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GRIFFIN'S BLACK LIKE ME



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BLACK LIKE ME

NOTES

including

- *Life of the Author*
- *General Introduction*
- *List of Characters*
- *Critical Commentaries*
- *Griffin's Philosophy*
- *Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

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CONTENTS

LIFE OF THE AUTHOR	5
GENERAL INTRODUCTION	
Racism: Definition and History	7
The South in 1959	12
Griffin's Purpose	14
LIST OF CHARACTERS	16
CRITICAL COMMENTARIES	19
Part I	20
Part II	23
Part III	44
Part IV	47
Part V	57
Epilogue	69
GRIFFIN'S PHILOSOPHY: 1960 AND AFTER	73
REVIEW QUESTIONS	76
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	78

Black Like Me Notes

LIFE OF THE AUTHOR

On first learning the theme of *Black Like Me*, most people find it remarkable that a Southern white would change the color of his skin and become a black man, even for a few weeks. Was he motivated, they wonder, by curiosity—a desire to experience as many sides of life as possible? Was it simply that he was paid very well for his account of his experiences as a black man? Or was this an extraordinary man—one possessing a rare amount of compassion and courage—who sincerely wished to understand and to communicate to other whites the true effects of their racism on the day-to-day life of blacks?

The details of John Howard Griffin's life make it hard to believe that he became a black man simply because of vulgar curiosity or a desire for money. In fact, the story of his life is that of a highly learned man who was able to overcome most of the prejudices ingrained in him by his Texas upbringing, and who became intensely dedicated to the cause of racial justice in a society which despised and threatened him for his efforts.

Griffin was born in Dallas, Texas, on June 16, 1920, and grew up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Under the influence of his mother, a concert pianist, he developed an early love of music which was to remain with him all his life. At sixteen, he went to France, where he completed his secondary education in 1938. Since Griffin had decided to become a psychiatrist, he began to study medicine and psychiatry at the Medical School of Tours, spending part of his time as an assistant to the director of an insane asylum in that city. But his involvement with music was too much a part of himself to be ignored, and his experiments with music as therapy for the insane led him to continue his study of musical composition, theory, and history.

During World War II, Griffin worked with the French underground movement, aiding in the escape of German and American refugees; later he joined the United States Army, fighting in the South Pacific and the Far East. The war interrupted his studies in both psychiatry and music, and severe damage to his eyesight as a result of war injuries put an end to his hopes of being a psychiatrist. He did continue his musical studies, however, and these were eventually to make him a recognized authority on certain aspects of music, most notably the Gregorian chant.

In 1947, Griffin, now totally blind, returned to Mansfield, Texas, where he took up cattle ranching while learning Braille and other skills necessary to the sightless. His return emphasized the fact that two major changes in values had taken place during his eleven-year absence. The first was an increasing attraction to Roman Catholicism, largely resulting from the influence of the priests and brothers in the French monastery where Griffin had studied music just before and after he went totally blind. His first novel, *The Devil Rides Outside*, written in 1952, draws upon this experience and centers on a young man's gradual rejection of worldly and sensual pursuits in favor of spiritual commitment. Griffin has acknowledged that writing this novel was a key factor in his own conversion to Catholicism, which occurred the same year.

The second major change involved a total reassessment of Griffin's social values. As a teenager in France, he had rapidly become aware that his schoolmates there did not share his Texas-bred sense of superiority to Negroes or his distaste for associating with black people on an equal basis. Moreover, as he witnessed the growth of Nazi anti-Semitism in pre-World War II Europe, he found inescapable parallels to the attitudes of whites toward blacks in his own country. It became obvious to him that one of America's major problems was racism.

In 1957, Griffin's eyesight suddenly returned, and in the following years he became prominent as a syndicated newspaper columnist. His increasing commitment to change Southern racist attitudes through his journalistic writings culminated in the

experiences narrated in *Black Like Me*, first serialized in *Sepia* magazine in 1960.

In the journals he wrote before undertaking this racial transformation and in the early parts of the book itself, Griffin speaks of his conviction that he must follow through with this project, even though he seriously feared reprisals. Unfortunately, when his account was published, his fellow Texans' reactions surpassed even his worst estimates of the malignant hatred festering in Southern white minds. Griffin, his wife, their four children, and Griffin's parents all became targets for threats of death or mutilation. Members of the black community secretly kept watch on the Griffin house to prevent violence. Finally, fearful for his family's safety and intensely saddened by his fellow whites' hatred and bigotry, Griffin moved his household to Mexico, where they remained until political unrest and anti-American sentiment forced them to leave. The Griffin family later returned to Texas and now resides in Fort Worth.

Besides the works already discussed, Griffin has written another novel, *Nuni* (1956); *Land of the High Sky* (1959), a history of western Texas and its Indian culture; a number of short stories; and many articles dealing with such topics as music, racism, primitive cultures, censorship, and religion. He is currently working on several books, including an autobiography to be titled *Scattered Shadows*. Griffin has also gained recognition in the field of photography and has done portraits of many prominent contemporary figures. He has received numerous awards for his various writings, including the Christian Culture Award, a citation from the National Association of Negro Women, and the *Pacem in Terris* Award established by Pope John XXIII.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

RACISM: DEFINITION AND HISTORY

Fundamental to the understanding of race relations in this country is a comprehension of the term *racism*. Basically, racism

is the conviction that another race is innately inferior to one's own or to all other races, and that it is therefore morally right to segregate, to dominate, and even to eliminate that race. Racism takes for granted such generalizations as "All Negroes are lazy." A racist accepts at face value a certain line of reasoning ("Since this man is a 'nigger' he must be lazy") and a certain emotional attitude ("I hate those lazy niggers").

Modern scientific and psychological studies have proven, however, that there is no evidence that the Negro race is biologically, intellectually, or temperamentally inferior to any other race. Yet myths about the Negro's inferiority and his "animalistic" nature are still popularly believed—for example, that the black man's brain is smaller than the white man's, that his sexual organs are larger, that he is lazier, less intelligent, and more inclined to criminal acts. Not only are accusations of this sort untrue, but modern sociologists and anthropologists also question whether there are any objective criteria—apart from superficial or cultural ones—for classifying human beings as belonging to one race rather than another. Certainly there is no historical or scientific basis for a concept of racial "purity" which insists that anyone who is not one hundred percent Caucasian (an unprovable issue in itself) belongs to a totally different race.

Why, then, did such misconceptions develop in the first place? The recent work of historians and sociologists has suggested that the roots of such racist beliefs lie early in the era when the white man in this country was enslaving black people. At first, black slaves were treated quite similarly to white indentured servants,* but as it became economically more profitable to push some slaves into lower and lower conditions and to refuse them the indentured man's privilege of working off his bondage, blacks were singled out for such suppression. A man who wished to enslave others—as opposed to using their services as indentured men—knew that it would be considered

*An indentured servant was one who signed a bond or a contract to work as an apprentice or servant. Usually some arrangement was made either to set a specific time limit for this service or to allow the indentured man or woman to use gifts or earnings to "buy off" his indenture after a minimum period of service.

immoral to deprive men just like himself of their fundamental rights. Thus, he sought out people of a culture and appearance different from his own; he believed that he could classify them at least as “inferior” human beings, or even, with a little more rationalization, as “subhuman.” This categorization enabled him to justify his enslavement of them: in his mind they were like cattle or horses – inferior creatures created for the use of superior beings like himself.

When slavery was legally abolished, the white former slave-owner either had to accept and acknowledge the idea that he had been wrong in his practices or he had to work even harder than before to convince himself that he had, after all, only been exerting the natural domination of a superior creature over an inferior one. The latter train of thought seems to be the basis for contemporary Southern racism. Of course, the more the freed slaves tried to raise their level of accomplishment – the more they threatened to show themselves as equals of whites in every way – the more the white racist had to prevent such achievements in order to prevent a feeling of guilt. Thus, a vicious circle was created which lasts still today: the more the white man oppressed Negroes, the greater guilt he felt, and, therefore, the more he had to oppress blacks in order to prove to himself that blacks were inferior.

Nor was the Northerner free of such racist views, although his actions and policies were not so extreme. Once the zeal of the antislavery movement had been tempered by the Northern victory in the Civil War and by the granting of citizenship and voting rights to Negroes shortly afterward, the Northerner found it easier simply to sit back and let the South work out its own problems. Without the prodding of the Northern conscience, Southern white racism grew more vindictive than ever in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The degree of repression and the number of mob actions against Negroes reached a peak in the South around the turn of the century – a period when a hundred or more lynchings a year were common. And from the 1880s on, the South enacted various laws designed to achieve the complete segregation of blacks from whites. As a result of

their failure to stop these outrages, and also because of their toleration of increasingly worse conditions in their own ghettos, Northerners began to feel guilty. Thus, they too began to subscribe to some of the Southern theories of black racial inferiority in order to justify their own lack of responsibility.

In the first half of this century, problems persisted in the South and grew more acute in the North. Large numbers of blacks migrated to cities in the North only to find that they had exchanged rural poverty for urban poverty. With virtually no financial resources, the migrant blacks found they could afford to live in only the most dilapidated areas of the cities. Moreover, the Northern whites, while unwilling to approve segregationist laws, were not receptive to the influx of large numbers of unskilled workers unused to urban living. The new group had a different way of life and, moreover, was an economic threat to the low income whites because they could be exploited by unscrupulous employers who could hire them at lower wages. White workers, generally poorly educated, were quick to adopt many of the racist attitudes of Southerners, espousing the doctrine of the inferiority of the Negro race in order to discourage employers from hiring black workers who, whites insisted, might work for lower wages but were too lazy and stupid to work as well as they. As these white workers improved themselves economically and moved into the suburbs, they took their racist attitudes with them, creating the white belt around the central urban area, a pattern typical of most Northern cities today.

Black Northern ghettos became centers of frustration and despair; first, because of the intolerable living conditions produced by overcrowding, and by the unwillingness of cities to spend money to improve ghetto schools and facilities, to provide adequate public services, and to enforce building codes and health regulations against unprincipled white landlords; and, second, because even a successful black was prevented by white society and by unscrupulous realtors from moving into better neighborhoods.

In the North, then, despite liberals' condemnations of Southern bigotry and proclamations of equal rights for all races,

economic patterns were such that a Negro in an urban ghetto was virtually predestined to a life of poverty, disease, and social restriction. Unlike the South, however, the North did tolerate some blacks in professional fields and did allow occasional token integration of a few schools and neighborhoods.

In the North, social restraints involved subtle tactics, but Southerners did not hesitate to indulge in the most flagrant violations of law to repress Negroes. Virtually all blacks were prevented from registering to vote; all were in segregated schools, usually greatly inferior ones specifically designed to keep the educational level of Negroes low; and all were prohibited from using the same public facilities as whites. Furthermore, blacks lived in constant fear of the brutality of public officials and the violence of white mobs.

World War II had two important effects on race relations in the United States. First, many Negroes returned to this country after having found an acceptance abroad which was denied to them in this country. When they returned to America's racist restrictions, these blacks were understandably less willing to tolerate such injustice. This unwillingness led to increasingly organized efforts by blacks to achieve their civil rights; they established CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) in the early 1940s and revitalized such existing organizations as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the National Urban League. The movement continued with the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the Montgomery bus boycotts and later in the 1957 establishment of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). Currently, of course, disillusioned with the ability of such nonviolent organizations to achieve necessary changes, black protest has taken on a more militant aspect in such newer organizations as the Black Panthers; in the reassessment of tactics and goals by such older organizations as SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and CORE; and in the formation of various black students' organizations.

The second important effect of the war on race relations was that because of its role in the war, the United States had world

attention strongly focused on it. Suddenly Northern liberals began to become conscious of the ugly image which American racism gave this country abroad. These influences combined in the 1950s to produce a reawakening of the Northern liberal conscience which—added to the effects of the Negro civil rights movement—resulted in the passage of certain beneficial legislation and in several crucial Supreme Court decisions. But the outcome of this period of reform was not enough to prevent such later occurrences as the outbreaks in Watts and Jersey City, the discriminatory law enforcement tactics visible in the Jackson State incident, and the considerable white backlash of the present time.

THE SOUTH IN 1959

John Howard Griffin's journey as a Negro through parts of the Deep South took place in late 1959, a time when many whites—in the North, at least—were congratulating themselves on their increasingly liberal attitudes on race and were looking with satisfaction at the record of legislative progress toward full equality for blacks. On paper, a brief survey of civil rights legislation in the 1950s looks quite good: it includes the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation order, its 1956 ruling on desegregating buses in Montgomery and other Southern cities, and the establishment in 1957 of the Civil Rights Commission, empowered to investigate charges of discrimination throughout the country. And legally, of course, blacks had had the right of citizenship and the right to vote since the passage of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments in 1866 and 1870.

But any native Southerner, black or white, knew that there was a vast difference between the actual and the paper status of Negroes in the late 1950s. Most Supreme Court decisions were either ignored or evaded. The 1961 Freedom Rides* to Alabama

*Freedom Rides began as a test of the Interstate Commerce Commission order against segregation in interstate buses and terminals. CORE and also the Nashville Student Movement organized and carried out the rides, during which Negroes occupied seats traditionally denied to them in the front of the bus. The Freedom Riders were several times the victims of white mob violence, and over fifty of the Riders were jailed for their participation in the protests.

and Mississippi, for example, dramatized the persistence of bus segregation in flagrant defiance of the 1956 decision. Blacks were kept out of white schools by any means available, a frequent tactic being the maneuvering of boundaries to keep school districts racially distinct. Constitutional guarantees were also side-stepped, and especially in Alabama and Mississippi, outlandish literacy tests and various forms of intimidation were used to keep blacks from registering to vote.

Griffin's conversations with Southern blacks and his observation of their life from within clearly reveal the ruthless and extra-legal campaign to keep "niggers in their place." He personally experiences the indignities of segregated buses, rest rooms, eating places, and hotels. His job inquiries are fruitless despite his outstanding education; as one plant foreman tells him, "We don't want you people. Don't you understand that?" And he sees evidence everywhere around him of the crippling effects of subhuman living conditions and inferior schools on the spirits of black men.

In the final analysis, however, it is not the specific violations of law, or denials of basic rights which are most appalling to Griffin. Rather, it is the racist's refusal to acknowledge blacks as human beings. It is such a refusal that allows otherwise upstanding citizens (like some of the drivers who pick up the hitchhiking Griffin) to believe that they are doing Negro women a favor by having sexual relations with them, but that it is forbidden for a black man even to look at a white woman. It is such an attitude, too, that allows whites to see blacks as commodities so that any one of "them" is always expendable—especially when a lynching or a beating may "teach them to keep in their places."

Racism, in fact, seems to Griffin so deeply engrained not only in the Southern but also in the Northern white outlook that it permeates the attitudes of even those who think themselves enlightened. In its subtler forms, racism reveals itself in unconscious condescension rather than in overt malice. It is entrenched in the attitude of the educated young man who gives

Griffin a ride in Alabama: despite his supposed admiration of Negroes' "healthier" sexual views, he unwittingly reveals to the journalist that he considers blacks basically animalistic; and he is utterly astonished that his passenger, whom he takes to be black, can speak intelligently. Unconscious racism also shows itself when the Southern white on the bus to Georgia states that he would have prevented a white bully from striking a black man, but involuntarily refers to the black man by the condescending term "boy." Still another variation appears in the behavior of the Ph.D. from New York who patronizingly offers to buy all of an elderly Negro vendor's turkeys. He so resents the old man's refusal to take part in this "charitable" act that he concludes, "There's something 'funny' about all of you."

There is little doubt, then, that in the South of 1959 racist views and policies continued, in effect, to enslave the black man.

GRIFFIN'S PURPOSE

Why did Griffin undertake this project? Why did he feel that it was necessary to disguise himself as a Negro rather than simply listening to what black men themselves had to say about the conditions of their life in the South? The answer lies in the very thickness of the barrier which racism has erected between blacks and whites.

Griffin is, after all, writing to tell whites about what they are doing to blacks. He believes that most whites cannot realize the sheer inhumanity of their attitudes and policies – and that if they were made to realize this, they might change. (Griffin later becomes disillusioned with the idea that such an approach could produce change quickly enough; see the Bradford Daniel interview in the bibliography.) The people Griffin hopes to reach with *Black Like Me* would not believe the testimony of a Negro – after all, American black writers have been depicting the effects of repression on their people since slave days, and most whites have never even bothered to read their works. Moreover, the racism of whites in the South of 1959 was such that if *Black*

Like Me were the work of a real Negro—and if it were widely read—its revelations and accusations would, at best, be ignored or dismissed as exaggerations or lies; at worst, they could provoke some sort of repressive, punitive, or directly violent action toward the author—probably much more vindictive than the threats leveled against Griffin.

Moreover, because of these very hostilities, Griffin as a white reporter would have little hope of gaining true information from the blacks he interviewed. Negroes in the South long ago learned the wisdom of telling the white man only what he wanted to hear—and even the best intentioned Southern whites wanted to hear that blacks were basically happy, that things weren't so bad. For if a decent white was confronted with the truth and accepted it, he would have to make the agonizing choice between the hypocrisy of keeping silent and the dangers to himself and his family of speaking out in a society dominated by racist hatred. So blacks, recognizing the degree to which white men might go to preserve this comfortable ignorance, chose to conceal the facts of their misery rather than risk further repression.

Furthermore, Negroes would be understandably suspicious of the motives of a white reporter asking them such questions as Griffin might ask. It was not uncommon for a sadistic white to gain the confidence of a Negro, lead him into making certain statements about those who were oppressing or threatening him, and then beat him up or take away his job for being "uppity" enough to tell "lies about our upstanding citizens." It is the well-founded fears of tactics like these which make Negroes reluctant to pose for Don Rutledge, the white photographer, in the latter part of the narrative. Obviously Griffin, had he posed as a white reporter, would never have gained a true notion of what life is like for Southern blacks.

For these reasons, then, Griffin undertakes this experiment and writes *Black Like Me*, despite the personal risks. It is a book about black people, written by a white man for a white audience, and should in no sense be classified as "black literature." But it

is an important text for whites who wish to begin learning about their own racism, about the repressive practices of the society their race dominates economically and politically, and about the fundamental reasons for black protest. In fact, for a white reader, *Black Like Me* is not a bad preliminary to the study of black literature itself.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

NAMED CHARACTERS

John Howard Griffin

Author and main character, a white Texas novelist, journalist, and rancher who temporarily darkens his skin in order to find out what life is like for a Negro in the South.

George Levitan

Owner of *Sepia*, a popular Negro magazine; he agrees to finance Griffin's project in return for articles for his publication.

Mrs. Adelle Jackson

Editorial director of *Sepia* who warns Griffin of the probable hostility of Southern whites to his project.

Sterling Williams

Elderly black shoeshine "boy" who becomes Griffin's contact for entry into the black community in New Orleans.

Joe

Williams' partner in the shoeshine business.

Reverend A. L. Davis, Mr. Gayle, and J. P. Guillory

Educated and influential members of the New Orleans black community. They meet daily at the Y Coffee Shop to eat and