

# **The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America Study Guide**

**The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America by Shelby Steele**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Introduction.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1, I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent?, Race and Power in an Era of Blame.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2, Race-Holding.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3, Being Black and Feeling Blue, Black Hesitation on the Brink.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4, The Recomposed Self, More on Vulnerability.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5, White Guilt.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6, On Being Black and Middle Class.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7, Affirmative Action, The Price of Preference.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8, The Recoloring of Campus Life, Student Racism, Academic Pluralism, and the End of a Dream.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9, The Memory of Enemies.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>



# Plot Summary

The Content of Our Character is written by author, columnist, and self-described black conservative Shelby Steele. Steele is currently a fellow at the Hoover Institute that studies race relations and affirmative action. The Content of Our Character won Steele the 1990 National Book Critics Circle Award for non-fiction. Born to a black father and a white mother, Shelby has a BA in political science, an MA in sociology, and a PhD in English. He was active in the Civil Rights movement and was a part of the black power movement.

The Content of Our Character turns a critical eye to how the black community has responded to the increased freedoms they won through the Civil Rights movement. While Steele believes that blacks still suffer from discrimination, he argues that they often give up opportunities staring them in the face because of fear and self-doubt. Blacks often blame society for their difficulties and social problems rather than taking initiative to meet their challenges head on. Blacks often react negatively to the bourgeois values that have helped other ethnic minorities withstand discrimination and achieve equality and advancement in American society.

The Content of Our Character is a short book, with an introduction, epilogue, and nine brief chapters. In Chapter 1, "I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent?" Steele argues that race is often used as a method of gaining power by both blacks and whites. In reality, race allows blacks and whites to shift what Steele calls "innocence" back and forth. Both sides employ racial power when they seek to alleviate their own guilt and play the victim.

Chapter 2, "Race-Holding" explains Steele's concept of race-holding where blacks often use their racial identity to protect their vulnerabilities but at the same time deprive themselves of important social opportunities. In Chapter 3, "Being Black and Feeling Blue," Steele argues that black identity is often reactionary and dependent on maintaining that American society is deeply racist and that the deck is stacked against blacks. Black identity also often restricts black individuality, blocking black advancement.

Chapter 4, "The Recomposed Self" makes the case that blacks have developed an identity based on "recomposition" or constructed an identity based on the struggles that blacks have engaged in. This identity is therefore reliant on blacks continuing to struggle and thereby harms blacks when they make real achievements. Chapter 5, "White Guilt" explains the idea of white guilt and how it figures into black identity.

Chapter 6, "On Being Black and Middle Class" focuses on the problems specific to being black and middle class. Chapter 7, "Affirmative Action" lays out Steele's critique of affirmative action and racial preferences. Chapter 8, "The Recoloring of Campus Life" describes the challenges blacks and whites face on college campuses specifically and Chapter 9, "The Memory of Enemies" describes how black memories of discrimination and the shame associated with it continues to hold blacks back. In the Epilogue, Steele

lays out the challenges facing the black community and argues that if blacks avoid the barriers that a previously helpful sense of black identity has given them, that they can achieve advancement in American society.



# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

Shelby Steele argues in the introduction that discussions about race relations have become scripted. Each side knows what they are supposed to say and how they are supposed to act in public. However, these scripts hide the truth of race relations and so the public and private selves of both blacks and whites are hidden. To write the book, Steele has to both forget his blackness to touch on human universal truths but to remember it to add his own experience into the perspective of the book. Only by focusing on both elements, can he give reality the priority it must always have.



# Chapter 1, I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent?, Race and Power in an Era of Blame

## Chapter 1, I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent?, Race and Power in an Era of Blame Summary and Analysis

Today, race discussions stops conversation. When the topic comes up in Steele's classes, blacks immediately assume the authority to reprimand whites and are practically predisposed to badger them. Blacks often call upon the collective guilt of whites as a "power move" or to feel powerful in a world where they often feel powerless. Whites respond as a more powerful group often responds with tolerant silence and feigned deference. Both sides often act as if they are entitled to power.

Steele believes that the struggle for racial power is really a struggle for innocence. Whites act innocent when they ignore the racial struggles of blacks and get defensive when accused of racism. Blacks act innocent when they take no responsibility for the struggles of the black community. Steele thinks that people "see for innocence" when they look for an opportunity to play innocent. In fact, while Steele agrees with Ronald Reagan on many matters, he thinks Reagan was popular in part because he offered the average white American a way to be innocent.

Blacks often handle feeling powerless in white society in two ways by bargaining or challenging. A black person bargains when she offers to absolve white Americans of their collective guilt in exchange for certain social privileges. On the other hand, a black person challenges when he refuses to absolve white America. Bill Cosby, for Steele, is the ultimate bargainer and Jesse Jackson inconsistently mixes bargaining and challenging. White innocence allows whites to ignore real racism on their part, but black innocence is often worse because they make society and government the agents of change.

Ultimately the only way to solve racial problems is not to focus on racial consciousness but to do as Martin Luther King Jr. challenged blacks to do. He asked them to have a moral consciousness that says that race should not be a source of advantage or disadvantage. When blacks moved from the early '60s moral consciousness to the late '60s and '70s racial consciousness, they lost their hold on the country and their ability to radically change the culture. Black power movements offer a challenge without any bargaining power.

Moral consciousness is too hard for all of us because it brings the possibility of accountability. Moral consciousness is not a power play because it makes us all capable of wrong doing. But if we really want progress, we have to have a moral consciousness.



# Chapter 2, Race-Holding

## Chapter 2, Race-Holding Summary and Analysis

Steele is a Professor at a large state university in California. He has a white wife and mixed-race children. He is often accused of being inauthentic, not so much because he has a white wife but because he has faded away into the middle class. In the eyes of many blacks, has failed to recognize the priority of the race. Many other middle class blacks have done the same. They have chosen individuality over the race. They have "race-fatigue" and are tired of thinking in racial terms.

However, race is still an issue and often produces "integration shock" in both whites and blacks, which occurs when either side realizes that they are in a mixed-race situation. Race fatigue often leads to integration shock when race relations become an issue again. This shock often leads blacks to refuse to see that racism really has declined. Steele calls this "race-holding" which occurs when people use their race to keep from examining how they really feel and taking responsibility for what are responsible for. Many blacks hold on to race when they adopt social norms within the black community that explicitly reject white culture. Race-holding and fear however both lead to attitudes of self-defeat.

Blacks race-hold by determining that whites have stacked the deck against them and then blacks accept that nothing can be done to better their situation. Accepting defeat however undermines the struggle for freedoms won decades ago. Holdings generally are self-descriptions that justify a person's fears. Since black choice really has expanded, many blacks are afraid to expand their lives. Now they have chosen to feel inferior and have retreated into racial identity.

Steele argues that individualism is not bad but instead is a seat of energy and power. It requires however that people to take responsibility for their position. Rejecting responsibility is to reject a base of power. Instead, responsibility between blacks and whites must be shared. Otherwise blacks simply adopt a psychological barrier to black progress. Steele thinks this psychological barrier is the most powerful barrier blocking black progress today.





# Chapter 3, Being Black and Feeling Blue, Black Hesitation on the Brink

## Chapter 3, Being Black and Feeling Blue, Black Hesitation on the Brink Summary and Analysis

Steele regards it as a shame that while equality and opportunity have increased for blacks, their achievements with respect to whites have declined. The black underclass however continues to expand and racial anxiety is a major problem. Steele then illustrates from his own experience in a segregated school and how discrimination made him feel inferior. He developed what he calls an "anti-self" or the part of one's identity that internalizes the negative attitudes that others have about you. Embracing this negativity produces aggression and low self-esteem. Blacks naturally respond this way however, since they are the most despised race in the community of races.

The most common response to the anti-self is denial rather than eradicating insecurity. Blacks often refuse painful self-knowledge or again, what Steele calls integration shock. One example of this is how blacks are constantly adding new names for themselves to common vocabulary. Another is how obsessed blacks are with black pride. The threat of pride however, is the threat of being accountable for one's actions. Integration shock produces a new form of segregation that takes hold in three ways.

First, blacks minimize or avoid important opportunities because they are afraid to try and fail. Second, they often withhold effort in areas where blacks do not typically achieve, such as in science and focus only on areas where blacks have already made great strides, such as in sports or music. Finally, blacks often self-segregate, particularly on college campuses. One reason that blacks self-segregate is because they are often threatened by the repentance of their oppressors. This means that blacks can no longer complain about discrimination and must make a life for themselves. Blacks do not deal with doubt. Instead, they avoid it. However, if blacks want to make any progress, they cannot avoid dealing with their doubt, no matter how difficult it is.



# Chapter 4, The Recomposed Self, More on Vulnerability

## Chapter 4, The Recomposed Self, More on Vulnerability Summary and Analysis

Blacks are racially vulnerable and this vulnerability has many effects on black politics, clothing styles, and dance. However blacks deny that vulnerability has these effects because they cannot handle racial importance being diminished in any way. Steele then illustrates from his own experience. He denies his shame and other blacks do too. Yet denying shame creates a false reality.

Racial vulnerability often controls how blacks react to their problems. The Civil Rights establishment did not realize, following the Civil Rights Act, that blacks did not really know how to be free. So civil rights victories brought integration shock. Segregation has prevented blacks from this problem.

In response to integration shock, blacks have engaged in "themes of recomposition" or methods of creating black identity. One theme of recomposition is victimization, which is particularly seductive since there is much to it. It never looks like a cover up. Another theme of recomposition is compensatory grandiosity, where blacks create their own sense of superiority. This is represented by the swaggering teenager, the strong and aggressive "sister," and the whole black sense of "cool." Grandiosity leaves a mark but is ultimately a form of dependency because blacks rely on this identity to get over their shame. For instance, blacks often overrate their degree of "soul" and often use dancing to create a mythology.

An even worse source of recomposition is black nationalism, as it creates its own form of superiority. Black nationalism cannot help blacks, Steele thinks because it is too defensive.

A ubiquitous form of recomposition in the black community is the claim of racial discrimination. Without a doubt blacks have endured incredible oppression but their new freedoms brought their own stresses. Again, blacks did not know freedom and so black American identity becomes a method of handling freedom. It recomposes black racial doubt and leads blacks to see certain actions by whites as assaults on this identity.

One particularly dangerous and debilitating effect of black identity is the suppression of individuality. Individualistic blacks often threaten to undermine black identity and so their independence is rigidly oppressed. One example is calling blacks "Oreos" when they try to achieve. Often when blacks insist on their individuality, they are culturally and socially excommunicated. Blacks must avoid all of these themes of recomposition and meet what makes them head on.



# Chapter 5, White Guilt

## Chapter 5, White Guilt Summary and Analysis

The black power movement started to rise in 1964 when whites started to admit their guilt by passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Since then much of social policy with respect to blacks has been made seeking white redemption. As a result, race relations have regressed since the seventies. Blacks had a choice between entitlements and development. Whites and blacks are complicit in blacks choosing entitlement.

White guilt is composed of two factors. The first factor is the knowledge of ill-gotten advantage, or knowing that white advantage comes from subjugated blacks. This triggers white racial vulnerability. Blacks enforce this guilt by trading on racial pain. The second element of white guilt is the display of racial anger by blacks. When blacks display their racial anger, they bring shame on themselves for making themselves emotionally vulnerable.

White guilt is in fact a need for innocence that arises from selfishness. So black power produces white guilt but whites want to be rid of the guilt. Hence they engage in escapism, quickly discharging their "duties" to blacks however they can. Blacks again become invisible and whites get to atone without facing their contributions to racism.

This problem is most acute in the university system. University educators and administrators will not tell blacks what they think of their scholarship and they will not demand that blacks perform. However this has a dispiriting impact on blacks because it is a kind of paternalism. The paternalism makes it difficult for blacks to develop on their own. Racial preferences produce dependence on entitlements. White guilt is not good for anyone. It must give way to genuine concern or it is only so much self-importance and devoid of humility.



# Chapter 6, On Being Black and Middle Class

## Chapter 6, On Being Black and Middle Class Summary and Analysis

Middle-class blacks are often put in a "double bind" between middle class values that reinforce personal responsibility, saving, and hard work and racial identity, which emphasizes the group and excuses individual bad behavior. Thus whenever a black person moves towards being middle class, she moves away from "being black" and vice-versa. Prior to the sixties, the black middle class often distinguished themselves from poorer blacks and poorer blacks had an image of the black middle class as "house slaves." In fact, Steele grew up this way.

However black racial identity changes throughout the sixties. It becomes more self-conscious and organized. It is also more prescribed and blacks also becomes less tolerant of those who had a different view of what it meant to be black. Further, poor blacks have a new social status as the ultimate victims, which in turn, pushes middle class blacks to identify with victimization they had never experienced. Middle-class blacks then often experience repressed ambivalence and repressed double binds. This produces a sort of terror in being able to maintain two sides of one's self. To maintain one's blackness, the black person must suppress any allegiance to middle class values. She must "contrive" to be black and in fact, she must fake it.

Steele notes that racial identity may have been necessary to win the freedoms won during the Civil Rights movement. Racial vulnerability may have played the same role. However, it is not worthwhile now. Black advancement depends on individual responsibility. Blacks should not be encouraged to believe that their advancement depends on the group.



# Chapter 7, Affirmative Action, The Price of Preference

## Chapter 7, Affirmative Action, The Price of Preference Summary and Analysis

When Steele's children apply to college, he faces a dilemma. While he opposes affirmative action, he could benefit his children by appealing to it. Somehow affirmative action seemed fair, though in another sense it obviously is not. Affirmative action initially looks fair because it looks like compensation for past harms. Yet a major problem with the program is that it has transformed equality into a form of social engineering in order to change white attitudes and increase campus diversity.

In one way, affirmative action is a kind of exchange between blacks and whites. Whites get absolved from racial guilt and blacks get power. Yet the exchange is a barrier to black advancement. Campuses focus on diversity rather than development and blacks are demoralized by the message that they need help to get ahead. The demoralization is only made worse by the cultural myth of black inferiority. In fact, blacks are much more likely to drop out of college than whites or other races, which probably reflects this demoralization. This is aggravated when many look to expand the reach of affirmative action types of policies.

Some claim that affirmative action is needed to fight against subtle discrimination, but Steele thinks that affirmative action increases it. He notes that the Supreme Court is moving away from racial preferences. This in turn, reduces power in the black community. However, the only power lost is that which came from discrimination and fear in the first place. Hence the loss is not to be regretted.

Steele wants affirmative action to take the form of the enforcement of real equal opportunity. He wants social policies aimed not at racial preferences, which do not work, but instead at educational and economic development. He argues that too many people have looked only to the goals of affirmative action and not to the means of affirmative action, which is a source of many problems.



# Chapter 8, The Recoloring of Campus Life, Student Racism, Academic Pluralism, and the End of a Dream

## Chapter 8, The Recoloring of Campus Life, Student Racism, Academic Pluralism, and the End of a Dream Summary and Analysis

Steele begins the chapter by noting that on university campuses in his day there has been a renewed sense of ethnic conflict. Campus racism seems to be reasserting itself and lines between races are becoming hardened. Many of the reports may be exaggeration but there is something to the phenomenon and the reasons for it are mysterious.

Steele speaks to many of the students involved and discovers that the conflicts do not have to do with racial inequality but instead are a reaction of anxiety to racial equality. When kids are brought together from different parts of the country, they find themselves confronted with difference. This causes anxiety and produces concentrated micro-societies. Affirmative action does not help this. Instead, it exacerbates what Steele calls the politics of difference. Individuals justify themselves and their goodness through difference and this produces ethnic balkanization.

Black students often feel inferior and not without good reason. However, race relations are much better today despite sharp new feelings of anxiety. One difficulty is black intimidation due to the fact that intelligence is the standard of merit on campus. Blacks react negatively to this and act out stereotypes. They do this out of feelings of being diminished, accountability to white expectations, and feelings of powerlessness and shame. In Steele's day, King encouraged blacks to work twice as hard and all the blacks in Steele's college class graduated.

Steele admits that circumstances are different but he notes that it is the black power movement that has changed this. Black has become a color of entitlement. Blacks often use their race as a source of power. The politics of difference makes everyone a minority and white male power does nothing to help because it generates a similar source of problems. Both sides make each other foreign.

Steele also holds administrators responsible for these campus racial conflicts. They try to compensate for past discrimination but gender and race are only gross measures of discrimination. As a result, color has become correlated with poverty and disadvantage.

Steele notes that when he talks to whites about campus racial tension they often speak from a fear of accusation and become defensive. They often see black students as



whiners and complainers and couple these comments with "some-of-my-best-friends-are-black" stories. These stories reveal white racial anxiety and the guilt that whites feel. When they face blacks like Steele, whites meet the possibility of their own inhumanity. And administrators feel this too though they try to avoid feelings it. Steele argues that administrators must truly help blacks to be free of guilt. He also claims that whites are not wholly innocent. For Steele, integration was once a high ideal and stood for something but that today it has become something else.



# Chapter 9, The Memory of Enemies

## Chapter 9, The Memory of Enemies Summary and Analysis

Steele notes that people often give their enemies territory in their minds and prepare themselves to be on the defensive against those enemies. One reason oppression hurts so much is that it leaves an "enemy-memory" due to the territory we give them. The allure of enemy-memory is powerful for blacks. Enemy-memory pulls people back into the past and causes reactivity. One example of this in Steele's mind is the drop in black enrollment just as race relations improve. Blacks become casual to opportunity and instead of taking the opportunities react to past victimization. Enemy-memory always pulls those who have it backward.

Steele then explains his concept of an "objective correlative" where a negative emotion is tied to some objective event associated with racism. Blacks are surrounded by objective correlatives. Enemy-memory is produced by these correlatives but it can acquire a force on its own. One example is how blacks often believe that the drug epidemic in black neighborhoods is a conspiracy to kill blacks. With rumors like these, the civil rights leadership has lost credibility. They often exaggerate black victimization.

In this way, blacks create "subjective correlatives" by associating certain experiences with negative emotions. Subjective correlatives help blacks in one sense because they sanction pursuing racial power. Anti-black sentiment is not as powerful as blacks remember it to be. Distortions of anti-black sentiment result from enemy-memory.

Blacks must resist associating black development with eliminating discrimination. Such a confusion leads to what Steel calls "inversion," where blacks take a positive opportunity and turn it into an obstacle to development. Inversion is a trap that blacks fall into but that whites avoid. Blacks put responsibility on others and ignore the fact that other groups have survived discrimination. Blacks are often socially active on campus but are poor students and this is caused by subjective correlatives. They create problems and make blackness as an identity reactive to white racism. In this way, black identity becomes dependent on white racism such that it cannot function without white racism. Blacks exaggerate discrimination to hold onto who they are.

In fact, racism is not the biggest challenge to the black community, but insufficient development is. Insufficient development is overcome by fighting inversion and letting go of enemy-memory.





# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In Steele's youth, he is caught up in the black power movement. He believes the movement is inevitable given the achievements of blacks. It is also positive in many ways. It makes blacks unapologetic about who they are. However, it provides no blueprint about how to move forward. Steele also finds little in the black power movement about how to be himself. Instead, black identity is simply understood as righteous and collective anger. Steel increasingly finds his sense of individuality in conflict with black power's collectivist emphasis.

Steele emphasizes that he still experiences racial slights and discrimination. However, he wants other blacks to understand that this need not block them from taking the opportunities before them. Their fate does not have to lie in society's hands. Blacks often want to let society take care of them because they are afraid and doubt themselves. Further, blacks simply do not have a lot of experience taking care of themselves.

For Steele, black identity is at war with its best interests. Blacks should focus on initiative and restrict their collective identity.

Blacks face many problems such as a growing black underclass, a shrinking number of college students, teenage pregnancy, gang violence, drug use, unemployment, single parent families, high infant mortality rates, and the like. Common remedies from the government often do not work. Instead, blacks must change their psychology. They can end their despair through social, political and economic advancement. Black leadership must help as well. The black community should turn a critical eye to themselves.

Blacks enjoy more freedom in the United States today than they have ever had and these freedoms were won at great expense. The fact is that most whites see black as equals. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not live to see this day, but many blacks have. In fact, Steele thinks we are in that world that King dreamed of. However the Promised Land is only full of opportunities and blacks must make the best of them.



# Characters

## Shelby Steele

The Content of Our Character was written by author, columnist, and filmmaker, Shelby Steele. Steele is now a fellow at the Hoover Institution. Steele has a BA in political science, MA in sociology, and a PhD in English. He taught English at San Jose State University between 1974 and 1991. Early in his life he was involved in both the Civil Rights movement and the black power movement. Steele is the son of mixed race parents and is married to a white woman and has two mixed-race children. All of these factors deeply shape Steele's role in the book, not only as the author but often as a character illustrating Steele's main line of argument.

Steele's main argument in The Content of Our Character is that the Civil Rights Movement got off on the wrong track by building black identity and the idea of black power off of their racial vulnerabilities and excessive collectivism. The net effect of these ideas has been to teach blacks that others are responsible for their success, to scorn the bourgeois values that would give them better lives, and to impose collectivist community norms that prevent individual blacks from making achievements in areas where they do not already excel.

Steele's experience as a successful middle-class black man who has made his peace with white America in some ways, leads him to argue that affirmative action undermines blacks' sense of themselves as competent and able to make their own opportunities. Steele also argued that middle-class blacks are often oppressed by their community for adopting "white" ways of life. Finally, Steele argues that in general the biggest barrier to black advancement is the psychology of the black community.

## The Black American Community

The Content of Our Character is a work of social philosophy and has no true "main characters." While it has a number of important individuals, none are more important than many of the groups and communities that come in for analysis in the book. The Content of Our Character is not only written to the black American community, but is written about them. Steele believes that blacks have been conditioned by the experience of slavery and subsequent discrimination to be afraid that they cannot take care of themselves and to doubt their abilities. He also argues that blacks have not really figured out how to live freely without help from whites because they have not had much experience with it.

The Civil Rights Movement was largely a success. It achieved hard-won freedoms for blacks. However an inevitable consequence of both the conditioning the black community experienced prior to the Civil Rights Movement and their subsequent experience of their new freedom caused them to react with the black power movement. This was a



movement that Steele was once a fervent member of. The black power movement created a collective black identity that helped blacks to respect themselves and to aggressively demand equal treatment. It also created however an entitlement mentality and a set of collectivist community norms that reinforced the American black community's psychological insecurities.

As a result, blacks have reacted to new freedom and new opportunity with more resentment and more skepticism. They have sought help from society rather than individual members of their community and many of these programs haven't helped, particularly affirmative action.

## **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Steele appeals to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message of racial equality and encouragement to the black community to work twice as hard to achieve in order to right the legacy of discrimination. Further, Steele notes with regret that blacks have squandered many of the freedoms that King won for them.

## **The Black Power Movement**

The successor to the Civil Rights Movement in the black community is the black power movement. This movement gave blacks a sense of pride in their community but also had what many regarded as unsavory militancy and an entitlement mentality. Steele was once a member of the black power community but now regards the movement as having held back black achievements.

## **Blacks on College Campuses**

Steele regards blacks on college campuses as manifesting psychological vulnerabilities in the black community more acutely than almost any other part of the black community.

## **American Whites**

Steele emphasizes that while many American whites are still racist, most are not. In fact, many have a sense of white guilt with respect to disadvantaged blacks that blacks often play on to gain advantages and whites often discharge in inappropriate and unhelpful ways.

## **Middle-Class Blacks**

As a middle-class black man, Steele experienced significant discrimination from his own community for "acting white" and following bourgeois values. Steele thinks that middle-class status threatens many low-class blacks who receive much more social attention



and so the black power movement has been used to facilitate the imposition of collectivist norms that discourage blacks from seeking middle class status.

## **Individualist Blacks**

Individualist blacks are threats to black collective identity because they often achieve despite discrimination against them. Steele regards it as a shame that black identity was "recomposed" in such a way as to block the achievements of blacks who go a different way.

## **White Racists**

White racists often play the reverse discrimination card as a way of proclaiming white innocence so as to shift their racial guilt back onto blacks.

## **College Administrators**

Steele holds college administrators responsible for many of the racial tensions between blacks and whites on college campuses.



# Objects/Places

## The United States

The Content of Our Character concerns the American black community and focuses only on the United States.

## College Campuses

A particularly nasty manifestation of racial tension particular to the post Civil Rights Movement era occurs on college campuses, according to Steele.

## Seeing for Innocence

Blacks and whites "see for innocence" when they look for ways to play the innocent victim against the attacks of the other.

## Race-Holding

Race-holding occurs when blacks use their racial identity to protect themselves from racial vulnerabilities. Race-holding has the negative consequence of holding back black development.

## Recomposed Selves

A recomposed self is created when an identity is destroyed or non-existent and must be created from elements common to the experience of a community. Steele believes that blacks often recompose their identities around the wrong elements in their collective experience.

## White Guilt

The guilt whites have over their knowledge of the disadvantages blacks suffered. Whites often discharge this guilt with quick fixes and throwing social programs at black problems that do not really work.

## Black Collectivism

The result of the black power movement, black collectivism occurs when the black community restricts the freedom of black individuals who want to go their own way.



Steele believes that black collectivism is a response to the threat that high-achieving and middle-class blacks pose to black identity as an oppressed group.

## **Affirmative Action**

The practice of using racial information to give extra advantages to disadvantages to minority groups to right past injustices. Steele argues that affirmative action holds back the black community by undermining their ability to believe in their own achievements.

## **Academic Diversity**

For Steele, emphasis on academic diversity is really the result of a fear of emphasizing academic achievement.

## **Enemy-Memory**

Enemy-memory is the real or false memory of past injustice from another minority group. Enemy-memory often keeps an individual or group from facing a reality without the enemy and leads to the invention of false enemies. Steele believes that blacks have done this with respect to their enemy-memory of past whites.

## **Inversion**

Inversion occurs when blacks turn new opportunities into new threats to racial identity.

## **Objective Correlatives**

The association of particular events or symbols with emotional pain. Steele argues that blacks face emotional correlatives in their daily lives which intimidate and discourage them from achieving.

## **Integration Shock**

Intergation shock is the psychological shock from being placed side by side with a distinct racial community. Integration shock often produces defensiveness and reactivity as the group identity becomes threatened. Steele believes that integration shock is most common on college campuses.

## **Double-Bind**

A double-bind is a psychological "damned if you do, damned if you don't" state that middle-class blacks are confronted with when they try to achieve. If they move up



socially, they become "less black" but if they do not move up they pay the associated costs.

## **Black Soul**

For Steele, the emphasis of black "soul" is just the result of an inferiority complex among blacks who have a need to make themselves feel superior to whites.

## **Black Power**

The emphasis on the power of blacks to take control of their lives and fight whites for social recognition as equals. While Steele believes the black power movement made many important contributions to the good of the black community, he sees it as having a number of negative consequences.

## **Bourgeois Virtues**

The practices of staying married, having children in wedlock, saving money, getting educated and the like are characteristic of middle class families. Steele argues that if blacks would adopt the bourgeois virtues, they would flourish. He points out all the ways in which the psychological vulnerabilities of the black community stand in the way of adopting these values.



# Themes

## The Dangers of Black Identity and Black Power

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, American blacks had to struggle first with slavery and then with life under significant legal, moral, and economic discrimination. After the Civil Rights Movements, blacks found themselves with a wide range of new freedoms that they had no experience with. For Steele, the self-doubt ingrained in black psychology, fear of failure, and this inexperience caused blacks to react negatively to their new freedom. They found a way to create a black identity that made them strong through the black power movement. Black power taught blacks to not be ashamed, to fight aggressively for their rights, and never to apologize for being black.

However, black identity was formed around the reality of a racist white America. When racism actually declined and attitudes changed, the black power identity was threatened. The whole point of black power was to combat racism. If racism disappears, so does the rationale for black identity. Hence the identity that black people created for themselves was threatened and accordingly, blacks reacted negatively to increased opportunities, even going as far as to invent and exaggerate racism elsewhere. This is a futile attempt to continue the rationale for black identity as a whole.

Another negative feature of the black power movement is that it created a series of collectivist moral norms that discouraged blacks from advancing economically and socially by pursuing "white" forms of life. As a result, blacks have not been encouraged to stay in school, go to college, avoid drugs, save money, stay married, and resist the entitlement mentality. These are the dangers of black identity and black power as Steele sees them. Black identity was formed as a method of moving forward socially but today it holds blacks back.

## Guilt, Shame and Doubt

Steele argues that most of black-white relations today, at least in their more negative aspects, are characterized by a series of negative emotions, particularly guilt, shame, and doubt. Whites often feel guilty from benefiting from a social system that oppressed blacks. When reminded of black oppression, whites often feel responsible and seek to discharge their guilt. Sometimes they do so in a negative fashion such as "throwing the dog a bone." They offer programs to blacks that are more intended to discharge white guilt than to improve the condition of blacks.

Black shame is the result of a long history of oppression and it is black shame that often discourages blacks from pursuing their own advancement. Instead, they react to their shame with anger and shift all blame for their condition onto their social conditions rather than taking responsibility for themselves. Shame only compounds itself in these





situations, however, since when blacks refuse to take their opportunities for progress, they fail in another way and so fall behind whites and other races in social progress.

Shame is not the only psychological barrier for blacks. Doubt is another. Steele emphasizes that the black community has little experience with real freedom and respect from their fellow citizens. As a result, taking responsibility for themselves is often a significant challenge and one that blacks can potentially fail to accomplish. Due to doubt, blacks often refuse to try and browbeat those blacks who do try to improve their stead.

## Embracing Opportunities

Steele never denies that racism is still a major part of American life. However things have improved dramatically on Steele's view. For every racist white person Steele meets, he meets twenty who are not racist. In many ways, black identity was formed under deep oppression and it cannot make sense of a world in which race relations have significantly improved. Blacks engage in "inversion" or a process of turning positives into negatives. Often increased opportunities are seen as threats or "hand-outs" from whites. Hence many blacks often prefer to gain resources that are acquired through browbeating or guiltning whites.

The problem for blacks is that they have helped to create a world that is significantly more respectful to them and where they are substantially more free to create lives of their choosing. Nonetheless, blacks shun these opportunities and not only do not progress but in fact often regress. Teen pregnancy, drug use, gang violence, high school drop-outs ,and the like are all problems that have become worse for blacks since the Civil Rights Movement rather than better.

In the epilogue, Steele encourages blacks to push back against a now dysfunctional black identity and strive to individuate themselves. In this way, blacks will be able to see past their psychological barriers and embrace the opportunities available to them. Steele reminds blacks that they can achieve despite being discriminated against. If they do, they can form a new black identity that will help blacks progress.



# Style

## Perspective

Shelby Steele is a self-described black conservative. Steele was born in the mid-forties and participated in the Civil Rights Movement and in CORE. During that time, Steele adopted a strong belief in racial equality and fought for the freedoms that were won during those years. As the black community turned towards black power, Steele followed them. Over time however, Steele began to feel alienated from the black community. This was apparently, not because his wife was white and his children were mixed, but because he wanted to rise up to the middle class and live as an academic. Steele followed a bourgeois conception of virtue and many of the blacks he knew condemned him for it.

As a result, Steele began to reevaluate his relationship to the black community and his understanding of the barriers black face in developing socially and economically. Steele began to see flaws in the black power movement and started to place more emphasis on individual responsibility and individualism. He also recognized the importance of bourgeois virtue and resisting dependency on the state for assistance. All four of these qualities: responsibility, individualism, bourgeois virtue and resistance to state power are hallmarks of the '80s style conservatism that Steele embraced.

Due to his conservatism, Steele not only argues that his values can benefit the black community but that government programs aimed at aiding blacks such as welfare, affirmative action, and the like have done more harm than good and should be resisted.

## Tone

As a conservative, Steele's political positions are not exactly popular in the overwhelmingly left-wing black community and even less popular among even more left-wing black academics. While some black conservatives react negatively to what they perceive as rejection by the black community, Steele does not. He still sees himself as a member of the black community in good standing and expresses no sense of alienation. While he has been criticized by many in the black community for "acting white" and following "white" values, Steele apparently bears no resentment to his fellow American blacks and instead sees their reaction to him as the predictable consequence of the black power mentality.

Accordingly, Steele's tone is not hostile or harsh. He never minimizes racism or excuses whites for wrongs they have committed. He never expresses himself angrily or engages in extended attributions of blame to the black community in a nasty fashion. While Steele is deeply critical of the black community's psychology, his tone reflects sympathy with the community and a deep disappointment that blacks have allowed their racial vulnerabilities to hold them back socially.



Steele is also very honest and forthcoming about the shame, guilt, and rage he has experienced as a black man in America. He relates several anecdotes that expose his own vulnerabilities and does so in part to encourage other blacks to get in touch with their own emotional vulnerabilities. In the end, Steele's tone is encouraging and hopeful because he believes that blacks can adopt a new psychology that will help them move forward in the world.

## Structure

The Content of Our Character is composed of nine short chapters surrounded by a brief introduction and a brief epilogue. The introduction brings forth the main themes of the book. In Chapter 1, "I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent?" Steele advances and defends the claim that blacks and whites use race as a power play. Race is a tool by which blame and innocence are shifted between the two racial groups. This tool is used when either group feels racial guilt or vulnerability and prefer to play the victim rather than face the truth.

Chapter 2, "Race-Holding" introduces the idea of race-holding, which occurs when blacks employ their racial identity as a shield against racial vulnerabilities. Steele claims that using racial identity as a shield also leads blacks to reject many genuine opportunities they are offered. Chapter 3, "Being Black and Feeling Blue," claims that the black identity that was formed in the black power movement, is reliant on the view that white American is racist and that blacks cannot advance. Steele thinks this is dangerous, in part because it has led blacks to impose moral norms that block individualistic blacks from improving their lives.

Chapter 4, "The Recomposed Self" contains Steele's case that blacks have poorly "recomposed" their racial identity following the Civil Rights Movement and Chapter 5, "White Guilt" analyzes white guilt and its relation to the cultural and racial self conception of blacks. Chapter 6, "On Being Black and Middle Class" holds that the black community often represses blacks who try to attain middle class social and economic status. Chapter 7, "Affirmative Action" critiques affirmative action as holding blacks back socially and furthering their sense of inferiority.

In Chapter 8, "The Recoloring of Campus Life" Steele explains the racial tensions blacks and whites struggle with on campus. In Chapter 9, "The Memory of Enemies" Steele argues that black "enemy-memory" or the memory of white discrimination and its tie to black shame holds blacks back. Steele ends in the epilogue by claiming that blacks must develop a new racial identity that will help solve black social problems.



## Quotes

"Race is an area in which Americans have been conditioned by a history of painful conflict into a rigid and unforgiving propriety. Each race has its politics and its party line that impose a certain totalitarianism over the maverick thoughts of the individual. Because of this we become a bit afraid of what we really think about race. ... Trust is a hard swim in waters where received wisdom so systematically dominates thought and intuition." (Introduction, x.)

"Now I know that if there was a secret to writing this book, it was simply to start from the painfully obvious premise that all races are composed of human beings." (Introduction, xi.)

"I think the racial struggle in America has always been primarily a struggle for innocence." (Chapter 1, pg. 5.)

"Once race-holding is triggered by fear, it ensnares us in a web of self-defeating attitudes that end up circumventing the new freedoms we've won over the past several decades." (Chapter 2, pg. 26.)

"No black identity, however beautifully conjured, will spare blacks this challenge that, despite its fairness or unfairness, is simply in the nature of things." (Chapter 3, pg. 55.)

"The most dangerous threat to the black identity is not the racism of white society (this actually confirms black identity), but the black who insists on his or her own individuality." (Chapter 4, pg. 72.)

"The selfishly guilty white is drawn to what blacks least like in themselves—their suffering, victimization, and dependency. This is no good for anyone." (Chapter 5, pg. 92.)

"To move beyond the victim-focused black identity, we must learn to make a difficult but crucial distinction: between actual victimization, which we must resist with every resource, and identification with the victim's status. Until we do this, we will continue to wrestle more with ourselves than with the new opportunities that so many paid so dearly to win." (Chapter 6, pg. 109.)

"Blacks can have no real power without taking responsibility for their own educational and economic development." (Chapter 7, pg. 125.)

"Race is, by any standard, an unprincipled source of power." (Chapter 8, pg. 140.)

"Our greatest problem today is insufficient development—this more than white racism." (Chapter 9, pg. 165.)

"But what we must know even more than this is that nothing on this earth can be promised but a chance. The Promised Land guarantees nothing. It is only an opportunity, not a deliverance." (Epilogue, pg. 175.)



## Topics for Discussion

Explains Steele's concept of racial "innocence" and how it relates to racial guilt and racial vulnerability.

Explain Steele's concept of race-holding. Do you think the concept makes sense? Do you think it applies to the black community in the way Steele thinks it does?

What does Steele believe was good about the black power movement? Why does he think it was inevitable? What are Steele's criticisms of the black power movement? Do you find them convincing?

What do you think of Steele's analysis of the psychology of the black community? Or the white community?

What is Steele's critique of affirmative action?

What did you think of Steele's analysis of campus life for blacks and whites? Explain in detail.

Outline Steele's conception of recomposing the self. Does it make sense? Is it relevant to black struggles?

What is "enemy-memory"? How does Steele think it hurts blacks?

After reading Steele's book, you will find that Steele is critical of many of the ideas and practices of the black community. Which criticisms did you find the most convincing and which the least? Why? Explain your opinion.