

Black Like Me Study Guide

Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin

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Plot Summary

Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin was published in 1960 at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. John Howard Griffin, a white man from Mansfield, Texas, decides to take a tour through the Southern United States as a black man. Griffin writes all of his experiences and thoughts down in his journal. He does not fail to detail every single experience that he has or any person that he meets. In order to keep many people safe, Griffin does not use names or let many people in on his plan. By becoming a black man, Griffin sees first hand what it is like to be a black person dealing with racism in the South.

The book begins with Griffin looking at statistics on the suicide rates of blacks in the South. The rates seemed to be rising. Griffin thinks that this is not suicide, but blacks giving up on their ability to live as their situation seems so bleak. He decides that the only way to know is to become a black man. Griffin goes to his friends at Sepia, a black magazine, and asks for their mental and financial support for the project. They agree to fund his trip as long as they may also publish portions of the book in their magazine. After consulting them, Griffin tells his wife of the plan. While she is not thrilled, she feels Griffin must take on the project if he feels he must. Griffin begins his trip in New Orleans.

After arriving in New Orleans, Griffin goes to a doctor to see about darkening his skin. He and the doctor develop the best method. After taking oral medication and sitting under UV lights, Griffin's skin turns a dark brown color. While the doctor was thrilled to help him at first, he later has second thoughts about the experiment. Griffin dismisses the doctor's protestations. He goes out into the city and is shocked by his new appearance. He is also startled by all the things that he is limited to do. He can no longer eat, use the bathroom, or shop where he wants. By becoming black, Griffin realizes he is now a second class citizen.

In New Orleans, Griffin meets Sterling Williams. He first meets Sterling as a white man and then meets him as a black man. He lets Sterling in on the secret. Griffin is shocked by the difference in Sterling's conversation with him. Sterling talks to Griffin with more openness and brotherhood when he is a black man. Griffin also meets black leaders and talks with them about how to make blacks' lives better. Griffin enjoys the intellectual discussions but is almost found out when one of the men insists he has read some of Griffin's work. Griffin also continues to visit Sterling while he looks for a job. While with Sterling, Griffin finds out about the lynching of a black man, Mack Parker, in Mississippi. The mob who lynched Parker was not found guilty, even though there was enough evidence against them. Griffin decides that he must go to Mississippi to see what it is like.

Griffin next travels through Biloxi and Hattiesburg in Mississippi. Here Griffin encounters more racism than he did in New Orleans. To his face, whites in New Orleans were very courteous. They hid their contempt. In Mississippi, however, the hate and racism is



blatant. Griffin experiences hate stares from many white women as well as many white men threatening him if he steps out of line.

After Mississippi, Griffin goes to Mobile and Montgomery. In these two places, Griffin becomes so depressed and lonely that he begins to hate being trapped in the skin of a black man. He cannot bare not recognizing himself and constantly being judged by the color of his skin. Griffin realizes that no matter his education or personality, he has no opportunities. From then on, Griffin decides to "zigzag" between being black and white. He then goes to Georgia where he is excited and happy about the atmosphere there. Due to the leadership of Martin Luther King, the blacks have a sense of determination there. This gives Griffin some confidence about the future.

The novel ends with Griffin publishing his journal and notes as a book. Many people are thrilled about the book and as a result Griffin is asked to be interviewed by award winning newspapers and popular television programs. Although many accepted the book, Griffin and his family are threatened by racist southern whites. Griffin's parents are ignored in town and receive hate phone calls, while Griffin's effigy is hung in his hometown. Griffin decides to move his family out of Mansfield, because he does not want to risk their safety. Yet Griffin knew that this might happen. He is still happy that the book has helped to open so many people's eyes and minds to the situation of blacks in the South.



October 28 -November 7, 1959 (pages 1-17)

October 28 -November 7, 1959 (pages 1-17) Summary and Analysis

Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin was published in 1960 at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. John Howard Griffin, a white man from Mansfield, Texas, decides to take a tour through the Southern United States as a black man. Griffin writes all of his experiences and thoughts down in his journal. He does not fail to detail every single experience that he has or any person that he meets. In order to keep many people safe, Griffin does not use names or let many people in on his plan. By becoming a black man, Griffin sees first hand what it is like to be a black person dealing with racism in the South.

Griffin begins his journal entries by explaining that he has always wondered what would happen if a white man became a black man. He questions the adjustments a person would have to make. He wants to know what it is like to experience discrimination that is based on skin color. Griffin writes that his questions were sparked by a report that he read. It said that the suicide rate among southern blacks had increased. Griffin wonders if this is because blacks are actually killing themselves, or if it is because they are giving up on life.

Although Southern whites say that there is a healthy relationship between the races, Griffin doubts this. Griffin thinks that the only way to understand what it is like to be black is to become black. He writes that there is little to no communication between the races. Griffin asserts that if a black man says what he really thinks to a white man, the white man will make his life miserable. The only way to bridge the gap is for Griffin to become a black man. He decides to travel around the South as a black man.

Griffin then goes to see a few of his friends to ask their opinion on his idea. The first is George Levitan, the owner of a black magazine, Sepia. Levitan thinks Griffin's idea is ludicrous, but is still enthusiastic about the project. He agrees to pay for the project if Griffin allows him to print his journey in Sepia. Griffin then lets Adelle Jackson, co-editor of Sepia, in on the idea. At first, Jackson thinks the idea is impossible. She then fears for Griffin's safety. Hate groups might try to hurt him physically or even professionally by discrediting his work. She also fears that many other whites will refuse to associate with Griffin.

Griffin then goes home to tell his wife of the plan. She was shocked at first, but concludes that her husband must undertake the project if he feels he should. She also says she will take care of the household and children while he is gone.



The next day, Griffin meets with Mr. Levitan, Mrs. Jackson, and three FBI agents. He thinks it will be a good idea to let a few authorities know about the project. Griffin decides not to change his name or identity. He will only change his skin pigmentation. If anyone asks who he is, he will answer truthfully. Griffin wonders if people will treat him as John Howard Griffin or as a black man. One of the FBI agents tells him that as soon as someone sees him, they will see a black man and that is all they are going to see.

Griffin travels to New Orleans first. On his first day there, he walks around the city as a white man. He sits at fancy restaurants and goes wherever he pleases, whenever he wants. At the end of the day, Griffin goes to stay at a close friend's house. The next day, Griffin goes to a doctor to find out how to darken his skin. He is instructed to take medication orally and then sit under ultra violet lights. Griffin tells his host that he is working on a special assignment and cannot be disturbed. He did not want to get his friend in trouble with his neighbors for housing a black man. He also feels like he needs a way to pass over into the black world.

Griffin spends the next few days at the doctor's office or in his room under the ultraviolet light. The doctor he is working with becomes increasingly negative about the project. He explains the physical side affects, but is also nervous for Griffin. While he claims that he is a proponent for equality, he thinks that blacks will not know how to use it. With more opportunities, they will hurt themselves and society.

When not under ultraviolet lamps, Griffin walks around New Orleans. He meets an elderly shoe shiner named Sterling Williams. Griffin tells him he is in New Orleans to study race relations and civil rights. After a few more doctor's visits, Griffin completes his transformation. Griffin is appalled and shocked by the completeness of the transformation. He no longer feels like himself. He feels lonely as the man he was is hidden by the skin of another. He feels trapped. If he went home to his children, they would not know him. He leaves his host's house late that night.

Griffin notices changes right away. As he gets on the streetcar, a white man gets on also. The man completely ignores Griffin. He then takes a bus to a black part of New Orleans. There, he finds that he is instantly friendly with other blacks. One black man helps him find a hotel, while he freely talks with two others about politics and current events. He is relieved that he can find kindness in someone's eyes.

While Griffin uses a first person point of view, in this section it is important to note that even though he keeps the same point of view, he is telling his story as a white man and then a black man. As the book starts, Griffin is an observer. He is commenting on what he has heard, not what he has experienced. When he becomes a black man, he can finally write about personal experiences. He is no longer a stranger looking in, he is accepted and apart of the community. This is seen in the way Sterling treats Griffin. When they first meet, Sterling treats Griffin as any white customer. He is pleasant, but does not share anything personal. This changes when Griffin becomes a black man.



November 8, 1959 (pages 17-38)

November 8, 1959 (pages 17-38) Summary and Analysis

Griffin wakes and leaves the hotel. He walks along the streets of New Orleans, still confused by his feelings of loneliness. He realizes that the black area is like a ghetto-filled with people struggling to survive. Blacks must use sexuality to be noticed by one another and claim their manhood that has been taken away.

Griffin then finds a black restaurant to have breakfast. He begins talking to the owner. Griffin questions him about where he may use the bathroom and find a Catholic Church. He is shocked to find how far he must venture to find a bathroom he may use. He then boards a bus to go to Canal Street. He takes a seat near the rear of the bus. As whites file onto the bus, they do not sit down next to blacks. Griffin catches the eye of a white woman and feels her sympathy for him. When he returns her glance, she yells at him for looking at her "like that." The other whites are angry with Griffin's forwardness, while the blacks are embarrassed that Griffin has drawn attention to himself.

Griffin gets off the bus. He goes to find the shoeshine, Sterling, he had once spoken to as a white man. Sterling now talks to Griffin in a very open manner. Griffin reveals who he is, and Sterling is shocked. He temporarily reverts back into a black/white relationship, but soon forgets and treats Griffin as a black man. He tells Griffin to listen to his speech, and he will pick it up soon. As a result of his nice clothes, Griffin attracts a black widow. He is nervous that her inquires will harm his secret.

Sterling's friend Joe, returns to the shoeshine stand with lunch. The three men cook the food on the sidewalk. Across the street, a black homeless wino stares at them. For a while, Joe and Sterling taunt him with the food. Finally, they let him have the scraps. For a second, they are more privileged than someone else.

Griffin then goes to find a nicer hotel. He tries the YMCA, but it is full. He instead rents a room from a middle-aged black woman, Mrs. Davis. He then goes to the YMCA cafe to talk with some leaders of the New Orleans black community. He meets with Reverend A. L. Davis and Mr Gayle. They start to discuss "the problem" of blacks and learn that Griffin is studying race relations in the South. They do not know he is really a white man.

Griffin tells them that he thinks that blacks' biggest problem is their lack of unity. The other two men agree. They feel that until the race bonds together, it will never be strong. Thus, whites use this against blacks. The two men assert that this aids in the oppression of blacks.



Another man enters the cafe. His name is J.P. Guillory. Guillory swears that he has heard Griffin's name before. Guillory also finds that he has read Griffin's books. He is very confused, because he knows John Howard Griffin is a white man.

Griffin then returns to the hotel to take a nap. When he wakes up, he decides to find another cafe to eat dinner. As he walks alone, he is accosted by a white man. The man follows and teases Griffin. While Griffin is frightened of what the man will do to him, he is also scared about what police will do if they see a fight. When they question him about his identity, he will have to hand over his license which states his real color. The man only ceases to follow Griffin when a police car finally passes.

Here one of the major themes of the book is introduced. Griffin talks with Rev. A. L. Davis and Mr. Gayle, and they all agree that black people's biggest problem is a lack of unity. This introduces the theme of hate within a group. Many blacks put down one another to make their own lives better. For example, while Sterling and Joe may not exactly hate the wino, by putting him down, they make themselves feel better. If they cannot heighten their place in society, they can certainly raise it among other blacks. This constant berating of one another does not aid in pushing forward for equality. The men think it is one tactic whites use to keep blacks in place.



November 10-12 1959 (pages 38-44)

November 10-12 1959 (pages 38-44) Summary and Analysis

Over the next few days, Griffin goes around New Orleans trying to find a job. He notices that even though he is highly qualified, he cannot get a job as a clerk, typist or book keeper. He begins to spend a lot of time with Sterling. He also becomes comforted by the fact that so many blacks are willing to help him for no compensation.

Griffin goes back to the YMCA cafe to again talk to Mr Gayle. They talk about how it is essential for young educated black people to have the same job opportunities as whites. Only when there is equality in the job market, will blacks be able to advance. So many young blacks go to school but cannot find jobs because of racism. They talk of how whites believe that once blacks take the first step to equality such as education, jobs and nice homes, they will threaten the survival of the white race.

Griffin writes that he thinks that blacks face two problems- immediate discrimination from whites and self-discrimination. As he walks in the French Quarter, he looks at restaurants he could once enter. He then feels like he has embarrassed other blacks for not staying in his place. While he rests on a bench in Jackson Square, a white man tells him blacks are not allowed to sit there. Griffin later found out that this was false. Anyone can sit in Jackson Square. The man did not want him there. Griffin now knows what it feels like to be constantly fatigued and not be able to relieve his exhaustion.

Griffin goes to visit Dillard University's campus. On his way back to his hotel, he catches the bus. The white bus driver is very cruel to him. He will not let him off the bus at his stop or any other close stops to his hotel. Griffin is tired, hungry and angry.



November 14, 1959 (pages 45-77)

November 14, 1959 (pages 45-77) Summary and Analysis

A week has passed since Griffin became a black man. He writes that he is finally getting used to rejection, but he cannot get used to the superficial courtesies from whites. He cannot bare feeling like a tenth-class citizen. He continues to further understand the hurt and despair of Southern blacks. Griffin points out that blacks are always seen as a mass, while whites are seen as individuals. Whites don't hate the individual black person, but instead they hate what they think masses of black people are.

Griffin goes to visit Sterling at the shoeshine stand. Sterling is really upset as he has just heard the results of a very important court case. In Mississippi, a black man who was in jail, was abducted by a mob and lynched. Members of the mob were not indicted by the Mississippi courts even though the FBI presented information against members of the mob.

Griffin decides that he must go to Mississippi to see what it was like. The people in Mississippi insist that they have a good relationship with blacks, but Griffin wants to see for himself. Griffin heads to the bus station. He is treated rudely and cruelly by the bus station attendant, who throws his bus ticket and change in his face. As he boards the bus, he feels the cold, hard stares of hatred on him from whites on the bus. Griffin sits toward the back of the bus with other blacks. They begin commenting on how Mississippi is "the most lied about state in the union." Griffin notices that there is an automatic comradeship between all the blacks. Easy conversation starts all over the bus.

As the bus stops, Christophe, a well-dressed black man gets on the bus. He begins yelling at other black people on the bus. He calls them ignorant and professes his intelligence to everyone. He picks a fight with two poorly-dressed black men. Christophe makes Griffin nervous. He tried to ignore him, but he then sits in the seat next to Griffin. Christophe begins to tell Griffin that he was an alter boy, his mother was Portuguese, and that he thinks Griffin is a priest. He also tells Griffin that he hates "us," as in other black people.

Christophe finally gets off the bus, and Griffin is relieved. Another black man, Bill Williams, sits next to Griffin. He gives Griffin advice about surviving in Mississippi. He tells Griffin not to even look in the direction of a white woman as other whites will take it as a sexual advance. They also tell him to walk in the middle of the street as other people may try to rob him, because he dresses well.

At the next stop, the bus driver informs the passengers that they have a ten minute break. He allows all the whites to get off the bus, but when the blacks try, he will not let them leave. He refuses to let them exit the bus. Bill Williams makes it off, but the rest of



the blacks stay on, angry. They consider relieving themselves on the bus to teach the bus driver a lesson, but know that will only satisfy the whites prejudices against them.

As the bus drives deeper into Mississippi, the black people on the bus become closer and closer, comforting each other with conversation. They finally arrive in Hattiesburg. Bill tells Griffin where to find a great hotel. He also gets Griffin a cab. Griffin is very thankful for his kindness.

The cab driver begins to talk about Mack Parker, the man who was lynched by the mob. He tells Griffin that Mack was one of the best men in Hattiesburg. He never drank or gambled. Griffin is upset by the gloom surrounding the city. All the blacks were angry, terrified and scared about what had happened to Mack. When Griffin finally gets to the hotel, he goes into his room and breaks down. The loneliness and helplessness is almost too much for him to bare.

The next day, Griffin goes to meet with an old friend, P.D. East. East is an editor of a local Mississippi newspaper. He finds East's wife at his house and explains his situation. East's wife agrees to tell East and that they will bring Griffin to the house to stay late that night. Griffin does not want to make East's white neighbors angry. Griffin meets East at a drugstore late that night. East is shocked at the physical change in Griffin. For a while they do not talk while riding in the car. Once they get into East's house, the awkwardness finally lessens. East, his wife, and Griffin talk about Griffin's experiences. East also gives Griffin his book to read called *The Magnolia Jungle*. Griffin reads the book all night, because he can't put it down.

East used to write according to the Southern perspective of race relations. As he started to drift away from the perspective, which he believes is wrong, he became more vocal about the true relationship between blacks and whites. As his views became more liberal, his neighbors and friends began to ignore him. He was also harassed by different white hate groups.

Two very important themes are introduced in this section. The first is self-loathing, and the second is the Southern perspective on race relations. The first theme is explored through Christophe. While he is black, he refuses to admit it. He hates other black people and has no wish to be black. He tells Griffin of his accomplishments and education, but refuses to be considered black. To further communicate his contempt for his race and himself, he tells Griffin that he hates himself and other blacks for being black.

This second theme, the Southern perspective on race relations, deals with whites believing that by helping blacks, they are hurting the superiority of the white race. This is seen through P.D. East's forced exclusion from his neighbors. They no longer wish to associate with him as they feel he has become a traitor.



November 15- 24, 1959 (pages 77-101)

November 15- 24, 1959 (pages 77-101) Summary and Analysis

Griffin and East leave Mississippi on Monday to go to New Orleans. East has a commitment to meet with a professor from Dillard University. They met with Dean Sam Gandy and let him and his wife in on Griffin's project. After the visit, East drops Griffin off in downtown New Orleans. Although Griffin hated the somewhat fake courtesies of whites before, to him it was better than experiencing visible hate.

Griffin stops by a Catholic Church and picks up a pamphlet by Father Robert Guste, a white priest. He wants to know the Church's stance on the equality of the races. Griffin then realizes that for a large black man to be standing in a church and reading a flyer on racial injustice would look bad to any white that enters the church. He takes the pamphlet and heads for the bus station.

At the bus station, Griffin sees a flyer in the black bathroom. It advertises that a white man will pay a black man to get a black girl for him to sleep with. Griffin is appalled at the sign. He sees an old small piece of French bread laying in the trashcan. He shudders to think that a black man saw the flyer and threw away his only food to get \$5 to buy a decent dinner.

Griffin arrives in Biloxi. He begins to walk but soon grows tired. He decides to hitchhike and is picked up by a young man from Massachusetts. The man has only lived in Mississippi for a few years, but he says he does like the people. The only thing he hates about them is their view on race. He says that whenever he tries to bring it up, they won't talk about it.

After the man from Massachusetts drops him off, Griffin starts walking again. No one picks him up, and there is nowhere to stop. He becomes exhausted. Finally, he sees a custard stand and buys an ice cream cone. He needs to use the restroom but knows he will not be inside. He sees a dilapidated outhouse behind the shop. He goes to the ice cream stand window and asks the attendant where the nearest bathroom is. The attendant kindly says it is probably about 15 blocks away. Griffin asks if there is any way he may use the outhouse out of fear he will not make it to the other bathroom. The attendant refuses but is sympathetic toward Griffin.

By the time it is dark, Griffin begins to get more rides. It quickly becomes apparent to him that the only reason why white men pick him up is to ask him personal questions. They are all inquisitive about the stereotypical overly sexual nature of a black man and want to know Griffin's experiences. They would ask about certain exotic or even morbid sexual experiences. Griffin would not always deny as he did not want to enrage them. He instead pleaded a headache or exhaustion. He would also tell the drivers that blacks have the same moral code as whites. Blacks are not lesser because they have



illegitimate children, because whites have them, too. He explains that blacks cannot always further their education due to doors always being closed to them.

Griffin is then picked up by a young white man who drives him to Mobile. The man is very kind and treats Griffin like an equal. He is almost convinced that the man is colorblind as he is so kind. Griffin concludes that the man's love for his child has spilled over and allowed him to look past color and except everyone.

After being dropped off in Mobile, Griffin meets an old black preacher. The man offers to house Griffin for the night. The two talk about race relations. The preacher says that although whites are cruel to blacks, he still loves them, because they are God's children. He says that blacks must understand that it is hard for whites to change their ways.

For most of the rest of the day, Griffin wanders around trying to find places that will serve blacks food, water or cigarettes. At one store, a white man tells him blatantly that "We don't want you people. Don't you understand that?" He says that he has nothing against Griffin personally, the man just doesn't want black people around. This attitude was very prevalent in Mobile.

Griffin remembers what it was like to be a young white man enjoying the beautiful city of Mobile. He remembers the opportunities and his excitement of being in a new town. The Southern whites were kind and wise toward the young Griffin. Now, as an old black man, he feels tired, angry and desperate. There is no trace of kindness in many of the whites' faces. There is only contempt. There are no opportunities, only a large group of people who want to drive out his race.

In this section, Griffin learns a great deal about the communication between blacks and whites. While riding with whites in cars, Griffin notices that they let their guards down. They ask questions that they would never ask in respectable white society, because they feel that as a black, Griffin is lower. Griffin tries to dispel a lot of the stereotypes and rumors that say that black men are overtly sexual and have no morals. A lot of the confusion comes from whites and blacks never talking. The whites he talks to do not seem to realize that they also, at times, have lower morals.

This section also deals with the theme of the Southern perspective on race relations. Many people warn Griffin not to make trouble or they will deal with him. Many whites feel that to preserve themselves, they must keep blacks lower. This is done by not interacting or giving blacks any chances to elevate themselves. Much of the hate is out of fear.



November 24- December 4, 1959 (pages 102-139)

November 24- December 4, 1959 (pages 102-139) Summary and Analysis

Griffin decides to hitchhike out of Mobile. He catches a ride with a white man who begins to ask about his family. Griffin finally thinks that he has found a nice white man, but he is wrong. The man asks if Griffin's wife has "ever had it from a white man?" Griffin is appalled as the man continues to explain that many white men in the area long to be with black women. If a black woman won't have sex with her white boss, then she will lose her job. The white man says that if a black woman knows what's good for her and her family, she will sleep with a white man who demands her to.

He further implies that, "We figure we're doing you people a favor to get some white blood in your kids." The man takes Griffin's silence as disapproval. He begins to tell Griffin that if he is here to stir things up, that he and his friends know what to do with blacks who misbehave. They either send them to jail or kill them.

Griffin writes in his journal that he is shocked by the man's hypocrisy. Many Southern whites claim that the only way to keep their race pure, is to stop "inbreeding." They usually blame black men for going after their women.

The man drops Griffin off, but does not let him leave without saying, "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 are completely off the record as far as we are concerned." Griffin begins to walk again. As it gets later and later, he gets worried about having somewhere to sleep that night. He hears a car off in the distance. Griffin goes into the street and waves his arms vigorously. A young black man pulls over. He tells Griffin that if he is willing to sleep on the ground, he can come and stay with him.

When they get to the man's home, Griffin sees an unpainted, wooden shanty. The man is greeted happily by a bunch of children ranging from ages nine to four months. His wife is also at the door. The small house consists of two rooms. They all sit down to have dinner at a make-shift table. The children are excited as they think they are having a party. They eat yellow beans and the candy that Griffin has brought. The children ask questions about Griffin's children. They want to know if they go to school and have parties like the one the family had tonight. When it is time for bed, the children run to kiss Griffin.

Griffin begins to think about his own children. By luck of birth, his children were born white and therefore into privilege. The loving children he met tonight will never have an extravagant birthday party or go to the best schools, because they just happened to be born black. He realizes that while he has tried to be objective in order to see the truth,



he cannot justify the whites' actions. When everything else is taken away, the criterion is color, not who a person is. Griffin is so upset that he begins screaming in his sleep. He is awoken by the man and apologizes for waking anyone else. The next day, Griffin leaves and thanks the family for allowing him to stay. He tries to give them a little bit of money, but they refuse it. He gives the wife money as a gift to the children.

Griffin goes to the bus station and into the black bathroom. It is only here that he feels safe. He longs to have fun and be allowed to enjoy himself. Griffin goes to the phone booth to call his wife, but feels so awkward talking to her. When his call is done, he walks out into the night air. Griffin feels as though the night is a black man's paradise. It is the only time he is safe as he can blend into the darkness.

Griffin goes to Montgomery where he notices a difference in the attitude of blacks. There is more of a feeling of determination due to the inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The city is uneasy and the hate stare is practiced all over, especially by older white women, Griffin notices. Many blacks are afraid they will act violently and undue the progress they have made with the non-violent movement.

Instead of going out around town, Griffin decides to try passing back into white society. His skin has become a lighter color. He decides to only go out at night, so that his skin will not be exposed to the sun. He rubs his skin raw to get rid of some of the color. Switching back to being white was surreal to Griffin. He couldn't leave the black hotel as a white man during the day, so he waits until night to leave. He starts walking behind a young black man, who becomes guarded when seeing Griffin. He even pulls out a weapon out of fear that Griffin will harass him.

Griffin is amazed and disgusted at how everything is suddenly opening up for him. He eats at a great restaurant and goes to a nice hotel to stay the night. Montgomery, once an ugly city, was now beautiful to Griffin. The next day, Griffin wanders into a black neighborhood. The blacks looked at him like the enemy. Griffin wanted to say that he used to be one of them, but because of his color, he could not.

Griffin starts to go back and forth between being black and white. He carries his skin dye with him and changes in either a bathroom or hotel room late at night. Griffin decides to leave Mobile and head off to Auburn, Alabama. On the bus ride there, an altercation occurs. A white lady goes to get on the bus, and there are no empty seats left. She refuses to sit as she does not want to sit next to a black person. Even though two white men scream at the blacks to make them move so that she may sit, no one moves. Eventually the two men stop harassing the blacks and leave the bus. One white man turns around and says to Griffin that he doesn't agree with what the two white men had done. He says he would have fought them if they would have started a fight. Griffin thinks this is typical of many Southern whites. They don't think blacks should be harassed but do nothing to stop it out of fear of being harassed themselves.

This section of the novel is very personal. Griffin comes to terms with how uncomfortable he is in his new skin. More importantly, he realizes how hard it is to be black in the United States. His tone becomes extremely personal and honest as he talks

about what it feels like to actually be black. He is saddened and depressed by the future lives of the black children he meets and realizes that it is just luck that he and his children were born white. He is so uncomfortable that he feels he needs to go back to being white to make it through the rest of the project.



Decemeber 2, 1959- August 17, 1960 (pages 103-164)

Decemeber 2, 1959- August 17, 1960 (pages 103-164) Summary and Analysis

Griffin shifts back to white status. He decides to go to the Trappist monastery to get away from the "constant racial grind." At the monastery, Griffin relaxes. He talks to the monks about their views of racism. They spoke about how many racists are religious people. They often invoke religion to justify racism. The monk says that many people do this on many issues. They twist words to justify their actions. Griffin then leaves for Atlanta to meet with photographer Don Rutledge to do a story on Atlanta's civic leaders.

Griffin finds hope in Atlanta, where several black leaders have taken strides to make sure that blacks have the opportunity to pursue education, jobs, and financial security. They founded schools as well as banks. It was then time for Griffin to return to New Orleans. Rutledge decides to go with him to take pictures of him as a black man. The two devise different ways to capture pictures by pretending that Rutledge is taking pictures of different scenes while Griffin accidentally walks into pictures. It would have been too odd for a white man to follow a black man around taking pictures in New Orleans.

Griffin finally gets to return home. He is ecstatic to see his wife and children. It is now January, and he has two months before the world will know what he has done. Paul Coates calls Griffin and asks him for an interview. This is followed by interviews with the Times, and on the Dave Garroway show, the Mike Wallace show, the Golden show and another Paul Coates show. Griffin's family starts getting either ignored or harassed by other whites. His mother received frightening calls, and Griffin refuses to go into downtown Mansfield for fear that he would be physically harassed.

It was on April 2, 1959 that a mob hung an effigy of Griffin in downtown Mansfield. A reporter called to give Griffin the news. Griffin and his family decide to go away to get away from all the craziness. Luckily, of the 6000 letters Griffin has received since the book, only nine of the letters were abusive. This further proves to Griffin that not all Southern whites are racists, they just do not want their neighbors to know their true feelings about blacks. Although Griffin's family returns to Mansfield for a time, he decides it is too dangerous for them to live there. Griffin sends his family away, while he stays to take care of last minute business.

Griffin hires a young black boy to help him move things out of his office. As he and the boy pack things away, the boy begins to talk to him. The boy asks Griffin why whites hate blacks so much. He tells Griffin that it sickens him to hear a white person call him "nigger." He also asks Griffin if he teaches his children things like that. Griffin denies it. He thinks that the boy exaggerates the extent of how much whites hate him and other

blacks. Then Griffin remembers what it was like to be black and the lack of communication that occurs between whites and blacks. How could the young boy not think that all whites hate him? With limited interaction and no communication, he only knows what he has seen. While blacks are trying to realize their potential, they are hating whites, which is not the answer. Griffin realizes that the gap between the two races is growing. He believes a militant black movement is not the answer. Only when the two races can reconcile, can things get better.



Characters

John Howard Griffin

John Howard Griffin is from Mansfield, Texas. In the fall of 1959, he decides to become a black man so that he can tour through the southern part of the United States and see what it is like to be a black man. Griffin has always been a proponent of equality of the races, but the writer wanted to get the real story. Griffin's detailed journal exposes the reader to every experience he has as a black man. On his travels through Louisiana, Mississippi and Georgia, Griffin finds out many things. He now understands that communication between blacks and whites does not exist. He also learns that blacks are being deprived of basic rights as human beings. They do not have the freedom to go where ever they want. While Griffin tries, he has a horrible time being a black man. The change he makes is so sudden and absolute that he is not sure what he has gotten himself into. After his travels through the South, Griffin gains the attention of the media, blacks, whites and hate groups. His experiences and book helped others empathize and consider the situation of blacks in the South.

P.D. East

P.D. East is an old friend of Griffin's. He is the editor of a newspaper in Mississippi. He used to keep a neutral perspective in his writings on race relations, but believes in the equality of the races. He felt he could no longer write in the Southern viewpoint on the relationships between the races. As his writings shifted to be more liberal, he attracted attention from white hate groups and was ignored by his neighbors. East agrees to house Griffin during his stay in Hattiesburg. East also drives Griffin back to New Orleans, and the two visit Dillard University together where East is supposed to give a speech.

Griffin greatly admires East and his ability to fight for equality among blacks and whites. He is marveled by the risk and public scrutiny that East and his family have been exposed to. Although Griffin greatly appreciates East's works, he can also see what his life will be like after the book is published. East's life is my no means easy as he has basically been alienated or treated offensively by other white people.

Adele Jackson

Adele Jackson is the former secretary of George Levitan who worked her way up to become the editor of Sepia magazine. She also tells Griffin that he should be careful of the danger that he might encounter as a black man.



George Levitan

George Levitan is the owner of a black magazine, Sepia. Griffin goes to Levitan with his idea first. He warns Griffin of the danger of undertaking such a project. After assurance and persuasion from Griffin, he promises to foot the bill for Griffin's trip through the Southern states.

Reverend A. L. Davis

Reverend A. L. Davis is a man that Griffin meets in the YMCA cafe in New Orleans. Griffin talks to him and Mr. Gayle about the biggest problems that black people face. They decide that the only way for blacks' situation to change is for blacks to be more united.

Mr. Gayle

Mr Gayle is also a man that Griffin meets in a the YMCA cafe in New Orleans. Griffin talks to him and Rev. A. L. Davis about the biggest problems that black people face. They decide that the only way for blacks' situation to change is for blacks to be more united.

Christophe

Christophe is a young black man that Griffin meets on the bus through Mississippi. Christophe makes Griffin uncomfortable when he causes a fight on the bus and is overly emotional. On the bus, Christophe is constantly yelling at two other black men or crying on Griffin's shoulder. He impresses Griffin by speaking many different languages. He says that he was once an alter boy and is sure that Griffin is a priest. For this reason, Christophe feels he can confide in Griffin. He tells Griffin that he just got out of prison and is excited to see his love who he had to leave behind. He also tells Griffin that he hates other black people. Christophe is a representation of a black person who has grown to hate his own race. He claims to Griffin that he is of many different descents, but never calls himself only black. He cannot bring himself to own his blackness. The character further represents the hate that blacks impress upon each other due to the different hues of their skin.

Mack Parker

Mack Parker is the young black man from Mississippi who was lynched by a mob. Many blacks are upset when they learn that the mob was not convicted for killing Parker, even though there was ample evidence against them. The story of Mack Parker is what pushes Griffin to journey into Mississippi. After hearing that it is the most racist state in the Union, he feels he must experience it as a black person.



Sterling Williams

Sterling Williams is the shoeshine that Griffin first meets as a white man in New Orleans. Griffin thinks that Sterling might be a helpful adviser to him during his project. He then returns later as a black man and confides in Sterling about his project. Griffin uses Sterling as his way into the black world. Sterling helps him with his speech and gives him other tips so that he can more easily assimilate into New Orleans' black society.

Don Rutledge

Don Rutledge is a white photographer who follows Griffin around New Orleans. Rutledge also works with Griffin on an article on the Black civic leaders of Atlanta.

Young black family

As Griffin begins to hitchhike, he gets trapped on a country road late one night. He flags down a young black man, who agrees to let Griffin stay with him at his home. Griffin is shocked to learn that the home is little more than a shanty that houses the man, his wife, and many young children. Griffin stays with the family for just one night and joins them for dinner as well as conversation. During this encounter, Griffin is most touched by the children he meets. He realizes that the children are no different from his own. They are just as loving and caring. The only difference between his family and his one is the color of their skin. Since these children are black, they will never have the opportunity that his children have in education, jobs and life. While Griffin is deeply saddened by this encounter, he admires the will to live and attitude of the family.



Objects/Places

Sepia

Sepia is the magazine in which Griffin will publish articles concerning his tour through the south as a black man.

New Orleans, Louisiana

New Orleans, Louisiana is where Griffin first becomes a black man. He sees what it is like to experience the city as a white man and then a black man. This is also where he meets Sterling Williams.

New Orleans YMCA

The New Orleans YMCA cafe is where Griffin has several important conversations with black leaders.

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Hattiesburg, Mississippi is the first stop on Griffin's journey through Mississippi. This is also where P.D. East lives.

Biloxi, Mississippi

Biloxi, Mississippi is the city that Griffin passes through to get to Mobile. He begins to hitchhike here and gets many rides from white men who want to know about the sexual experiences of black men.

Mobile, Alabama

Mobile, Alabama is the city that Griffin passes through as he goes to Montgomery. He also meets a preacher here where he talks about race relations. In the swamp lands of Mobile, he meets the kind, young black man who allows him to stay the night with him and his family.

Montgomery, Alabama

Montgomery, Alabama is where Griffin decides to pass back into white society. Due to the boldness and determination blacks feel due to the inspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King, tension between blacks and whites is even more strained.



Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta, Georgia is one of Griffin's last stops on his tour through the south. His spirits are lifted when he goes to Atlanta as he sees hope for black people.

Mansfield, Texas

Mansfield, Texas is Griffin's hometown. He lives there with his wife and children. His mother and father also live in Mansfield. This is also where Griffin's effigy is hung after his book is published.

Trappist Monastery

Griffin visits the Trappist Monastery in Conyers, Georgia.

effigy

An effigy is a doll or figure that resembles a person. Griffin' was hung in effigy in his hometown.



Themes

Self loathing

Griffin often speaks about the depression, loneliness, and anger that he felt while he was a black man. As his time wears on, he cannot stand the face that stares back at him in the mirror. Because of this skin, he cannot seek advancement. As an educated man who has all the right credentials, he can't even get a job as a bookkeeper. All doors are closed to him. The feeling of sickness and loneliness overwhelms him. As Griffin begins to talk and connect with black leaders, he realizes that this loathing also plays into whites' ability to oppress blacks. This is further emphasized when Griffin is hitchhiking and picked up by a white man who insists that blacks are happy when they can get white blood into their families. By having a connection to the white world, blacks can claim their whiteness instead of their blackness.

When Griffin is in Montgomery he can no longer bare being in black skin. He decides to pass back into white society as it is easier to live with. While Griffin has stepped up to the challenge of living life as a black man, he does not fully commit. Black people do not have the option to become white. When they get desperate, they must remain in their skin. They are forced to continue on with a certain lifestyle or fight for their happiness and what they equally deserve. Griffin had a choice. He could become black or stay white. He was not "trapped" in black skin for the rest of his life.

Finally, Christophe, the young, well dressed black man who scares Griffin on the bus, is a perfect example of self loathing. While talking with Griffin, he refuses to admit that he is black. He claims to be French, Spanish and Native American. While he may rightly have some of the ethnicities just mentioned, he wants to be anything but black. This relates back to the white driver's assertion that blacks long to have white blood in their race so they may have something else to claim instead of their own blackness.

Hate within the group

Frequently, throughout the novel, Griffin asks blacks what they think the biggest problem is for black people. Many decide that it is the fact that many black people have not banded together to overcome the problem of racism. There is too much hate and discrimination going on between black people. For instance, many Southern blacks judge each other on how light or dark their skin is. Instead of rising above the discrimination, Southern have embraced the idea of having lighter skin as a way to get away from being black. By putting down someone who is darker than than someone else, Southern blacks create a hierarchy within the group, which does not help their cause. This similar hierarchy is also seen when Sterling and his business partner refuse to give the wino any food. Although their discrimination was not based on skin color, they felt better about themselves by making the poor man beg and feel worthless.



Again, Christophe is an example. When Christophe gets on the bus, he tries to cause a fight with other blacks. He causes a scene and thereby embarrasses the blacks on the bus, even though he is trying to seem better than the rest of them. He tells Griffin how sophisticated and educated he is, bragging that he knows French as well as Latin. He continues to pick at other blacks on the bus and confides in Griffin that he hates "us." The hates for other blacks that Christophe displays is especially depressing.

The Southern perspective on race relations

Griffin often comments on the "Southern perspective" on race relations. Many southerners are happy being segregated and never interacting with blacks. As long as the two races stay separated, nothing will change. While there are many whites who hate blacks, many do not know them, because they have never interacted. They are frightened to have blacks advance as they believe it will change the way they live their lives. Many times, the hate comes from fear of not knowing the race and Griffin learns this. The color of his skin came with prejudgments and stereotypes. Many whites feels that aggression and hate is the only way to keep things the same. Griffin is told by many white men that if he tried to "shake anything up" he will be taken care of. While many whites think this is a kind way to treat someone else, it makes them a second class citizen. They are unable to advance.

Another aspect of this view is that whites should not "turn" on one another and help blacks. As seen in P.D. East's case, when he began to write in favor of equality, his neighbors and friends turned on him. He received hate mail, as well as physical threats. It seems as though when other whites help to threaten the perceived superiority of the race, they are harassed. Griffin also experiences this at the end of the novel when his effigy is hung in Mansfield.

Communication

Toward the end of the novel, Griffin decides that until whites and blacks begin to communicate effectively, little will be done to mend race relations in the South. While Griffin sees the cruel and unfair treatment that blacks are subjugated to in the South, he also noticed that blacks no very little about whites. They therefore have their own prejudices against whites. In the case of the young black youth who helps Griffin to clean out his office, he notices that the young boy thinks every white person hates him. He is confused by other whites' and Griffin's kindness. As he has only been around whites who have called him bad names or treated him negatively, he has judged the whole group.

When Griffin first changes from being black to being white again, he is shocked at how little he is now allowed to communicate with blacks. The skin color barrier has led to a barrier of words. Often Griffin notes that black people guard their thoughts and words around whites out of fear of being thought of as a trouble maker. Griffin believes that whites must stop their preconceived notions in order to learn who blacks truly are.



In one of the last paragraphs of the book, Griffin talks about how he hopes that blacks will see that the only way to make progress into to push for integration, not segregation from whites. He hopes that through verbal and visual (silent protests, sit-ins) communication that blacks can convey their message of equality towards whites. He does not think that a violent black movement is the way. Communication and education are the only ways for blacks to succeed and be considered equal citizens in the United States.



Style

Perspective

Throughout the entire novel, Griffin writes in first person. This helps to achieve his tone, which is extremely personal. The first person narrative also makes sense because of the structure of the novel. It is also important to note that while Griffin does keep the first person perspective, he is at times writing from the view of three different people: a white man, a black man, and a white man trapped in a black man's skin.

At the beginning and end of the book, Griffin writes as a white man. In the beginning of the novel, all he can do is quote facts and others' experiences concerning the situation of Black Americans. While he is sympathetic to the racial injustice that is happening in the South, he also wants to keep an unbiased opinion. At the end of the book, Griffin's perspective is completely changed. He believes that no one can justify the current treatment of blacks. His perspective has changed as he no longer feels as though he is an outsider to the black community and the situation in the South. He can speak with confidence of what is occurring.

The black man's perspective further helps the reader to identify and sympathize with not only Griffin but also the depressing situation for blacks in the Southern United States. Griffin's candid, truthful personal experiences would have been extremely helpful for gaining sympathy in reader for blacks and their fight for equality. This is especially true of when the book was published. By seeing another white man venture into learn about the problems of blacks, it makes people relate more to black people. One of the main problems with race relations in the South is lack of communication on both sides. Hopefully, by reading this book readers will see that effective communication is beneficial in any situation.

Griffin's perspective as a white man trapped in a black man's skin is another aspect of the novel. Many times, Griffin comments that he no longer feels like himself. While he is still John Howard Griffin, a writer from Mansfield Texas and a father with a loving family, he often cannot identify with this person. He becomes so consumed by having black skin that he is convinced that he will not be able to relate or interact with people who formerly knew him. He finds it especially difficult to talk to his wife, who was at once his most intimate companion. As society is treating him differently, he begins to view himself as and feel like a completely different person. These three different perspectives are interesting to compare and contrast throughout the book.

Tone

Although Griffin thinks that Southern whites are probably treating blacks poorly, he attempts to be unbiased throughout the book, so that he may really see that state of race relations there. It soon becomes clear through his judgmental tone that he does not



agree or condone the behavior of Southern whites. As a black man, he sees the hate purely based on the color of his skin. He knows he is still the same person. The only credential he is being judged on is the color of his skin.

The tone of the book is also very personal. Since it is a journal, Griffin pours his innermost thoughts into the book's pages. The reader feels as though he has abandoned all his inhibitions. He is very frank and honest with the reader. As he is no longer an outsider looking in, but instead a part of the group, he can give a truthful retelling of his experience. His honesty is brutal. Griffin writes about every detail and every experience. The reader can sense his growing amount of concern about the situation in the South. Though his personal tone, Griffin also conveys the message that he was deeply affected by each person he met and situation he lived through. The reader can also feel his fear concerning the safety of those involved with the book. Whether it be Griffin's family, friends, or unnamed characters, he tries to be personal without harming their wellbeing. His writing is extremely descriptive, and this is essential for the reader to not only believe, but also understand the unique experience he has had.

Structure

The structure of the book is that of a journal. Each section is dated by month and day. The sections are not equal sizes as different events stood out in Griffin's mind everyday. The reader can relate to this format, especially if he himself has had a journal. Some days where, obviously, more eventful than others. This structure works for the book as the reader feels as though he is going on this journey with Griffin. Griffin uses a journal structure in order to narrate his stories, experiences and feelings. The reader gains a very personal view of Griffin's innermost feelings. The reader feels as though they have experienced what has happened to Griffin, because they are hearing the tale directly from him. It is also like the reader is peering into Griffin's private thoughts.



Quotes

Rest at pale evening...

A tall slim tree...

Night coming tenderly

Black like me.

From "Dream Variation" by Langston Hughes

"Suddenly I had had enough. Suddenly I could stomach no more of this degradation-not of myself but of all men who were black like me."

- December 1, p. 132

"I felt the Negro children's lips soft against mine, so like the feel of my own children's good-night kisses. I saw again their large eyes, guiless, not yet aware that doors into wonderlands of security, opportunity and hope were closed to them."

-November 24, p. 114

"When all the talk, all the propaganda has been cut away, the criterion is nothing but the color of skin. My experience proved that. They judged me by no quality. My skin was dark."

- November 24, p. 115

"The completeness of the transformation appalled me. It was unlike anything that I had imagined. I became two men. The one observing one and the one who panicked, who felt Negroid even into the depths of his entrails."

- November 7, p. 11

"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 are completely off the record as far as we are concerned."

-November 24, p. 103

"The transformation was total and shocking. 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 John Griffin I had been were wiped from existence. "

—November 7, p. 11

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."

—November 8, p. 32

"I hate us, Father."

-November 14, p 56



"At such a time, the Negro can look at the starlit skies and find that he has, after all, a place in the universal order of things. the stars, the black skies affirm his humanity, his validity as a human being. "

-November 24, p. 119

"They're God's children, just like us. Even if they don't act very god-like anymore. God tells us straight- we've got to love them, no if's, ands, or buts about it. Why if we hated them, we'd be sunk down to their level. There's plenty of us doing just that too."

- November 9, p. 98

"When the awareness of it strikes, a man either suffocates with despair or he turns to cling to his woman, to console and seek consolation. Their union is a momentary escape from the swamp night, from the utter hopelessness of its ever getting better for them. It is an ultimately tragic act wherein the hopeless seek hope."

- November 24, p. 113



Topics for Discussion

Do you agree that Griffin has three different perspectives throughout the book? That of a white man, black man, and white man trapped in a black man's body?

Toward the end of the book, Griffin states that he began "zigzagging" between being white and black. Should he have finished the experiment as only a black man? Do you think he was taking an easy way out by not remaining black?

Do you think Griffin was wrong not to disclose his situation to people he could have endangered such as his friend in New Orleans and others?

How do you think Black Americans reacted to this book?

How is this book relevant to our society today?

Civil Rights was the issue that was grappled with in the 1960's. Today, the equal rights movement is centered on improving the lifestyle and rights of gay, lesbian and transgender people. Could Griffin's experiment work in this new situation? Would this be a good idea today?

Do you think that the journal format works for this book? Could Griffin have been more successful formatting the book in a different way?