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MOTHERLOVE, INITIATION, POVERTY, AND PRIDE:
TEACHING "GETTING THE FACTS OF LIFE" BY PAULETTE CHILDRESS WHITE
AND "THE SKY IS GRAY" BY ERNEST GAINES

[Deborah Smith Pollard](#)

In his frequently anthologized short story ♦The Sky Is Gray,♦ Ernest J. Gaines presents a fictionalized account of a series of events that occurred in 1940s Louisiana when he was a mere boy suffering with a bad toothache. This physical ailment serves as a narrative catalyst, both driving the action and pulling the readers into a world where poverty co-exists with pride, and in which a mother who appears to be cold and unfeeling is revealed to be a loving parent teaching her male child to negotiate the often harsh realities of the segregated South.

Gaines's ability to recreate the Louisiana parish that was the backdrop for his initiation into manhood is impeccable. However, in a lesser-known work, ♦Getting the Facts of Life,♦ Paulette Childress White is equally impressive in her ability to evoke the streets of metropolitan Detroit, the challenges faced by a welfare-assisted Black family in the 1960s, and a young girl's encounter with the various challenges impending womanhood could hold for her. [1]

This essay explores the pedagogical rationale and strategies for teaching these stories as companion pieces. Because many students encounter Gaines's story in an introductory course, such as Introduction to American or African American literature, they could easily come to view this male/Southern narrative as the essential coming of age story in Black literature. That is, they could see Gaines's narrator James and his mother Octavia as reflecting the challenges all Black parents and children encounter. However, placing these two stories in tandem provides an excellent opportunity to underscore differences in male and female literary voices and issues and to explore the contrasts between the concerns of a child in the rural South of the 1940s and a child in the industrial North in the 1960s, while expanding our notion of what constitutes a coming of age story.

On my campus, Introduction to African American Fiction and Introduction to Fiction are among the classes students can take to meet their distribution requirements in English; the former can also be used to fulfill the diversity requirement for the college that houses my discipline. So while English majors are among those who take the course, most of the students are non-majors representing a range of disciplines. Most of the students on our campus are non-minority suburbanites. We do have a sizeable number of pupils who are of Arab descent as is the case with other colleges and universities in the area. The percentage of Black students is relatively small; however, in the African American lit course, during some semesters, they can constitute as much as one-third to three-quarters of those enrolled.

The students admitted to our campus have usually read the canonical literary works by Hawthorne, Poe, Hemingway, and Twain as well as short stories by more contemporary authors such as Raymond Carver and Annie Proulx. Still it is rare that their exposure has included much African American literature, save the occasional piece by Alice Walker or Maya Angelou. So my task is not only to teach them♦or refresh their memory♦about the terminology and hallmarks of various literary genres but also to have them identify and evaluate how the conventions of those forms are utilized by individual Black writers.

Within the African American literature course where I have most often taught ♦The Sky Is Gray,♦ I use the theme ♦Black Families and Love,♦ at the center of which is the anthology *Memory of Kin* edited by Mary Helen Washington. In 2005, after engaging in a great discussion with my students about the rich details, lessons and themes in Gaines's classic and those in its screen adaptation, I was reminded of a conversation with a colleague about how easy it is for students to read one work of African American literature and essentialize its elements, that is, to decide that they have seen the full range of triumphs and challenges faced by African Americans. [2] I asked myself, ♦If I teach Gaines's work as a coming of age or rite of passage story, will students walk away with the idea that it is in fact *the* singular, that is, *the* essential model for such a story? Would they think that the experiences and lessons learned by the protagonist in 'Sky' represent the range of what coming of age looks like when addressed by an African American writer?"

My two-fold efforts to combat that possibility were first to add Paulette Childress White's ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦ which became an immediate hit with subsequent classes. The reasons students gave for embracing the story included the fact that the author had taught on the campus next to ours and has written about a community and streets in the metropolitan Detroit area that many have heard about all of their lives. But the overwhelming reason they expressed for being captivated by the story was the voice and journey of Childress White's Midwestern industrial city girl, Minerva.

The second step I took to try to keep the specter of essentialism at bay was to outline my pedagogical objectives for placing these stories together. Toward that end, I addressed the conventions of the coming of age story that each author uses, the historical and regional concerns embedded in the texts, and the gendered literary voices of their protagonists.

The Conventions of the Coming of Age Story

To prepare the students for the two stories, I present a lecture during which I explain what is meant by the Apprenticeship Novel or *Bildungsroman* and some of the more famous works within the genre, including James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel*. I reference Holman's *Handbook to Literature* as I explain that in the standard apprenticeship novel or education novel, the author traces the youth and early adulthood of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and patterns, and acquire a philosophy of life and ♦the art of living♦ (34).

Hazel Arnett Ervin, author of *The Handbook of African American Literature*, offers a perspective on how the genre is often shaped by Black writers, stating that the ♦development for the African American hero or heroine within the dominant culture yields narratives of various contexts♦ (32). She observes that these can include critiquing and resisting the society that denies the protagonists' validity and blackness, the development of their moral center and activism, or the exploration of the ambiguities in identity formation (32-33). I share Ervin's insights and then add that some of the most popular works by Black authors fall within this category, such classics as Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and among more contemporary works, Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*. Here, I discuss how in Hurston's novel, for example, her protagonist Janie is shown developing both physically and emotionally from a naïve, dreamy-eyed girl to a self-aware widow who, after each marriage, becomes more conscious of what she wants and needs to feel complete.

Since Gaines's ♦Sky♦ and Childress White's ♦Facts♦ are both short stories and not novels, this is also an opportunity to magnify the differences between the genres and to explain that what would be a literary exploration of several years in a novel becomes an examination of a much shorter period♦a single day or a few days♦within the context of a short story. Within these two works the trip to the brink of adulthood is represented by an outing each youngster takes with his or her mother to places most children and adults would like to avoid: the dentist's office and the welfare office.

Before we leave this part of the lesson, the students have an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the basic concept of the *Bildungsroman* by recalling movies they have seen that have presented that theme, among them *The Lion King*, *8 Mile*, and *Love and Basketball*.

Historical and Regional Concerns in ♦The Sky Is Gray♦

Teaching these stories together paves the way for an exploration of their distinct historical contexts. Some students will know the key narratives of the civil rights movement, or they will at least have heard of the Montgomery Bus boycott that brought both Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. into national focus. However, they might not have thought about the fact that a place as small as Bayonne, Louisiana, the setting for ♦The Sky Is Gray,♦ would have been as segregated as it was and what that meant in the everyday lives of Black people. Showing brief segments from *Eyes on the Prize* often increases the students' understanding of what the culture was like within the African American community prior to and during the movement. Then, together we list the various elements of Jim Crow that are evident in ♦The Sky Is Gray,♦ including segregated buses, schools such as the one James passes on the way to town, and restaurants that are so racially restricted that Octavia tells her son to avert his eyes as they walk to one of the establishments that are open for Black clientele.

Questioning segregation is also at the center of the heated discussion James witnesses between a preacher and a young college student while in the waiting room of the inferior dentist who sees Black patients. The preacher espouses a position of compliance: everyone should just accept the status quo since that is the will of God. In contrast, the college student advocates a much more assertive role and declares that everything must be challenged, including assumptions about something as basic as the color of grass. My students have been fascinated that a conversation with clear parallels to the civil rights movement could have taken place in the 1940s since many of them naively believe there was a monolithic position within the Black community regarding what should be done in the midst of widespread segregation.

I explain some of the complexities involved in and the protracted nature of the civil rights debates within the Black community and that a variety of responses and ideologies co-existed for generations. One way I highlight these divergences for the introductory classes is by outlining some of the key differences in the approaches to education and civil rights espoused by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, two African American leaders whose approaches to civil rights clashed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I conclude that overview by having them read ♦Booker T. and W.E.B.,♦ a poem by Dudley Randall that succinctly represents the distinct philosophies held by the two. This mini-lecture helps the introductory students understand that the pivotal face-off between the preacher and college student is both a literary encapsulation of what had been hotly contested in the past as well as a harbinger of the modern civil rights movement with its myriad strategies and voices that was just a decade away, including those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael. In an upper level class with more advanced students, having them read DuBois' essay on ♦The Talented Tenth♦ and excerpts from Washington's narrative *Up from Slavery* would be perfect for setting the stage for the verbal sparring between the preacher and the college student.

Historical and Regional Concerns in ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦

As we consider ♦Getting the Facts of Life,♦ we focus on the segregation reflected in this Northern city. The students, the majority of whom are either children of the North, recent immigrants from the Middle East, or first generation Americans from a variety of locales, often have difficulties believing that the Midwest region in which we are located and in which the story is set has a troubled history in terms of race relations. Currently called ♦the most segregated region in the country,♦ the metropolitan Detroit area has historically been a place of restrictive covenants, of efforts to keep the city where our campus is located ♦clean,♦ that is, free of Black people, and of segregated living communities, often reinforced to this day by redlining practiced by insurance companies and real estate agencies. (♦This city?♦ is what students often ask, finding it difficult at least initially to fathom that such measures were taken on so many levels in their own area to keep Blacks and Whites apart.) Since most cities in the U.S. have had or are near cities that have had similar practices, this part of the discussion could easily be adapted to coincide with the history of the regions in which other instructors and students are located.

These patterns and practices are reflected in the distinctly different Black and White neighborhoods that Minerva and her mother walk through on their way to the welfare office. I ask the students to identify the markers the author has placed within the story to delineate the two communities, signifiers that point to both racial and economic separation.

As they walk through the Black city of Ecorse, Minerva and her mother pass by empty lots, a field bordered with weeds, and a pool hall. In contrast, the absence of stores, vegetable gardens and fences as well as the existence of what Minerva describes as ♦June green grass♦ and houses set far away from the street are among the signals that Minerva and her mother are on the side where more affluent White citizens dwell, not necessarily more happily but in decidedly different configurations.

The point I make about the two stories is that whether it is the overt, *de jure* segregation of the South in the 1940s, a time where a Black male's failure to follow its rules could result in his death, or the covert, *de facto* segregation outlined in the Midwest of the 1960s, Jim Crow laws were insidious and pervasive, affecting the lives of the community's vulnerable children in both regions of the country in a variety of ways.

The Gendered Literary Voice in ♦The Sky Is Gray♦

Next, we begin a discussion of what makes Minerva's voice different from James's voice. That exploration focuses on traditional gender roles and societal expectations and how♦or whether♦they have changed over time. The students outline, either in small groups or with me on the board, the many signs of James being propelled into taking on adult responsibilities. When we meet the protagonist of ♦The Sky Is Gray,♦ who carries Gaines's middle name, he is only eight but already being called ♦the man♦ by his mother, a designation he carries for several reasons despite the chronological and physical evidence to the contrary. His father is away in the army, and as the oldest child and a male offspring, James is summoned to act as a surrogate, just as many other young sons in similar slots have been. I ask if that happens to some young boys today. The students answer in the affirmative, citing fathers being taken away by civilian or military obligations or going AWOL because they won't or can't face their parental responsibilities.

James takes his role seriously, watching his two younger siblings and being the brave one at night though he, too, is afraid of the dark. ♦I can't ever be scared and I can't ever cry. And that's why I never said nothing ♦bout my teeth,♦ he explains to us about the toothache he has been experiencing for a month (167). He is also involved in other traditionally masculine activities, such as hunting rabbit and trapping birds with his brother, Ty.

As we discuss the range of important lessons James learns during his one-day trip to town, many students express the belief that the most memorable part of the story centers on the principle he is beaten into learning at home. Ty and James have caught red birds in their traps and have plans to simply play with them. However, their mother forces James to kill them (171-72). Inevitably, the majority of students explain how angry they were that the mother would smack him into carrying out her orders without ever explaining her reasoning. When I ask when their feelings toward the mother shifted, they usually state that the transformation began when the family expresses a level of pride in James's accomplishment in providing meat for the table, a rare commodity for this family that has meager resources. James shares his acquired insights after the fact: ♦I'm still young♦I ain't no more than eight, but I know now, I know why I had to do it♦. Suppose she had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who was go'n look after us? They had to be somebody left to carry on ♦(172).

The Gendered Literary Voice in ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦

Teaching ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦ and focusing on Minerva's distinctly female perspective provides an opportunity to recount how rare it would have been as recently as forty years ago to have had her voice included in college courses. To help make that point, I bring in the text *All of the Women Are White, All of the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, published in 1982 by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, which contains numerous syllabi for teaching courses in African American literature from instructors who were often the first on their campuses to do so.

I work with the students, most of whom are fascinated by the title, to analyze each clause within it and its significance. That provides me with an opportunity to talk about *canons* and *canon formation* and about the fact that for generations, students were taught that all of the literature worth reading was produced by White male British or American authors such as Shakespeare and Hemingway. I talk about the significant changes the women's movement brought to expanding the range of texts considered canonical as scholars ♦recovered♦ the work and female perspectives of Susan Glaspell and Kate Chopin, for example. Finally, I refer to the lecture I presented during the first week of classes about how courses in African American literature emerged and challenged the traditional canon with venerable writers and texts, as well as with a body of literary criticism advanced by those ♦brave♦ enough to focus on both the unique and the universal qualities of the work.

After searching the web, I found that besides being used in African American literature courses, ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦ is also used in American Lit and Women's Studies. A class focusing on contract law has also incorporated the story, which means students in a variety of settings are hearing Minerva express her own anxieties, cares and concerns. [3] Why is it important that she be heard in these various contexts? Most of the students by this point can see Minerva's literary presence in these settings as a reflection of the work done by scholars like Mary Helen Washington in women's and African American studies, whose collection contains both stories under discussion here.

Minerva, a literary version of Childress White as a young girl, has, like James, been given the task of watching her younger siblings. She has been awarded the nickname ♦The Witch♦ because of her overzealous disciplinary tactics. Whereas first-born James steps up to hunt and protect the others from the frightening darkness, third-in-line Minerva has assumed duties that can be seen as traditionally female: ♦I had long established myself as first in command among the kids. I was chief baby-sitter, biscuit-maker, and broom wielder♦ (130). While she seems fine with having mastered these skills, she expresses relief that at twelve she has not yet taken on the physical development her sister Stella had begun at the age of ten: ♦I still had my girl's body and wasn't anxious to have that changed. What would it mean but a loss of power?♦ (130).

Minerva provides insights into the social implications for this perceived loss of female authority even as she details what it was like to travel along the streets of her community: ♦If you were a woman or a girl over twelve, walking this block♦even on the safe side♦could be painful. They [the boys and men] usually hollered at you and never mind what they said♦ (131). Later, in response to a weak catcall, Minerva responds, ♦Hey baby yourself.♦ At that moment, Mrs. Blue, Minerva's mother, gives her daughter her first warning of the story when she says, ♦Minerva girl, you better watch your mouth with grown men like that♦ (132). She shoots her daughter a warning glance, even as she hides a smile, perhaps pleased that she is not raising a girl who is afraid to speak her mind. Still my students have noted and said they understand the mother's concern that a girl's verbal challenge to men can bring on unwanted retorts and even physical challenges.

Just as James is affected by what he learns while in the dentist's waiting room, some of Minerva's most profound lessons come as she observes what transpires in the case worker's office. Minerva witnesses and absorbs a great deal

about the intestinal fortitude her mother must summon in order to put aside personal pride and get the assistance temporarily needed from the government. Minerva describes the scene: ♦The woman went on down the list sounding more and more like Momma should be sorry or ashamed, and Momma's answers grew fainter and fainter. So this is welfare. I wondered how many times Momma had had to do this. Once before? Three times? Every time?♦ (136). The uncomfortable situation helps Minerva to understand why her siblings who had made the journey with their mother in the past all declined to repeat it.

Always provoking discussion is the way in which the welfare worker talks to Minerva's mother, a manner that some students see as demeaning and others see as professional and merely part of the process. Although she never fails to call her client Mrs. Blue, the social worker's questions are pointed, probing, even highly personal at times:

♦Excuse me, Mrs. Blue, but are you pregnant?♦

♦What?♦

♦I asked if you were expecting another child.♦

♦Oh. No, I'm not, Momma answered, biting down on her lips.♦

♦Well, I'm sure you'll want to be careful about a thing like that in your present condition.♦

♦Yes♦ (137).

The discomfiting office encounter helps Minerva to realize how naïve she had been to feel happy when her father, who had been a welder with a railroad company, lost his job. The business relocated, he declined to move away from his extended family, and encountered difficulties finding a new source of employment (138). At that time, she had only been eleven and oblivious to the kinds of questions that could be hurled at a woman seeking assistance for her children and out of work husband. Just as James expresses a clearer understanding of why his mother made him kill the birds, Minerva becomes aware that a daunting range of tests, beyond receiving and yet not responding to catcalls, often awaits grown women who sometimes have to take on the world on behalf of their families.

Conclusions

It is during the return trip home in each story that both youngsters receive their final lessons of the day. Mrs. Blue talks to her daughter about life, her development from girlhood to womanhood, getting her husband to the welfare office, and having babies, all in a straightforward, sometimes humorous manner. Though Minerva confides that the very thought of becoming a woman is ♦like some kind of suffocating rose♦ and announces she wants no part of it, her mother assures her that she will not only be a woman if she keeps living, but that she will be ♦some kind of woman♦ (139), that is, one who handles the responsibilities well.

In contrast, James's final lessons of the day come with much less conversation, but by the end of his journey he has learned through observation that you can get your child a few minutes out of the cold if you ask to look at ax handles while he stands by a heater, that you are allowed to enjoy a meal offered by a kind stranger if you perform a service in return, and that no matter how good it might be to take an extra portion of salt meat home, you must only take the amount which you can afford. While Minerva's mother assures her that womanhood will come, Octavia affirms her son's maturity by the end of the day: ♦You not a bum. You're a man♦ (196).

My lesson on the two short stories concludes with the students exploring the extent to which Minerva and James have matured during their short journeys and the areas in which each may still have some growing up to do. The students surmise that both protagonists take major steps toward adulthood because of the manner in which their mothers resolve to handle the economic challenges they confront and because each parent, both wittingly and unwittingly, uses an unwelcome trip to guide and teach her impressionable child several vital lessons.

I never leave these paired short stories without pointing out that in each is embedded another important element: neither poverty, in the case of Ernest ♦James♦ Gaines, nor a two-year stint on welfare, the length of time ♦Minerva's♦ family was in the system, was enough to stunt the creativity of these writers who used their personal experiences and skills to craft insightful, provocative short stories about the day they took an illuminating, life-altering trek to a dreaded office with their mother.

Clearly, Gaines's well-known story can stand alone as it has since its initial publication in 1963. However, when taught with the equally well-written though lesser known work by Childress White, ♦The Sky Is Gray♦ can provide interesting points of comparison and contrast with ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦ specifically providing students with an opportunity to consider how the gender of the protagonist/narrator and the setting can be used to shape distinct African American literary voices.

Notes

[1] The author has since remarried. However, because the short story was published when she was Paulette Childress White, I use that name in this essay. [\[return to text\]](#)

[2] *The Sky Is Gray*. Dir. Stan Lathan. Perf. Olivia Cole, James Bond III, Margaret Avery, Cleavon Little, Chez Lister. PBS/Monterey Video, 1980. [\[return to text\]](#)

[3] The contract law course that lists ♦Getting the Facts of Life♦ as one of the readings is Law 720-01: Contracts I at Saint Louis University School of Law. Syllabus 2007. Accessed 8 April 2009: http://www.law.du.edu/latcrit/documents/esb/c_nelson_contracts1.pdf. [\[return to text\]](#)

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