you can." Walking along the street to find the person who will help him find lodging (referred by someone Bill put Griffin in touch with), Griffin becomes the target of a car full of white men, who scream at him and throw a tangerine at his head before driving away.

Once again, fear and violence come to the forefront of Black Like Me. *This time, Griffin is unsettled by the "wild" part of Hattiesburg that he plans to sleep in. Worse, he learns that a dark-skinned man can't even walk down the street without fearing for his life—a point made all too clear by the car of white boys who single him out simply for going about his day.*

Griffin in completely unsettled not only by the car of racists, but by Hattiesburg's entire atmosphere. "I felt the insane terror of it," he writes. Periodically, cars drive through the streets and everyone disappears for their own safety, coming outside again only when the unknown vehicle has passed. Eventually, Griffin makes his way to a "wooden shanty structure," where his room is at the top of the building. Once inside, he's shocked by how "decrepit" his lodgings are, feeling quite uncomfortable despite the fact that his "contact[s]" have assured him that this is the safest place for him to stay. Alone, he looks down upon the street and feels like he must be in hell. "Hell could be no more lonely or hopeless, no more agonizingly estranged from the world of order and harmony," he writes.

What's most striking about this scene is that Griffin feels an acute sense of loneliness as a result of his intense fear. Unable to banish his dread, he feels as if he has been plunged into "hell," thereby insinuating that the perpetual safety he experienced as a white man is an absurd luxury compared to this sate of constant worry, a feeling that makes a person feel isolated and cut off from the "order and harmony" of the world.

Trying to stop feeling sorry for himself, Griffin takes on the voice of his supposed black identity, saying, "Nigger, what you standing up there crying for?" But this does nothing to make him feel better—in fact, he feels as if this outburst has come from an entirely different person as he looks in **the mirror**. "It's not right. It's just not right," he hears himself say. Trying to distract himself, he finds a roll of film negatives on the ground but is disappointed to discover that the frames are blank. Depressed, he sits down to write his wife, but he's unable to conjure any words. "The observing self saw the Negro, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the ghetto, write 'Darling' to a white woman," Griffin notes. "The chains of my blackness would not allow me to go on." As such, he abandons the task.

Once again, Griffin faces the mirror and is unsettled by what he finds, though this time his discomfort comes not necessarily only from his own reflection, but from his sense that he is cut off from the world he knows. As such, he tries to fully embody his new identity as a black man, but this does nothing to make him feel better. Indeed, he can't quite leave behind his double-consciousness, since he can't fully inhabit the identity of a black man, but also can no longer completely exist as a white man, given his current circumstances. As a result, he is straddled between two identities, which is ultimately why he's unable to write to his wife, feeling estranged from their relationship because of the various implications that come along with a black man calling a white woman "Darling" (in Mississippi, at least).

Going back outside, Griffin seeks out barbeque food. When a woman working at the restaurant hands him his food, though, she looks up and he interprets her look as one that says, "God…isn't it awful?" As music blares all around him, he thinks angrily about how white people like to claim that black people are "happy" with the way things are. "The noise poured forth like a jazzed-up fugue, louder and louder to cover the whisper in every man's soul. 'You are black. You are condemned.' This is what the white man mistook for 'jubilant living' and called 'whooping it up,'" Griffin writes. "This is how the white man can say, 'They live like dogs,' never realizing why they must, to save themselves, shout, get drunk, shake the hip, pour pleasures into bellies deprived of happiness."

Again, Griffin spotlights the cyclical nature of oppression. First, white society deprives black people of their rights, thoroughly disenfranchising them and leaving them with no hope for upward mobility or advancement of any kind. As a result, many people feel they "must" "shout, get drunk, shake the hip, pour pleasures into bellies deprived of happiness." Then, perhaps most unfairly, white society claims that this kind of behavior is an indication that African Americans are happy with the way things are, since this way of life looks, from the outside, "jubilant." As such, white society allows its racist beliefs to perpetuate, never stopping to consider the fact that things would be different if they stopped oppressing African Americans.

Feeling as if "disaster" could strike at any moment Griffin gives up and calls the only person he knows nearby, a journalist named P.D. East. Billie, his wife, answers the phone and tells Griffin that P.D. will pick him up and that he can stay at their house on the condition that he doesn't do anything related to his project while staying with them, since P.D. has already been "persecuted for seeking justice in race relations" and, as a result, his entire family has been ostracized from white society.

Griffin's decision to retreat from the African American section of Hattiesburg underlines his privilege as a white man. Unlike the people surrounding him, he has the option and means to simply remove himself from uncomfortable situations. What's more, his sudden retreat emphasizes just how difficult it is to live under racial oppression. After all, Griffin has only experienced this life for roughly two weeks, and even this short period of time is apparently too much for him to take.

When P.D. picks up Griffin, the two men ride side by side in the darkness, a strange awkwardness in the air. Griffin, for his part, wonders why their conversation is "stilted," but then he realizes what's happening. "I had grown so accustomed to being a Negro, to being shown contempt, that I could not rid myself of the cautions," he writes. "I was embarrassed to ride in the front seat of the car with a white man, especially on our way to his home. It was breaking the 'Southern rule' somehow." When he arrives at P.D.'s house, Billie greets him kindly but makes "gallows humor" jokes about the entire situation, which help ease the tension. "What did we fear?" Griffin wonders. "It was unlikely that the Klan would come riding down on us. We merely fell into the fear that hangs over the state, a nameless and awful thing."

Although Griffin has only been disguised as a black man for two weeks, he has already developed a number of defense mechanisms to keep himself safe from white aggression. As a result, he finds it difficult to let his defenses down when riding in P.D.'s car. Of course, he knows that he's a white man, but he has now experienced the many complications that African Americans face when associating with white people. In this way, readers see how thoroughly fear can refigure the way a person moves through the world.

Griffin notes that this "nameless" fear that "hangs over" Mississippi reminds him of what it was like to live in Europe during the Nazi era—there was, he says, a shameful kind of fear that arose whenever he used to speak to a Jewish person during this time. "For the Negro, at least, this fear is ever-present in the South, and the same is doubtlessly true of many decent whites who watch and wait, and feel the deep shame of it," Griffin writes.

Griffin studied in France as a young man when Hitler was conquering Europe. Because he's well-acquainted with the kind of simmering dread that accompanies acts of violence and discrimination, he can identify the "ever-present" fear that African Americans feel in the South, as well as the "shame" nonracist whites feel when they stand idly by because they're too afraid to speak out against racism. It is perhaps because he's so familiar with this dynamic that he has decided to write this book in the first place, as the entire project is an example of what it might look like for a white writer to take a stand against racial injustice.

After settling into P.D.'s house and spending time with his family, Griffin unwinds. Before long, P.D. gives him a manuscript of his memoir, *The Magnolia Jungle* and asks him to read it, so Griffin retreats to his room and reads, enthralled by the writing. "I read through the night the story of a native-born Southerner, a man who had tried to follow the crowd, who ran an innocuous little newspaper, *The Petal Paper*, glad-handed, joined the local civic clubs and kept himself in line with 'popular opinion,' which meant 'popular prejudice,'" Griffin notes. Describing the premise of P.D.'s book, Griffin goes on to explain that P.D. slowly began to see that his attempts to placate racists were immoral, so he started writing editorials that challenged bigoted ideas. As a result, he and his family were threatened, and he lost "most of his local subscribers and ads."

P.D. East's story serves as an example of the many ways in which nonracist whites are often bullied into upholding white society's racist values. By essentially destroying P.D.'s professional life, the local racists effectively issue a warning to other white people who might want to speak out against racism. By outlining this story, Griffin once again shows readers why so few white people are outspoken when it comes to social justice. And yet, at the same time, P.D. East remains true to his conscience, something Griffin clearly admires.

Going into more detail about P.D. East's downfall in white society, Griffin explains that P.D. was outspokenly against a bill "to levy penalizing fines against any church holding nonsegregated services." This, P.D. upheld, was "simply the old story of legalized injustice." "This tendency to make laws that are convenient or advantageous rather than right has mushroomed in Southern legislatures," Griffin notes. Interestingly enough, though, Griffin notices that P.D. East hasn't let these hardships break his spirits. Although his entire life has changed as a result of his decision to speak out against racism, he still manages to be funny in his book manuscript. This, Griffin intimates, is one of the reasons he can't put down *The Magnolia Jungle*. Indeed, when he finally tries to sleep, he sees that the sun has already risen. Shortly thereafter, P.D. wakes him up, and the two men spend the rest of the day discussing the manuscript.

Again, Griffin goes out of his way to make sure readers know that P.D. East hasn't been entirely destroyed by his sudden downfall in white society. He does this because he wants his readers to understand that, although there are certainly—and unfortunately—repercussions in the South for speaking out against racism, it's still possible for a person to act according to his or her conscience.

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P.D. takes Griffin to Dillard University—a black institution in New Orleans—to meet the dean. He then drops Griffin off in city, where he goes to the bus station and buys another ticket to Mississippi, though this time he has chosen to visit Biloxi. In the bus station's bathroom, Griffin finds a homemade flyer made by a white man who wants to "Pay for various types of sensuality" with black girls of "various ages," offering the most money for girls as young as fourteen. Sadly, Griffin thinks, this man will probably find what he's looking for, since there are many people who badly need this kind of money. As he stares at this piece of paper, a black man enters the bathroom, sees the flyer, and laughs. "In these matters," Griffin writes, "the Negro has seen the backside of the white man too long to be shocked."

When Griffin sees the lewd flyer in the bathroom, readers will recall the author's experience as a shoeshine, when white men didn't hesitate to ask him inappropriate questions. Indeed, African Americans have long seen "the backside of the white man," since many white people don't care what black people think about them. By presenting this, then, Griffin reminds readers just how unaware racists are of the extent to which they embarrass themselves by behaving so disgracefully.

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On Griffin's first day in Biloxi, he starts hitchhiking along the road, eventually getting into a car owned by a white man with red hair. Right away, Griffin can tell he is kind, and begins to hope that he has perhaps "underestimated the people of Mississippi." However, the driver soon goes out of his way to make it clear that he's from Massachusetts, clearly wanting Griffin to know that he's "not a Mississippian." When the two men fall into a conversation about race, the driver says that he respects his new neighbors but doesn't understand why they're so unable to talk about equality. "They can't discuss it," he says. "It's a shame but all they do is get mad whenever you bring it up [...]. They're blocked on that one subject. [...] if I mention race with any sympathy for the Negro, they just tell me I'm an 'outsider' [...]."

The point that the redhaired driver makes is worth noting, as he identifies the white community's unwillingness to speak openly about race. This lack of communication is the reason so many whites are capable of ignoring their own bigotry. Simply by refusing to talk about race relations, they enable themselves to continue oppressing African Americans without having to admit their own prejudices.

After his ride with the redhaired driver, Griffin walks for a long time, trying to eventually make his way to Mobile, Alabama. That night, he begins getting more and more rides. Indeed, he learns that white men who would normally pass him during the day are more likely to pick him up at night. "It quickly became obvious why they picked me up," he writes. "All but two picked me up the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book—except that this was verbal pornography." Believing that they don't need to show any kind of "respectability," these men ask Griffin shockingly lewd questions about his sex life. "They appeared to think that the Negro has done all of those 'special' things they themselves have never dared to do. They carried the conversation into the depths of depravity," Griffin notes.

In this section, Griffin encounters the same lack of respect he has already identified in the white community. This time, though, his interactions with white men become pointedly sexual, as they succumb to a voyeuristic impulse to fetishize black sex. And although these men presumably think they're not doing anything wrong because they're not saying anything blatantly hateful, it's clear that their interest in such matters stems from their belief that black people are fundamentally different than white people. As such, their questions are quite obviously racist.

Ride after ride, the drivers ask Griffin about his sex life. Sometimes these conversations become dangerous, as is the case when one driver asks if he has ever been attracted to a white woman. Griffin says he hasn't—remembering the dangers of showing interest in white women—but the driver says, "Do you think I'm crazy? Why, I had one of them admit to me just last night that he craves white women." He then says that there are "plenty white women" who would like to sleep with a black man, but Griffin merely replies, "A Negro'd be asking for the rope to get himself mixed up with white women." Once it becomes clear that Griffin won't talk about being attracted to white women, the driver pulls over and lets him out.

In this moment, the driver puts Griffin in an incredibly precarious situation. On the one hand, if Griffin placates him by agreeing that he has been attracted to white women before, he runs the risk of transgressing against one of the most dangerous unspoken rules in Mississippi about interracial relationships. On the other hand, if he continues to deny that he's attracted to white women, then he has to actively disagree with—and seemingly disappoint—the driver, therefore putting himself at odds with a white man. As such, the entire conversation is colored by Griffin's reticence and fear.


At one point, a young man picks Griffin up and begins speaking with an "educated flair." Still, though, all of his questions have to do with sex. "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," Griffin writes. For instance, the driver says, "I understand Negroes are much more broad-minded about [sex]," insisting that black people don't have the same kind of "inhibitions" as white people. "I don't think there's any difference," Griffin replies. "Our ministers preach sin and hell just as much as yours. We've got the same puritanical background as you. We worry just as much as white people about our children losing their virginity or being perverted."

Once again, Griffin presents readers with a white man who is unaware of his own bigotry. Or, at the very least, this young man is unwilling to fully examine the implications of his beliefs about black people. Indeed, the driver presents himself as an educated man who believes in racial equality, but he makes the same assumption that all racists make—namely, that there is a fundamental difference between white people and black people. Despite this belief, though, he refuses to admit that he's racist, instead allowing his implicit biases against black people to inform his worldview without ever interrogating his opinions.

Clearly excited by the fact that Griffin speaks "intelligently," the young man pushes on, even asking "the size of Negro genitalia and the details of Negro sex life," though he tries to disguise these lewd interests by using hifalutin language and making fleeting references to sociological studies. "The boy ended up wanting me to expose myself to him," Griffin writes. "I turned mute, indrawn, giving no answer." After driving in silence, the driver says, "I wasn't going to do anything to you," and Griffin assures him that he knows that. "It's just that I don't get a chance to talk to educated Negroes—people that can answer questions," the young man says.

The young driver embarrasses himself by revealing his true interest: the sex lives of black people, whom he has clearly fetishized because he thinks they're fundamentally different than white people. In response, Griffin gives him nothing but silence, inviting him to reflect on just how ridiculous and awkward his question really is. Embarrassed, the driver tries to claim that he's simply enthralled to have the chance to converse with an "educated" black man, though this is obviously not the case, since intelligence has nothing to do with the "size of Negro genitalia."


"You make it more complicated than it is," Griffin tells the driver. "If you want to know about the sexual morals of the Negro—his practices and ideals—it's no mystery. These are human matters, and the Negro is the same human as the white man. Just ask yourself how it is for a white man and you'll know all the answers." In response, the driver cites "social studies" that make a different argument, but Griffin cuts him off, saying, "They don't deal with any basic difference in human nature between black and white."

Again, Griffin underlines the fact that there is no "difference in human nature between black and white." Indeed, skin color is an appearance and nothing more, at least when it comes to the fundamental "nature" of human beings.


The next driver that picks Griffin up is a young man who looks tough and unforgiving but actually turns out to be a kind man who believes in equality. When he pulls over to buy both Griffin and himself hamburgers, Griffin wonders how, exactly, this southerner has managed to adopt such an egalitarian spirit, but he can't quite figure it out—the man is simply kind.

Griffin learns his own lesson about appearance in this moment, as he judges this new driver based on what he looks like and then sees that his assessment is completely inaccurate. Though he assumes the young man will be just as racist as all the other drivers, he soon discovers he is full of kindness and good will.

Griffin arrives in Mobile, Alabama and meets a black man near the bus station. This man, it turns out, is a local preacher, and he invites Griffin to stay with him, though he only has one bed. As such, the two men go back to the preacher's house and climb into bed together. "Do you want to talk or sleep?" the preacher asks, and since Griffin is beginning to feel overwhelmed not only by the rough night he has had, but by the intense "poverty" of the preacher's home, he says he'd like to talk. This, he notes, "banishe[s] the somberness."

Again, Griffin frames communication and camaraderie as one of the only true respites from the hateful, exhausting world of the segregated South. Emotionally fatigued from a long day of implicit bias and entrenched racism, he relishes the opportunity to simply coexist as equals with this kind preacher.

NOVEMBER 21, 1959

For three days, Griffin stays in Mobile and looks for work. Discouraged, he eventually asks the foreman of a plant whether or not he would hire him if he were more talented than a white worker. "I'll tell you," the foreman says, "we don't want you people. Don't you understand that?" He then goes on to say that the white community wants to force blacks out of Alabama by refusing them jobs and thus making it impossible for them to live in the state.

When this foreman admits that he wants to disempower black people by refusing them jobs, readers see that institutionalized racism has very real effects on African Americans, since the inability to find a job inevitably forces people to uproot their lives to find work elsewhere. In addition to acting out his bigotry in an everyday way, then, this foreman takes a broader approach by disenfranchising black people through various economic injustices.

NOVEMBER 24, 1959

Hitchhiking between Mobile and Montgomery, Griffin gets a ride from a white man in a truck who has a shotgun leaning against his leg in the cabin. Laughing, the driver says, "That's for hunting deer." Their initial conversation starts out normally, as the driver asks about Griffin's family. Eventually, though, he asks if Griffin has a "pretty wife," and when he says that he does, the driver asks, "She ever had it from a white man?" When Griffin doesn't respond, the driver goes on, saying that he hires many black women at his business and that he has sex with all of them as part of the interview process. "You think that's pretty terrible, don't you?" he asks. "I guess I do," Griffin says. The driver then insists that everybody does this, saying, "We figure we're doing you people a favor to get some white blood in your kids."

Yet again, Griffin finds himself in a precarious situation. If he celebrates the driver's assertion that many white men have sex with black women, he might put himself in danger, since racists normally vilify the idea of interracial relationships. However, if he admits that he thinks the driver is "pretty terrible," the driver might turn on him. Despite this danger, though, Griffin acts in accordance with his conscience, saying that he doesn't approve of the driver's actions. In doing so, he demonstrates the importance of standing up for what one believes in, even when doing so is risky.

Griffin is astounded by the driver's "hypocrisy," thinking about the many times he's heard white people speaking terribly about the "horror" of "mongrelization" and the importance of "racial purity." Moving on, the driver asks Griffin why he's in town, asking if he's here to "stir up trouble." Griffin denies this, but the driver tells him what white people do to black people who "stir up trouble": "We either ship them off to the pen or kill them." Suddenly, Griffin sees how eager this man is to make an example out of a black man, and this "terrifie[s]" him. "You can kill a nigger and toss him into that swamp and no one'll ever know what happened to him," the driver says, and Griffin only dares to say, "Yes, sir," before falling silent. Shortly thereafter, the man pulls to the side of the road and asks Griffin to get out.

Sure enough, Griffin's decision to openly challenge the driver's racist ways puts him in danger. This is made evident by the fact that the driver immediately begins to indirectly threaten Griffin, saying that a white man like him can kill a black man and "toss him into" a swamp without any repercussions. In turn, readers see the frightening consequences that African Americans often face when they push back against bigotry.

As Griffin gets out of the truck, the driver says, "I'll tell you how it is here. We'll do business with you people. We'll sure as hell screw your women. Other than that, you're just *completely off the record as far as we're concerned*." With these words ringing in his mind, Griffin wanders a desolate stretch of road, starving and parched. Eventually, he comes upon a "service station" with a grocery store inside. Seeing the white owners, he hesitates, but then he remembers what the racist driver said: "We'll do business with you people." As such, he enters and buys food, careful not to do anything other than purchase the goods. Back on the road, he's relieved to be picked up by a black man, who takes him home for the night despite the fact that he only has two rooms to share between his wife, two daughters, and himself.

Once more, Griffin benefits from the kindness of a black stranger. By showing readers that a sense of camaraderie is what ensures his safety after leaving the racist driver's car, he emphasizes the importance of banding together in the face of discrimination and hate.

That night, after having a jovial time with the black driver and his family, Griffin wakes up and realizes that he has been screaming. This is because he was having a nightmare, one he's been having rather frequently. In the dream, white people surround him and give him "the hate stare" as they close in on him, his back "against a wall." The next morning, Griffin has breakfast and coffee and prepares to leave, reaching for his money. However, the driver's wife stops him, saying, "If you gave us a penny, we'd owe you change." Still, Griffin leaves money before returning to the highway, where two white boys drive him to a bus station.

Griffin's recurring nightmare is a sign that he has been thoroughly troubled by his experience as a dark-skinned man in the South. Indeed, it's clear that the stress of existing under the influence of racism has permeated every aspect of his emotional life, imbuing him with a constant fear of white violence. What's more, the kindness of the driver's wife once again emphasizes the importance of unity and community, ultimately suggesting that people can help one another cope by exhibiting small acts of empathy.

In the bus station, Griffin buys a ticket for Montgomery and then goes to the bathroom, where he looks at himself in **the mirror**. Having been in this disguise for more than three weeks, he is "no longer shocked" to see himself. Suddenly, he feels "a great hunger for something merely pleasurable, for something people call 'fun.'" As he continues to look into the mirror, he sees that his skin has lightened because he hasn't been lying under the sun lamp, so he darkens the corners of his lips and reminds himself that he must be careful not to take off his clothes in front of anyone, since the majority of his body has lightened.

The fact that Griffin's skin is fading back to white is a reminder that he isn't actually a black man. Although he has inhabited the persona of an African American, there's no changing that he is—in reality—a white man who can transition back to a life of privilege whenever he wants. This is important to keep in mind, especially since he himself seems to overlook this point by investing himself wholeheartedly in the appropriation of a black identity.

NOVEMBER 25, 1959

Griffin is pleased to see a prevailing attitude of courage and "resistance" amongst African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama. Because of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "influence," the black population has committed itself to "nonviolent and prayerful resistance to discrimination." This, Griffin notes, "bewilder[s]" racists, since black violence often gives bigots an excuse to go on "repress[ing]" African Americans.

The racists in Montgomery are at a loss when black people practice "nonviolent" "resistance" because they are so used to taking African American anger and using it against the entire population. In other words, these racists try to perpetuate bigoted stereotypes by provoking black people into doing things that they (the racists) can then use against them. By refusing to respond to hatred with violence, then, Montgomery's black community manages to deprive racists of one of their most harmful tactics.

NOVEMBER 27, 1959

Feeling that "the situation in Montgomery" is quite "strange," Griffin decides to "try passing back into white society." This decision also has to do with the fact that he can't bear to face "hate" anymore.

Griffin's unwillingness to withstand "hate" anymore is worth noting, since it says something about just how emotionally destructive and upsetting it is to live under the constant influence of racism. Indeed, Griffin has only been disguised as a black man for about a month, and yet he can't bear to continue even for the sake of this experiment. As such, he decides to transition back into "white society"—an option that is obviously unavailable to people dealing with racism and bigotry.

NOVEMBER 28, 1959

After taking the stain off his skin and dressing in low-contrast clothes, Griffin looks like a tan white man. Once he does this, he decides it's "important to get out of the neighborhood and into the white sector as quickly and inconspicuously as possible." In the street, a young black man sees him and reaches into his pocket, grasping a knife because he thinks Griffin is going to "harass" him. To "reassure him" that he has "no unfriendly intentions," Griffin walks up to him and says, "It's getting cold, isn't it?" The young man, for his part, stands "like a statue, unresponsive." As Griffin moves through town, he has trouble "adjust[ing]" to life as a white man, though he eventually feels a "sense of exultant liberation" when he walks into a nice restaurant and is greeted with kindness. That night, he checks into a white hotel.

When Griffin tries to connect with the frightened young man, he finds himself unable to bridge the gap between the white and black communities. This is because this gap—at least in this moment—is one based on fear, since the young man thinks Griffin is going to "harass" him. Readers might recall Griffin's fear when one of the white drivers who picked him up urged him to say that he is attracted to white women. In that scene, Griffin felt trapped, knowing that he might be putting himself in danger if he responded to the white man's question. Similarly, this young man on the street now clearly fears that speaking to Griffin might lead him into a difficult situation, so he remains silent. As such, readers see the ways in which fear inspires a rift between blacks and whites, shutting down any possibility of genuine communication between the two groups.

NOVEMBER 29, 1959

In Montgomery, Griffin goes out of his way to speak to other white people, who tell him what they think about white society's relationship with the black community. "They said they knew the Negroes, they had had long talks with the Negroes. They did not know that the Negro long ago learned he must tell them what they want to hear, not what is," Griffin writes. "I heard the old things: the Negro is this or that or the other. You have to go slow. You can't expect the South to sit back and let the damned communist North dictate to it [...]." As he listens, Griffin suppresses the urge to say, "Don't you know you are prattling the racist poison?" As he moves through Montgomery—which is so tragically segregated—he wonders if it's even "worth trying to show the one race what [goes] on behind the mask of the other."

Again, Griffin underlines the lack of honest communication between the black and white communities. What many white people fail to realize, he points out, is that African Americans have long been discouraged from speaking the truth about what it's like to live in the South. Unfortunately, though, the majority of white people (at least in Montgomery) tend to take what black people tell them at face value, thereby giving themselves an excuse to go on living the way they want to live. This, it seems, is how racism sustains itself, as neither whites nor blacks end up speaking honestly about the situation itself (at least not with each other). In turn, the two communities remain tragically divided.

DECEMBER 1, 1959

Griffin decides to alternate between presenting as white and presenting as black, keeping his stain and makeup tools in a bag with him at all times. When he finds a secluded place, he steps out of sight and transforms himself. "I was the same man, whether white or black," he writes. "Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly-love smiles and the privileges from whites and the hate stares or obsequiousness from the Negroes. And when I was a Negro, the whites judged me fit for the junk heap, while the Negroes treated me with great warmth."

By saying that he is "the same man" whether he presents as white or black, Griffin once again highlights the fact that appearance doesn't necessarily have anything to do with a person's true identity, though it does profoundly impact the way one moves through the world. Indeed, Griffin is treated differently depending upon what he looks like, finding camaraderie with whomever looks like him and resentment from whomever does not. In this way, then, he also spotlights the intense division between the black and white communities.

After spending time in Montgomery, Griffin travels—disguised as a black man—to the Tuskegee Institute, a nearby black university. Near the school, he encounters a drunk white man who calls him over. This drunk man is a PhD student who has come to Alabama from New York to "observe" the state's racial dynamics. The student asks Griffin if he'll have a drink with him, and when Griffin declines, he says, "Wait a minute, damnit. You people are my brothers. It's people like me that are your only hope. How do you expect me to observe if you won't talk to me?" He goes on to say that he doesn't "consider" himself "any better" than Griffin. "Though I knew he had been drinking," Griffin writes, "I wondered that an educated man and an observer could be so obtuse—could create such an embarrassing situation for a Negro."

The drunken young man Griffin encounters in this scene has romanticized the idea of himself as someone who stands for equality. Although it's obviously a good thing to advocate for justice and the destruction of bigotry, this man's way of expressing these ideas is performative and self-interested, as he never stops to consider that his boisterous words about equality are putting Griffin in an "embarrassing situation." And though he claims to invest himself in the idea of equal rights—calling black people his "brothers"—it's clear he mainly wants to satisfy his own ego, as made evident when he says, "It's people like me that are your only hope." In this manner, he reveals his desire to be seen as a beneficent savior of sorts—a self-aggrandizing idea that stands in stark contrast to his supposed commitment to equality.

Griffin again declines the drunk man's invitation to have a drink, and the man starts to make a scene. At this point, a black man appears with a truck full of turkeys and asks if either Griffin or the drunkard would like to buy one. "I don't have any family here," Griffin says, but the drunkard butts in, insisting that he'll buy all of the turkeys "just to help" the man selling them. He then says he'll give the turkeys away, but the seller is unsure, not knowing whether or not to take the ten dollar bill that the drunkard has held out for him. "What's the matter," the drunkard says, "did you steal them or something?" Griffin notes that now the "unpardonable" has "been said." "The white man, despite his protestations of brotherhood, had made the first dirty suggestion that came to his mind," he writes.

When the drunk man makes "the first dirty suggestion" that comes "to his mind," it becomes apparent that a person can see him- or herself as empathetic without actually embodying any of the traits normally associated with someone who believes in equality. Indeed, the drunkard has developed an implicit bias against black people, one he doesn't even recognize, since he's too busy telling himself that he's committed to equality and racial justice. All the while, though, he harbors disparaging ideas about African Americans—ideas that inevitably make their way into his actions and thus cause him to behave like a racist despite what he thinks about his own enlightenment.

The drunkard picks up on a sudden "resentment" that the turkey seller and Griffin now project toward him. As a result, he becomes angry. "Hell, no wonder nobody has any use for you. You don't give a man a chance to be nice to you. And damnit, I'm going to put that in my report. There's something 'funny' about all of you," he says, stomping away.

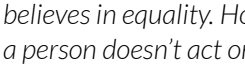
Rather than interrogating his own implicit biases against black people, the drunk man lashes out at Griffin and the turkey vendor. Indeed, he avoids reckoning with his racist beliefs and then makes gross generalizations about African Americans—unfair generalizations that only contribute to his deeply entrenched bigotry. In turn, readers see how easy it is for unexamined prejudices to perpetuate themselves.

Taking a bus to Atlanta, Griffin witnesses a moment of extreme tension as two white women board and can't find a place to sit in the bus's white section. No white men rise to let one of them sit, so the driver calls out to the black passengers, asking a young black man and a black woman to sit together so that the white women can sit down without having to be next to either of them. However, both passengers "ignore" the driver, and the whites start turning around to glare. "Didn't you hear the driver? Move out, man," says a redhaired man. "They're welcome to sit here," the young black man says, gesturing to the seat next to him. "They don't want to sit with you people, don't you know that?" the driver says, but still, nobody moves.

Throughout Black Like Me, *Griffin witnesses several everyday acts of heroism. This time, it comes when the young black man says that the white women are "welcome to sit' next to him despite the fact that the driver has asked him to move. Given the charged atmosphere of the bus, this is an extremely courageous thing to say, since it's obviously dangerous for a black man to stand up for himself in the South. Nonetheless, Griffin communicates a certain amount of respect for this man, thereby underlining how admirable and important it is to stay strong in the face of fear—otherwise, he intimates, nothing will ever change.*

The redhaired man asks the driver if he wants him to "slap" the two black passengers "out of their seats," but the driver says, "No—for God's sake—please—no rough stuff." "It's all right," says one of the women, urging the driver and the redhaired man to stop this charade. When the white passengers all get off in Atlanta, one turns to the young black man and says, "I just wanted to tell you that before he slapped you, he'd have had to slap me down first." None of the black passengers are impressed, but they nod to acknowledge his sentiment. "Well, I just wanted you to know—I was on your side, boy." With this, he "wink[s]," "never realizing" that he has "revealed himself" by using the word "boy." In the bus station bathroom, Griffin quickly wipes off the stain and becomes his white self once more.

The young black man's courage in this scene is worth noting, since it leads to a small victory over the racism of the bus's white passengers. This bravery stands in stark contrast to the white man's retrospective assertion that he would have stood up for the black man if the redhaired passenger had tried to fight him. Considering the fact that this man said nothing in the actual moment, this is a spineless comment, one he clearly says only to make himself feel better about not having the mettle to do what's right in the first place. Indeed, this passenger is a racist himself, though he doesn't recognize this because he sees himself as an enlightened man who believes in equality. However, these kinds of beliefs mean nothing if a person doesn't act on them in real time.



DECEMBER 2, 1959

Sepia magazine assigns Griffin to write stories about Atlanta, pairing him with the photographer Don Rutledge. However, because Rutledge won't arrive for several days, Griffin visits a nearby Trappist monastery, where he basks in a feeling of equality and peace. Despite this respite from the constant racial tensions, though, he screams himself awake one night after having his recurring nightmare about white people closing in on him.

By this point in Black Like Me, *Griffin has finished the majority of his experiment. However, it's clear that the emotional effects of his experience as a dark-skinned man are too strong to simply disappear. Indeed, even in the tranquil atmosphere of the Trappist monastery, he can't get over the feeling of constant terror to which he's become so accustomed.*

DECEMBER 4-7, 1959

After returning to Atlanta and finishing his work with Don Rutledge, Griffin concludes that Atlanta "has gone far in proving that 'the Problem' can be solved and in showing [...] the way to do it." This, Griffin upholds, is the result of "three factors." First of all, the black people in Atlanta have "united in a common goal and purpose," and they benefit from strong community leaders. Second, "the city of Atlanta has long been favored with an enlightened administration." Lastly, Atlanta has a good newspaper that isn't "afraid to take a stand for right and justice." This is vital, Griffin says, since most publications in the South simply print what the racist public wants to hear, only circulating negative stories about African Americans.

It's worth paying attention to the reasons Griffin lists when considering why or how Atlanta has succeeded in "proving" that it's possible to improve the difficult racial dynamics in the South. When he references the fact that Atlanta has good community leaders—around whom the population can "unite in a common goal and purpose"—he points out that the city has established a strong sense of unity, which ultimately enables African Americans to better address injustice. What's more, he identifies the importance of good political leadership, thereby underlining the significance of an "administration" that can disrupt patterns of systemic racism on an institutional level. Finally, Griffin highlights the role that the media plays in such matters, reminding readers that open and honest communication is vital when it comes to combatting racism.

Griffin explains that two economists came to Atlanta twenty-five years ago and "recognized that economic emancipation was the key to the racial solution." Indeed, they realized that black people would never be able to attain upward mobility if they kept using white banks, since these banks invariably denied loans to African Americans. For example, there was one instance in which the black community wanted to build more black housing, but none of the banks would give them loans to do so. As such, the community leaders pooled money from black citizens and used it to grant loans to people wanting to build property. As soon as the white "lending agencies" saw this, they said, "Don't take all that business away from us. How about letting us handle a few of those loans?"

This story about housing loans illustrates the effectiveness of community organizing. Rather than working within a system that is rigged against black people, Atlanta's local leaders decided to create a new framework, one in which black people could thrive. By shifting to a new economic model, the black community ultimately enabled itself to attain upward mobility. What's more, this success encouraged white banks to change their policies, thereby altering the patterns of institutionalized racism that normally make sure black people remain disenfranchised and oppressed.

DECEMBER 9-14, 1959

After his time in Atlanta, Griffin decides to return to New Orleans one last time in his disguise, this time taking Don Rutledge along to take photographs. This proves rather difficult, since people find it strange for a white man to be photographing a black man in public, often assuming that Griffin must be some kind of celebrity. As such, Griffin and Rutledge pretend to be strangers, and Griffin simply sneaks into the frame while Rutledge acts like he's taking a photograph of something else. When they finish, Griffin "resume[s] for the final time [his] white identity."

Once more, Griffin experiences the division between the black and white communities, this time realizing that he can't even go around and take pictures with Rutledge without attracting scorn from passerby.

DECEMBER 15, 1959

Back in Texas, Griffin is overjoyed to be home, though he also can't banish terrible thoughts of bigotry from his mind, thinking as he hugs his family about how it's impossible to ignore the world's injustice now that he has experienced it firsthand.

In the same way that he couldn't leave behind his emotional turmoil while he was at the Trappist monastery, Griffin now finds it difficult to assimilate back into his own life without thinking of the horrors he experienced while disguised as a black man. In turn, he shows readers how difficult it is to simply ignore injustice, especially after facing it head on.

JANUARY 2, 1960

At an editorial meeting, George Levitan tells Griffin that he'll only publish his story if he "insist[s]." "It'll cause trouble. We don't want to see you killed. What do you think? Hadn't we better forget the whole thing?" he says, but Griffin refuses to back down now. As such, they agree that the piece will be published in March.

Now that Griffin has experienced life as a dark-skinned man in the South, he knows that he has to publish his findings, since doing so will help white people shift their perspectives and examine their own implicit biases. Although this might put him in danger, he clearly feels that what he's found is too important to keep hidden, as this would only further enable white society to tell itself the lie that African Americans are happy with the way things are in the South.

FEBRUARY 26 – MARCH 14, 1960

As Griffin's story nears publication, people begin to find out about what he's done. He even begins to receive interview requests, and he decides to go on a television show to talk about his experience as a dark-skinned man in the South. After his first interview airs, he and his family wait for phone calls to start pouring in, and though they do receive several, they're surprised that no threats arrive—yet.

Now that he has revealed to the public that he disguised himself as a black man, Griffin braces himself for the white community's harsh reaction. After all, he has gone against the "currents" that Adelle Jackson pointed out to him before he began the experiment—"currents that make the idea of a white man's assuming nonwhite identity a somewhat repulsive step down."

MARCH 17 – 23, 1960

Griffin travels to New York for an interview with *Time* magazine. He then prepares for another television appearance. In the time since the first television interview, his mother has received "her first threatening call" from a woman who told her that Griffin shouldn't return to Mansfield. Claiming that Griffin has "thrown the door wide open" to black people in the area, this woman says that a group of angry locals are planning to harm him if he ever comes back. Griffin's next television appearance goes well, as does the one after that. He also does a radio show, and soon gets a copy of *Time*, which has printed his interview. Thankfully, it is well written, and he's pleased with the outcome. Later, Griffin does yet another television appearance, and though he is particularly nervous about this one, which is live, he's quite happy with how it goes.

Unsurprisingly, Griffin ends up receiving threats because he has challenged the racist idea that there is some kind of fundamental difference between white and black people. However, he clearly doesn't let these threats keep him from continuing to spread news of his project, as he keeps giving interviews and talking about his experience. As such, he implies that people—and especially white men who have the privilege of relative safety—shouldn't let threats keep them from doing what's right.

APRIL 1, 1960

Griffin does a television show from his home in Mansfield. He feels as if his "local situation" is "odd," since he has "no contact with anyone in town." Nevertheless, he knows that everyone has been talking about him, debating whether or not what he did was a "Christian" thing to do.

Even though the entire country is busying talking openly about Griffin and what he's done, he finds that his "local" community refrains from interacting with him. In this way, he is cut off from any kind of communication with the people surrounding him, effectively shunned because nobody is willing to face him directly to discuss the implications of his project. This, it seems, is the same kind of reticence and unwillingness to talk about difficult matters that enables racism to sustain itself in the first place.

APRIL 2, 1960

Griffin is awoken in the morning by a phone call from a newspaper in Fort Worth, Texas. The reporter on the other end of the call tells him that he has been "hanged in effigy from the center red-light wire downtown on Main Street" in Mansfield. Apparently, a group of racists strung up a dummy meant to portray Griffin, and the reporter now wants to know what he thinks of the matter. Later, after someone takes down the dummy and throws it away, it appears once again, this time hanging from a sign that says, "$25.00 FINE FOR DUMPING DEAD ANIMALS." Despite this absurd turn of events, people in Mansfield are "utterly silent." Indeed, nobody calls Griffin to check in, and this disappoints him. "Did their silence condone the lynching?" he writes. "My family's uneasiness approached terror now."

After a dummy version of Griffin is hanged in Mansfield, he is forced to reckon with his own "terror" in a much more visceral, immediate way. Whereas before he and his family simply worried in an abstract way about the fact that racists were unhappy with him, now they come face to face with the threat of true violence. Worse, nobody in the surrounding community rallies support for Griffin, instead falling into "silence" and thereby tacitly "condon[ing]" this hateful behavior. Once again, then, readers see the importance of communication and community, since it's clear in this moment that Griffin feels completely isolated because none of his fellow townspeople are brave enough to extend their support. And it is exactly this kind of frightful isolation that discourages nonracist whites from ever speaking out against bigotry.

Griffin decides to temporarily move his family to a friend's house in Dallas. While driving down the road and passing his neighbors, he sees that they are giving him "the most violently hostile stare." Then, at a red light, a stranger pulls up next to him. "He told me he'd heard that 'they' were planning to come and castrate me, that the date had been set," Griffin writes. "He said this coldly, without emotion, neither threatening nor sympathetic, exactly the way one would say: 'The weatherman's promising rain for tomorrow.'"

Without many true allies in his community, Griffin is subject to fear and intimidation seemingly everywhere he goes. He even experiences "hostil[ity]" when driving by his neighbors. Worse, he is forced to face the terrifying possibility that an unidentified group of racists are going to physically harm him. Once again, then, readers see the ways in which racists discourage other white people from advocating for equality.

APRIL 7 – 11, 1960

Shortly after Griffin and his family go to Dallas, someone burns a cross "just above" their house at an African American school. Despite this, he and his family decide to return to Mansfield several days later, not wanting to "hide away" any longer. "Our townspeople wanted to 'keep things peaceful' at all costs," Griffin writes. "They said I had 'stirred things up.' This is laudable and tragic. I, too, say let us be peaceful but the only way to do this is first to assure justice. By keeping 'peaceful' in this instance, we end up consenting to the destruction of all peace." Indeed, Griffin upholds that "condon[ing] injustice" means accepting the "destruction of all social stability, all real peace."

When Griffin says that his "townspeople" want to "keep things peaceful," he isn't saying that they're advocating for equality or harmony, but rather that they're angry at him for disrupting the supposedly "peaceful" way of life they've established. This, it seems, is why they're so angry at him, since he dared to challenge their notion that black people are happy with the way things are. Despite their anger, though, he understands that going along in ignorance like this only means allowing for a number of inexcusable "injustice[s]"—something he's unwilling to "condone."

JUNE 19 – AUGUST 14, 1960

Griffin is reassured by the many warm wishes he receives in the mail, which he believes proves that southern white people are more understanding than they're willing to show. Still, though, he decides to move his family (and his parents) to Mexico, since staying in Mansfield would be "too great an injustice to" his children. However, he decides to stay behind for several days. "I felt I must remain a while longer, until the bullies had a chance to carry out their threats against me," he writes. "I could not allow them to say they had 'chased' me out. They had promised to fix me on July 15th, and now they said they would do it August 15th."

Although it might seem crazy for Griffin to wait until an angry mob of racists descends upon him, it's actually quite important that he demonstrate to his community that he will not back down. If he were to succumb to fear, he would only help bigots discourage other nonracist whites from taking a stand against discrimination. This is why he decides that he can't "allow them to say they had 'chased'" him out of town, ultimately suggesting that the most productive way to respond to hatred is by embodying resilience.

AUGUST 17, 1960

Griffin's family has already left for Mexico, but he has stayed to wait for the racists' attack. As he wraps up his last few days at home, he hires a young boy (who is black) to help him clean out his parents' house. As they work together, his helper says, "Why do the whites hate us—we don't hate them?" This prompts a "long conversation," in which the youngster brings up "the obvious fact that whites teach their children to call them 'niggers.'" "Your children don't hate us, do they?" he asks. "God, no," Griffin replies. "Children have to be taught that kind of filth. We'd never permit ours to learn it." This conversation depresses Griffin because he sees how certain the boy is that all white people hate him.

Griffin's conversation with this child illustrates just how deeply racism can work its way into the consciousness of a young person. Because the boy has seen nothing but discrimination and hatred, he assumes that all white people dislike him—a tragic assumption that unfortunately makes some sense, given the way that white people treat black people. This is perhaps one of the most harmful elements of racism, as young people are forced to contend with toxic hatred so early in life.

Griffin suggests that one of the most "distressing repercussion[s]" of the "lack of communication" between whites and blacks is that some African Americans have started to make sweeping and negative generalizations about white people. This, Griffin says, is "justified to some extent," but he thinks it's a "grave" situation all the same. "It only widens the gap that men of good will are trying desperately to bridge with understanding and compassion. [...] The Negro who turns now, in the moment of near realization of his liberties, and bares his fangs at a white man's whiteness, makes the same tragic error the white racist has made," he writes. Lamenting that some black people have started "preaching Negro superiority," Griffin suggests that racial dynamics in America are very volatile. "If some spark does set the keg afire," writes, "[...] then we will all pay for not having cried for justice long ago."

Griffin ends Black Like Me *on a somewhat contentious note, since he suggests that black people who make generalizations about white people make "the same tragic error the white racist has made." This is quite clearly untrue, since racism is something borne out of a troubled history of black slavery and systemic oppression. As such, it cannot be compared to the unfavorable opinions that some African Americans might develop about whites, since this is only a reaction to years and years of hatred and disenfranchisement. Plus, the rights of white people remain uncompromised, no matter what people say about them (whereas African Americans are not only spoken about negatively, but also denied their rights). Having said that, it's important to note that, although Griffin's analysis of race relations in America certainly lacks nuance, the overall message he wishes to send is that equality will remain out of reach if whites and blacks don't manage to "bridge" the "gap" of "understanding" that exists between them. As such, he underlines the importance of unity and communication between whites and blacks—a notion that was at the time rather radical, though it might not seem particularly revolutionary today. Still, it is for this reason that* Black Like Me *remains an important text, since it urged white people to interrogate their unexamined prejudices in a way that few books had before.*

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