

# My Black is Beautiful: A Study of How Hair is Portrayed in Children's and Young Adult Literature

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**MY BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL: A STUDY OF HOW HAIR IS PORTRAYED  
IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

by

QUACY-ANN WEBLEY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English Literature  
in the College of Education and Human performance  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Jeffery Kaplan, Ph.D.

## **ABSTRACT**

This research seeks to examine how authors represent Black/African-American beauty in children's literature. To conduct my research, I have chosen to review Natasha Tarpley's *I Love My Hair* and Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair* in conjunction with Zora Neale Hurston's young adult novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The objective of my thesis aims to highlight the emphasis authors place on Black/African-American children's hair and the cultural differences in their perceptions of Afro-beauty. Today, society expends extensive time and interest in outward appearances through media: television, radio, digital media, and fashion magazines. As a result, Black/African-American adolescent and teen girls become overly concerned with their beauty and face extreme pressure to fit into the dominant cultures definition of beauty: 'lighter skin, slender nose, slim body frame, and straight hair.' Black/African-American girls who fall short of the prescribed characteristics of beauty become psychologically impaired with their self-confidences; sometimes refusing to embrace their own features or invest extensively in beauty care products to conform to the dominant beliefs of beauty. I have provided a summary of the focused literature for the benefit of readers who not have had the opportunity to read the previously mentioned texts along with a sample lesson plan.

## **DEDICATION**

To my parents Cedric Webley and Hortense Creary for encouraging me to remain focused reminding me to always put God first in all I do.

To Dain Regis, my fiancé, whose love and support motivated me to realize my true potentials. Your determination and thirst for knowledge inspire me. Thank you for always reminding me just how strong I am when I seem to forget.

To all the Afro-Beauties out there who know their black is beautiful and continues to embrace it.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In a society where an immense amount of emphasis is placed on beauty, young girls are being affected by different standards of beauty from every direction of our culture. This is especially prominent in the Black/African-American community. With Western beauty standards being what they are, such as lighter skin, slender nose, slim body frame, and straight hair, women who don't embody those characteristics are forced to either embrace their own features or conform to those images that are elevated in the media on a day to day basis. Walther (1990) discusses the issues that many young girls face, "In trying to conform to the "look" of a white movie star, Pauline has denied the fundamental physical reality of her body." This paper will shed light on the way in which Black/African-American beauty is reflected in one piece of prominent young adult literature, two children's picture book, as well as bring attention to the huge focus that is placed on hair in the Black/African-American community.

With little to no representation of natural Black/African-American hair in the media, young Black girls are faced with the question of: Are my ethnic features considered beautiful? In the rare instances when Afro-beauty/representation is present, little variety is contained in that representation so it is implied that all Black people fall in the same category. With celebrities such as Beyoncé, Rihanna and Miley Cyrus constantly revamping their appearance, particularly their hair, a certain level of pressure is being placed on meeting those Western perceptions of beauty. These beauty standards are put in place largely by the media. Since hair is one of the few things that one can change about themselves, many women, but more directly those in the Black community, purchase the look they want because the pop culture depicts acceptable appearances. Oftentimes, that look is "bone straight hair flowing in the wind" look.



In recent years, as a reaction to Dr. Kenneth Clark's "Doll test", Blogger and YouTube hair enthusiast Chime Edwards took a "good hair" "bad hair" approach to the test. This test was re-conducted with a group of black children using a doll with Afro textured hair and another with straight hair. The dolls were identical except for the texture of its hair. The children were asked to select the doll with pretty hair.

Other questions that were asked during this experiment includes:

Why do you think her hair pretty?

Is having nappy hair bad?

Why do you think that doll's hair is ugly?

Which doll would you like your hair be like?

Which one would your hair look the most like if your mom didn't press it?

The results concluded that 65% of the children identified straight hair as being the most beautiful and appealing and Afro textured hair to be ugly and undesirable (Edwards, 2013).

This experiment is a prime example that European beauty standers are definitely prominent in the minds of these young children though these are not standards that necessarily celebrate Afro-beauty. To see young children allude to their Afro characteristics as being ugly is extremely disheartening because it really illustrates the one-sided idea of beauty that society has in place.

When we look at young adult literature, little to no representations of Black beauty is reflected so young Black women and men are faced with trying to relate to those mainstream characters who exude different physical attributes than young Black readers. This thesis

explores the portrayal of Afro-beauty, in particular images of hair, in two astounding books: *I Love My Hair* (Tarpley, 1998) *Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1997) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937).

## **Rationale**

My interest on this topic was sparked with the immense amount of focus that was given to Olympic gymnast Gabby Douglas during the 2012 Summer Olympics; not for her gymnastic skills, but for her hair. In the article *Gabby Douglas's hair sets off Twitter debate, but some ask: 'What's the fuss?'* author and Deputy National Editor at The Washington Post Vanessa Williams (2012) addresses the uproar in the Black/African-American Community about Douglas's hair being unkempt and how much of a disgrace she was all because of her hair. Along with this particular incident, much focus has been placed on young Black girls embracing their natural hair and ending the cycle of falling victim to toxic straightening chemicals such as perms or being slaves to wigs and other hair extensions. This thesis is an effort to help young Black girls feel empowered about their kinks and coils in their beautiful natural state. Because Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937) has always been one of my favorite books, using this book as a blueprint especially because the author did such a magnificent job of highlighting the emphasis that has always been placed on hair in the Black community is fitting. I paired *I Love My Hair*, (Tarpley, 1998) and *Nappy Hair*, (Herron, 1997) with Hurston's book because I think these are books that younger girls are able to relate to because they too want to see themselves in the books they read. Young girls want to see strong protagonists who look the way they do in the books they read because this ultimately teaches them to accept themselves. In working with young children, I have realized that they really pay attention to everything that

takes place around them so what better place to find a role model than in a book? Especially one that celebrates their beauty, their differences and the qualities that really makes them, who they are. Our fascination with hair is not some new found concept, in fact, it goes as far back as Biblical times.

In *1 Corinthians 11:15*, Paul states, “...but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.” In many cultures, a woman is taught that her hair is her crown and glory and the Black community is no exception and especially when we look at Hurston’s novel. One possible difference with the Black/African-American community is the amount of time and monetary resources that are directed into hair.

As a future educator, I believe it is important for students to be exposed to books that contain relatable characters so has to honor diversity and cultural backgrounds as well as making learning more fun and meaningful. It goes without saying that as humans we love being able to relate to our environment and the things around us. The same applies to students and the classroom. When students read literature that mirrors their background/experiences, they are more inclined to participate in the learning environment. They want to share their own messages when they feel represented in the learning environment. As a reader, I find that I am more engaged in reading when I can relate to the protagonist in any way. Though short lived at times, relatability to the character tends to give reader strength when reading.

The following chapter provides a review of related research on the portrayals of Afro-beauty in literature in general and across time.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study explored how hair is perceived in the Black community with a focus on the children's books *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* paired with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Therefore, this chapter will provide insights into previous related works.

According to *I See Me in the Book: Visual Literacy and African-American Children's Literature* (Johnson, 1990), illustration is just as important as the content that is being presented" (Johnson, 1990, p. 10). In the illustrations of African-American children's literature, the memories furnished must be communal memories, the fantasies conveyed must be the dreams for the community as well as for the self, and the adventures cannot be skipped through. Several studies of Black images in children's literature exist; however, mainstream Black images provides limited reliability for young Black children. Visual representation of Afro-beauty is a large issue because there is little to none available. At times, we find that stereotypes and misconceptions are present in the available representations of Afro-beauty in literature.

Alexis De Veaux's (1987) article discusses the aspect of Black hair as it is reflected in books such as *Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1997) and *An Enchanted Hair Tale* (Alexis De Veaux, 1987). Black hair is a topic that is regularly discussed and debated in Afro culture due to longstanding pain from oppression of African people (Enekwechi, & Moore (1999). Blacks or African-Americans makes up about 11% on the Nations population, yet we consume over 30% of the hair care products on the market. Currently, a very large market for both hair services and hair products exists because the Black community is responsible for 80% of the demand and consumption. Because many Black/African-American women are becoming more educated

about their tresses, there has been a big shift in, “ethnic hair-care companies that once catered exclusively to African-American consumers are targeting more customers” (Palmer, 2003).

Black hair has always been very political in the Black/African-American community. Black women have always been judged by the way they wore their hair as well as for the texture of their hair. For instance, when a Black woman wears an Afro, it is often seen as a form of rebellion, when in fact it is likely self-acceptance. The straight hair standards were not set within the Afro community; however, to go against it can be looked at as counter culture. In actuality, wearing Afro hair in its natural state is just a choice and the way that some Afro women choose to live their lives. Afro women are simply trying to live a life that suits their everyday lives as well as life that does not conform to the Euro standard of beauty, but to accept natural Afro-beauty. One of the biggest issues within the Black/African-American community is the unfathomable thought that wearing one’s hair naturally is revolutionary. This ultimately trickles down to children because often times young Black girls especially are made to feel less beautiful than their colleagues if their hair grows outwards and not down their backs. So much of a Black woman’s identity is found on the top of her head in terms of hair. Notably, this notion of identity through one’s hair is not something that started in the Black community, but Black women have upheld it for generations. Black women tend to get judged based on the hair choices that they make.

An elevation of European beauty standards over Afro-beauty may pose a problem on a psychological level for Black children because they are being presented with the idea that their beauty is neither desired nor valued. In the two picture books referenced, the main characters are ridiculed by others because of their hair texture and it beckons the question as to what lessons or

themes do the authors and illustrators of these books hope to leave their impressionable readers. Though both books attempt to convey the same message, of how hair is viewed in the Black community and the fact that it affects the way that people in the Black/African-American community view beauty and each book takes a different approach.

Given the racist past and present of the United States, there are several identity and beauty issues that African American women face. Since 1619, African American women and their beauty have been juxtaposed against White beauty standards, particularly pertaining to their skin color and hair. During slavery, Black women who were lighter-skinned and had features that were associated with mixed progeny (e.g., wavy or straight hair, White/European facial features) tended to be house slaves and those Black women with darker-skin hues, kinky hair, and broader facial features tended to be field slaves (Patton, 2006).

Herron's (1997) *Nappy Hair* was inspired by a family joke directed towards Herron as a child which she turned into an upbeat piece of literature for children. Although talk of the protagonist's hair began as an intimate family joke, the author decided to make it public in the form of an oral act to written literature. The language is adjusted from adult speech to a children friendly format. On a different note, due to the discourse surrounding hair and the use of the word "nappy," hair can sometimes be a taboo topic in the African-American community. In an effort to heighten the discussion of the protagonist hair, the author uses traditional Black speech.

Another article that was helpful in informing my thesis topic concerning children's literature is Elizabeth Shafer's (1998) "I'm Gonna Glory in Learnin'": Academic Aspirations of African-American Characters in Children's Literature".

In the above article, Shafer discusses the different themes present in Black/African-American children's literature. One of the most prevalent themes explored throughout much young adult African-American literature is the issue of education and whether African-American children possess the academic skills to excel in anything other than vocational education. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's, authors such as Jesse Jackson and Lorenzo Graham presented strong depictions of African-American characters in their writings. As time went on, accurate depictions of Black/African-Americans became visible in young adult literature. However, despite the progress that has been made, the issue of Black/African-American misrepresentation in young adult literature remains a problem today. For example, it is very common to find a token Black/African-American character in many young adult novels but they tend to be decorated with stereotypes such as being a thug or sassy, neck-rolling individuals with attitudes. Overall, a vast majority of contemporary novels either misrepresent Black/African-Americans or omits representation all together.

As teachers, having many different reflections of different cultures and ethnicities in our classrooms is important because many times, the classroom is the only place students will see this diversity. One of the things that stood out the most to me was the fact that academic success and failure is a popular theme in Black/African-American children's literature. Interestingly, I absolutely agree based on many books that I read as a young adult.

Overall, I have been able to find some information that addresses Black beauty and how it is reflected in young adult literature and the most interesting part is that most books available to young children and young adults appear to convey the same idea that only Western or Caucasian standards of beauty are beautiful. The following chapter will provide the process which was followed to explore the topic of Afro-beauty.



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In order to explore and examine representations of beauty in this thesis entitled, *My Black Is Beautiful: A Study of How Hair Is Portrayed in Children's And Young Adult Literature*, several aspects remain to complete this thesis. First, this thesis took a close and analytical look at how Black/African-American beauty, with a focus on hair, is illustrated in African-American author Natasha Tarpley's *I Love My Hair* (1998), Carolivia Herron's (1997) picture book *Nappy Hair* and African-American author Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

In order to explore and examine representations of beauty in this thesis entitled, *My Black is beautiful: A study of how hair is portrayed in children's Literature with a focus on the children's book Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1997), and *I Love My Hair* (Tarpley, 1998) paired with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937), I first, had to take a close and analytical look at how Black/African-American beauty was displayed in each piece of text.

I selected these three books because they are great conversation starts for students. The pictures that are displayed in the children's books are light hearted and yet, when paired with the novel proved to be a great precursor for deeper more though provoking conversations in the classroom. These books are great displays and celebrations of pride, diversity and self-worth through the exploration of hair.

### **Personal Rationale**

First, there are three essential reasons why I selected these three particular books. They are as followed: Back in 2013, I participated in a study abroad program in Botswana, Africa and

one of the things that really caught my attention, was the images of beauty that was displayed in the classrooms. These displays glorified westernized beauty with little to no representation of Afro-beauty.

In recent years, a natural hair movement has been taking place in the Black community which has caused Afro women to embrace their natural tresses with a move away from chemically altered hair. Lastly, as a student teacher, I found it interesting that the curriculum that was being told to teach was not reflective of the diversity that was present in the student demographic. Authors Jeffries and Jeffries (2013) focus on hair and its impact on curriculum by examining the relationships between the cultural power of hair, literacy, performance and African American girls. This article provided much insight into the correlation of hair and the way in which students react to material that they can react to. Authors Jeter and Tonya Crittendon discusses the beauty questions many Black/African-American women face “To perm or not to perm, to go straight or remain natural, or to experiment week after week, year after year, with yet another daring new style” (Crittendon, 1994). This article is a great illustration of the way the natural hair movement has changed the way Black/African-American women are beginning to appreciate their hair and its versatility.

In order to explore and examine representations of beauty in this thesis entitled, *My Black is beautiful: A study of how hair is portrayed in children’s Literature with a focus on the children’s book *Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1997), and *I Love My Hair* (Tarpley, 1998) paired with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937), I first, had to take a close and analytical look at how Black/African-American beauty was displayed in each piece of text.*

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#### *Steps For Analysis*

1. I first read for general content.
2. Analysis of Rhonda Jeffries's article *An analysis of the impact of Carolivia Herron's Nappy hair on literacy and literature.*
3. After reviewing articles related to feminism, sexism, racism, and images of beauty, in particular, *Unbearable weight : feminism, Western culture, and the body*, I was more prepared to evaluate the selected literature for my research (Bordo, 1993).
4. I also used the checklist "10 Quick Ways To Analyze Children's Books For Racism and Sexism" as guide for evaluation each book used in this research (see Appendix A).

"Both in school and out of school, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes – expressed repeatedly in books and other media – gradually distort children's perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for librarians or teachers to convince children to question society's attitudes; but if children can learn to detect racism and sexism in books, they can transfer that skill to other areas. The following ten guidelines can be used by teachers, librarians, and other educators to evaluate children's books and to help students detect racism and sexism in the books they read," ("10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism," 1974).

Using these as a template, I analyzed a pairing of *Nappy Hair, I Love My Hair*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in order to note possible commonalities and/or differences as well as insights into portrayals of Afro-beauty.

The following two chapters will offer brief summaries, histories, purposes, and analyses of *Nappy Hair, I Love My Hair*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF *NAPPY HAIR* AND *I LOVE MY HAIR***

This study explores how hair is portrayed in children's and young adult literature, therefore, this chapter will outline related information and the analysis of *I Love My Hair*.

### **History of Book:**

In the 1997 picture book *Nappy Hair*, author Carolivia Herron initial intention behind writing this children's book was to illustrate to her Harvard University student, how African-American story telling is done, the call and response. When Herron's text was taught by a White Brooklyn, New York teacher; however, the uproar that was caused by the book, ultimately got the book banned. The basis of this ban was that it was thought to be insulting to African-American's/Blacks or African-American's/Blacks thought that using such a "derogatory" term to describe Afro hair was appalling. As the reader look at the main character Brenda, we are presented with a strong and boastful girl as it pertains to her hair. Brenda is very boastful of the fact that she has the nappiest hair of anyone else in the world. In every way, Brenda is really and truly accepting the beauty that is her *Nappy Hair*. This book is based on Herron's experiences at Harvard University and on the fun that her family poked at her *Nappy Hair* when she was a little girls- . The conversations were actually recorded at a family gathering (Herron, 1997). This book is a celebration of African-American culture and literature and the call and response provided is a prime example of the cultural celebrating.

### **About the author:**

As an African-American Jewish female author, educator and publisher, Carolivia Herron, has undeniably made her mark in the literary world. Earning a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature

and Literary Theory from the University of Pennsylvania, as well as well as having held professorial appointments at Harvard University, Mount Holyoke College, California State University, Chico, and the College of William and Mary.

“Carolivia’s publications include the adult novels *Thereafter Johnnie* (Random House, 1991), and *Asenath and the Origin of Nappy Hair* (Street to Street Epic Publications, 2014). She has also published the critical edition, *The Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké* (Oxford University Press, 1991). *Thereafter Johnnie* is a tragic novel of the rise and fall of an African-American family in Washington, DC. *Asenath and the Origin of Nappy Hair* is a comic novel describing the nappy haired interconnection of a contemporary African-American Jewish graduate student, Shirah Shulamit, and Asenath of Ancient Egypt.”

As an author, Herron has ventured in children’s pictures books, lyrics and librettos for musical works such as: *Let Freedom Sing: The Story of Marian Anderson* (music composed by Bruce Adolphe and many other areas of writing. Herron continues to be not only an educator but a lifelong scholar as well.

**Author’s purpose for *Nappy Hair*:**

The intention behind this book was to illustrate the approach of call and response in African America Literature to Herron’s Harvard University student. In the book, the reader experiences call and response with Mordecai speaking a line which is then followed by lines spoken by the audience. For instance, when Uncle Mordecai calls out, in the beginning, we see the family preparing themselves for what Uncle Mordecai will say, because they know that there is a lesson to learn. As the story proceeds, we see call and response being used as more than just a writing techniques, it illustrates the families support for what Uncle Mordecai is about to say.

Author Michèle Foster defines call and response as being a form of "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (Foster, 2001). In African cultures, call-and-response is a pervasive pattern of democratic participation in public gatherings, in the discussion of civic affairs, in religious rituals, as well as in vocal and instrumental musical expression.

In fact, "as Mordeci denounces the shame one family member claims he should have for talking about Brenda's nappy hair in such a bold way, he affirms her intellectual abilities and the family responds:

Family: Ain't she something

Mordeci: A rose among a thousand thorns.

Family: I know it.

Mordeci: Them old hardheads think they can talk English.

Family: Yep.

Mordeci: But this chile talks the king's English.

Family: I hear her.

Mordeci: Talk the queen's English too.

Family: She can do it (Jeffries, 2002, p. 73).

This is an illustration of the backing the family provides for Mordeci's story and with that comes affirmation from the entire family for Brenda. In a large part, call-and-response is an extension of the yearning of African-Americans to move from intensely structured didactic patterns of communicating. Historically, African-Americans were only permitted to speak only when

spoken to and at times they were not able to said situation. With call-and-response, there is a level of freedom with language. Here, we see a deconstruction of the barriers that appears in white speech patterns.

Oral tradition has long been about creating allegories and creating texts that tell an individual story to convey a lesson to a larger group or a personal story that attempts to represent the experiences of the larger group (Lavie, 1990). It is evident to the audience that Uncle Mordeci's story serves as more than a means of encouragement Brenda. It also serves as a confirmation of the African-American cultural presence in the American culture and the fight to maintain, affirm and preserve this culture. As we look at Herron's text, the reader can see an illustration of Beauty being both accepted and celebrated as it pertains to African-American features in African-American females

*Them some willful intentional naps you got all over your head.*

The rest of the family sitting at the tables respond

*Sure enough.*

Then Uncle Mordecai calls,

*Your hair intended to be nappy.*

And the people respond,

*Indeed it did .*

The call and response strategy that is used in *Nappy Hair*, also serves as a look into the African-American/Black culture. This call and response illustrates the way in which conversations are held within the culture. The audience is also given a view of the admiration that both Brenda and



the rest of her family has for her hair through the call and response. “Initially, acknowledging the importance of storytelling in the lives of African-Americans, the author, Herron, begins using text in *Nappy Hair* that is a reminder , as well as a st of instructions:

Uncle Mordeci told this story

at the backyard picnic.

Uncle Mordeci told it,

The folks joined in between the lines,

little Jimmy taped it,

and here it is (Jeffries, 2002, p.72-73).

The author, Herron, uses the initial statement of the book, we see the author using uncle Mordecai to let the audience know just how important the elderly is in the African-American community as well as the immense amount of knowledge that they possess. There is a stress of just how important oral history is in the African-American community, the author illustrates this through the oral storytelling and interaction that takes place with the family and uncle Mordecai. Herron, uses uncle Mordecai and the rest of the family to illustrate the call and response idea and its importance in the African-American community. This is the family's means of interaction throughout the story. It is a back and forth however, the family knows by the end of the call and response they will have learned something from the vast amount of knowledge uncle Mordecai possesses

**History of the book: *I love my hair***

In the children's picture book *I Love my hair*, author Natasha Tarpley tells the story of how she fall in love with her hair. Much like most Afro girls, there was a daily/nightly ritual that would take place between mother, daughter, and hair. Tarpley describes the comfort that she came to associate with the sitting position she routinely took between her mother's knees as her mother massaged her scalp with fragrant filled oils. We are told of the stories that Tarpley was often told by her mother as a means of distraction from and any stubborn tangles that would result in pain. Tarpley explains the routine between mother and daughter, "Sometimes she would tell me stories to distract me from the pain of stubborn tangles. But what I enjoyed most about these evenings was being so close to my mother --- the texture and sound of my hair sliding through her finger, the different hair styles she would create, the smell of the hair oil mixing with the lingering scent of her perfume," and through this routine, there was a phenomenal mother and daughter bond that was formed (Tarpley, 1998).

Tarpley goes on to explain that as she got older, her hair became her own responsibility and though it seemed liberating at first, she saw beyond the artistic freedom she now had with her hair. Tarpley informs us of the different stages that followed, "from relaxers to punk-rock spikes, from braids to barley-there short natural. Almost two years ago, I decided to grow dreadlocks," and it was at this point that she realized the peace that she found in the routine she partook in with her mother for so many years prior (Tarpley.1998).

**About the Author:**

An acclaimed author of several bestsellers, and graduate of Harvard University, Natasha Tarpley has definitely made her mark in the literature field. Tarpley began writing alongside her

mother at the tender age of seven. By the time she was a sophomore in high school in Chicago, Tarpley began earning publication credit for her poetry. She went on to participate in writing workshops at Harvard University in an effort to peruse her love for writing.

Despite having studied German since second grade, Tarpley, changed her area of study from German to African-American Studies due to an experience she was subjected while enrolled at the University. It was at this point when Tarpley began to write a series of poems. This series later on went on to help Tarpley secure two fellowships, one of which was the prominent National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.

Tarpley published her first book in 1998: a family memoir entitled, *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (Beacon). The very same year, she published her first, widely acclaimed children's book, *I Love My Hair* (Little Brown). A companion book followed (*Bippity Bop Barbershop*, Little Brown), along with two more picture books (*Joe-Joe's First Flight*, A A Knopf; and *Destiny's Gift*, Lee and Low). Tarpley's most recent work is based on the historic Disney-animated film, *The Princess and the Frog*. It's called, *Princess Tiana and the Royal Ball* (About Natasha , 2010).

When she is not out engaging with her community in Chicago, IL. Tarpley, gives her time to Voonderbar! Productions, LLC, the independent publishing company she Co-Founded. Voonderbar! Productions, LLC is the production site of multicultural books for children of all ages.

### **Author's purpose for *I love My Hair*:**

In my analysis of this piece of text, I concluded that the purpose behind this picture book was to illustrate the bond that is created and shared between young Afro-girls and their mothers. In *I Love My Hair*, Tarpley also explored the pride young children with Afro textured hair exuded for their hair due to the love and reinforcement instilled in them by their mothers. In the beginning of the book, Tarpley likens her mother's to pillows. Tarpley states, "I say between her knees, resting my elbows on her thighs, like pillows," here, we see Tarpley associating her mothers with comfort and tenderness which would be the blue print for their relationship as the book goes on (1).

We learn that there are times when the pain is so intense that Keyana had to cry out, at which point her mother would console her to and reassure of the is her hair.

Keyana describes her mother's reassurance, "Mama puts the comb down and rubs my hurting places. Then she leans in close to me, like she has a big secret to tell.

Do you know why you're so lucky to have this head of hair Keyana? She asks

I shake my head no.

Because it's beautiful and you can wear it in any style you choose. " Here, we see Keyana's mother building a foundation that Keyana can always go back to with her hair. The lesson being taught here, is no matter the frustration that Keyana may experience with her hair, she must still remember that her hair is beautiful and diverse because of her heritage.

### **The use of Hair:**

Keyana's mother explains the many possibilities for her hair which rang from; buns, corn rows, beaded, Afro styles and pig tails. In my analysis of *I Love My Hair*, I found that there were

six major life lessons that Keyana was being taught through the usage of her hair as an outlet. These included the important of one's heritage, self-sufficiency, finding joy in music, the equality of all human being and the endless possibilities present when one is truly free.

Keyana's mother highlighted her heritage when she does a bun because it resembles soft yarn spun by their "grandmothers at their spinning wheels," in referencing their grandmothers, Keyana's lineage being taught to her (10).

The hairstyle that follows are corn rows which is Keyana's mother's way of teaching her that if she sews her seeds in life and cares for it appropriately, she will have much harvest which allows her to be self-sufficient. Mama explains, "I can part your hair into straight lines and plant rows of braids along your scalp, the way we plant seeds in our garden, then wait and watch for them to grow" (12). Here we see mama making the relation between their current lifestyle and Keyana's hair.

The beaded style presents Keyana with music, she explains,

"The beads click to the rhythm of my walk....Tap! Tap! Clicky-Clacky," this is a life lesson that teaches Keyana to find beauty and appreciation in the small things because that's what will count in the end (15).

One of the most vital lessons taught to Keyana by her mother was that of Equality. Keyana discusses a time in school when she was made to feel less than by her peers and her teacher explains "Wearing an Afro was a way for them to stand up for what they believed," here Keyana get a basic lesson on the rights that many fought for during the civil rights movement (20).

The last life lesson that Keyana is taught is that of freedom by way of Keyana's pigtails. Keyana likens her pigtails to wings in saying, "Today I'm wearing it in my favorite style of all: two ponytails that stick out on either sides of my head and flip in the air like a pair of wings. One of these days I just might take off and fly!" In this final scene of the books Keyana is embracing the freedom that is her Afro textured hair. She is realizing that she doesn't have to be overwhelmed and discouraged by her glory. Her hair is capable of so much that Keyana feel free to explore whatever style she seeks. Much like Keyana, when one defines their own happiness in life, they experience such freedom that flying and reaching for the stars is well in their reach (23).

The following chapter takes a closer look at *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which was paired with *Nappy Hair* for the purposes of this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

This study explores how hair is portrayed in children's and young adult literature; therefore, this chapter will outline the portrayal of hair in what is often a secondary English Language Arts reading requirement: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Huston, 1937).

### **About the author:**

Author Christine Ayorinde (2014) describes Hurston as “A strong, controversial and fiercely independent woman, in many respects Hurston was ahead of her time” (p. 1). Born in Notasulga, Alabama to Lucy Ann Potts, a former schoolteacher, and John Hurston, a carpenter and Baptist preacher, African-American novelist Zora Neale Hurston has earned her place up there with other classic American Authors. For a majority of her adolescent life, Hurston was raised in Eatonville, Florida the first all-black community to be incorporated in the United States for which her father served as the mayor. The fifth of eight children, Hurston was extremely close with her mother, so it was only natural that she took it extremely hard when her mother passed away in 1904. Her relationship with her father deteriorate and as a result, she took off traveling the south doing odd jobs such as being a wardrobe girl and a live-in maid to support her education.

After enrolling as a part time student at Howard University, Hurston took up writing. When a piece of her writing was published in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* in 1925, Hurston moved to New York City to partake in the Harlem Renaissance. Her charm and

intelligence caused her to be popular amongst her peers and her early stories were very much a reflection of the Central Florida community that she was from. Both the dialect and the black heritage was present in her work which was catching enough attention that one of her stories in *The New Negro* (1925) and Hurston also won second prize in a literary contest sponsored by Opportunity.

Hurston wrote pieces such as *Mule Bone*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* upon her return to Florida after much hardship. Her most acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), was written in a matter of weeks. Pieces such as *Tell My Horse* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* also followed. Despite multiple marriages, Hurston never had children and after suffering after suffering a stroke, Hurston died of hypertensive heart disease in 1960. A strong, controversial woman, Hurston's work transcends time and continues to be influential to readers even today.

### **History of the Book:**

Written in 1937, Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes place in the 1900's. The main character Janie, is unlike the other African-American female characters in the story. With a grandmother who was a slave, and a grandfather who was white, Janie is anything but typical. Much like Janie, her mother, was of a lighter complexion and as a result of being raped by her school teacher, Janie was born. Though free at the time, African Americans were viewed as second class citizens especially in the south. Due to a lack of education, many African Americans were reduced to doing the jobs that no one else would do as result of the lack of the lack of education, many black were forced to take on jobs that require heavy manual labor.

Eatonville, the setting of the story, was the first incorporated African-American town in the United States. Not only were blacks viewed as second class citizens, but women had little to



no rights during this particular time period. Throughout the story, we see an illustration of the lack of women's rights when we look at Janie's character. She was groomed by her grandmother from an early age to eventually become the wife of a man who would be able to support her financially. It was practically unheard of during this particular time in history, where a woman was able to take care of herself financially, so naturally Janie was married off to the highest bidder off by her grandmother. As the story goes on, times passes, and Janie finds herself in a series of different romantic relationships and grows into herself as a woman.

Though written a number a years later, this book was the byproduct of the immense amount of pain and suffering that was witnessed by Hurston curtsey of The Great Depression. Due to grim economic conditions, "Social realism" became very popular as it pertained to literature during this time. On other words, this was a social commentary of the issue that attention needed to be placed on the injustices that African-Americans faced. Zora's writing was targeted when it was originally published because of both the fact that she was a woman and African-American. Zora experience extreme difficulty trying to get her work published because many in the writing community found her writing disgraceful. Despite her large body of work, Hurston died in poverty in 1960. This story is often times thought to be a reflection of Hurston's life through her character Janie's thoughts and actions. In the beginning of the text, the reader see a reflection of both social and political inequalities between African-Americans and Caucasians as well as between men and women. This story is believed to be her social commentary on things. Despite the fact that Janie and Zora are different people, they both faced similar difficulties and this story was an illustration that things did not change with the times.

### **Author's purpose of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written as a social commentary to address issues of gender inequality, and the roles that African-American women are placed in as it pertains to social and personal relationships. The threat of a loss of identity for the Black woman is also a subject matter that I pulled to the forefront in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a piece of text that has been richly decorated with language that has strong poetic jargon and folkloric imagery to fully carry the intended message.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* contains many strong images of feminism. For instance, Janie's hunger for the perfect marriage, which was a representation of the lack of self-love. "There is also the pear tree image of femininity, the mule symbol also represents womanhood" (Al-Masaeed, and Few.2009). However, Janie's hair is by far the strongest symbol used by Houston as a reflection of Janie's feminism. Here, is where the audience see a representation of Janie's feminine strength and beauty.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is perceived by critics as a journey toward self-identity through which a black female achieves growth and development against the history and the oppression of race and sex. 'Janie rejects her grandmother's misguided vision of black women's lives in favor of the journey to the horizon in search of the independent self.' Her relationship with Tea Cake (her third husband) helps her to find her identity, but his death helps her to stand for herself and to speak in her own voice without being dependent on men anymore. (McKay 62)

### **The use of Hair:**

It is often said that a woman's hair is her glory and it is evident to the audience that Jody Starks, Janie's second husband felt the same way. Jody felt that Janie's glory (her hair), was attracting the men of Eatonville to be filled with lust for her and this ultimately caused much friction between them. So much so, that he demanded that Janie tie her hair up as a symbol of the control that he had over her. We see Janie embracing her freedom and womanhood when Jody dies because she burned every head wrap she was ever forced to wear and let her hair down both literally and figuratively.

Author Ashe Michèle suggest that Hurston loads allusions to Jody's interest in Janie's hair into their meeting and courtship, so it is not surprising that Janie's hair becomes an issue during their marriage. Ironically, although Janie tells Joe on his death bed that he didn't know her at all, where her hair is concerned he may have known her only too well. Recognizing that Janie's hair was vital to her self-esteem, Joe made sure he kept her hair under his control. Throughout their twenty years of married life, Joe insisted that Janie keep her hair tied up when she was around the store and the post office. Although "this business of the headrag irked her endlessly, Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store" (86). Janie and Joe were locked in a power struggle over her hair, and for twenty years, Joe won out. Because Joe was aware that Janie's hair symbolized her "self," Joe began to communicate to the people of Eatonville that he "owned" Janie's hair as a means of demonstrating that he, in effect, "owned" Janie. And the public got the message. In the following passage, which occurs just after Joe becomes mayor of Eatonville, some of the townsfolk are sitting around talking, wondering if the

power Joe wields as mayor extends to his home. The passage reveals the depth of the community's interest in Janie's hair as a feature that sets her apart from the other townswomen:

"Ah often wonder how dat lil wife uh hisn makes out wid him, 'cause he's uh man dat changes everything, but nothin' don't change him."

"You know many's de time Ah done thought about dat mahself. He gits on her ever now and then when she make little mistakes round de store."

"Whut make her keep her head tied up lak some ole 'oman round de store? Nobody couldn't git me tuh tie no rag on mah head if Ah had hair lak dat."

"Maybe he make her do it. Maybe he skeered some de rest of us mens might touch it round dat store. It sho is uh hidden mystery tuh me." (Ashe, 1995, p. 79)

It is at this point, when Janie meets her third Husband Tea Cake who embraced and adored every inch of her wild curly glory. For instance, the narrator states, "Tea Cake treats Janie's hair (womanhood) with considerate devotion, and it is under these circumstances that Janie's identity is her own" (103). Here, the audience sees Janie accepting both her femininity and beauty as her true strength.

The following chapter provide a discussion of the idea of pairing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with the two children's books chosen for this study in order to engender conversation about images of Black beauty in our culture and in literature.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION OF ANALYSES OF THE PAIRING

In order to analyze the representations of beauty in this thesis entitled, *My Black Is Beautiful: A Study of How Hair Is Portrayed in Children's And Young Adult Literature*, this chapter seeks to look at the selected books as a unit, rather than individually. This chapter will focus on the way in which Natasha Tarpley's *I Love My Hair* (1998), Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair* (1997) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) holistically portrays hair.

After reading and analyzing these three books, a few major aspects came to light that *I Love My Hair*, *Nappy Hair*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* have in common. For instance, all three pieces of text were written by African-American women, they all captured significant aspects of the Afro/African-American culture, but most of all, they all served as phenomenal celebration of Afro textured hair. Though these stories were told in different ways and were reflective of different times, they all managed to capture Afro-beauty as it pertains to hair. In comparing *I Love My Hair*, *Nappy Hair* and *Their Eyes Were watching God*, I will focus on how hair was shown, how African-American history was touched on, and how each author chose to deliver their messages.

When the reader looks at *I Love My Hair*, it is evident that some reflection and reminiscing are taking place. We learn from the author that after years of getting hair done by her mother, she had become so accustomed to it that when she no longer needed her mother's assistance. Yet, despite her happiness at first, she began to miss it. In this children's book, the main character is taught both her heritage and life lessons through her hair. Her mother uses the

versatility of Afro hair to illustrate the main characters beauty and strength. In *I Love My Hair*, there are multiple occasions where African-American history was touched on. There is an instance in the book when the main character is being made fun of by her peers due to the Afro texture of her hair. Her mother takes this opportunity to teach her that during the civil rights movement, many African Americans wore their hair in an Afro state to illustrate the pride they had.

Each book had a different way of addressing the topic of hair. In *Nappy Hair*, a call and response route is being taken by the characters. Call and Response is executed with Uncle Mordecai speaking a line which is then followed by lines spoken by the audience. For instance, when Uncle Mordecai calls out, in the beginning, we see the family preparing themselves for what Uncle Mordecai will say, because they know that there is a lesson to learn. As the story proceeds, we see call and response being used as more than just a writing technique, it illustrates the families support for what Uncle Mordecai is about to say. This call and response that takes place between the characters, is very reflective of the African-American culture. Historically call and response is something that was and still is very prominent in the African-American Culture. Call and response is something that was used by slaves to communicate with each other because the lack of literacy that was present. Presently, in traditional African-American churches, pastors will say, "Can I get an Amen?" and the congregation will reply "Amen," which illustrates just how prominent this tradition is to the African-American community.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the author uses chattel situations to illustrate the main character Janie's strength and growth. As she is faced with different challenges, she changes along with her. For instance during her second marriage, her husband saw her as property to be

protected. She was to speak only when spoken to and her place as a woman was not with the men. During this time, it was also demanded by her husband that her hair be wrapped up and tucked away much like Janie. The reader see very strong images if hair throughout the novel and parallels between Janie's hair and the rest of her life. One of the central illustration and reflections of African-American is In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be found in the setting of the story which is Eatonville, Florida. Eatonville is especially known for being the first all-black community to be incorporated in the United States. The reader can see the purposeful placement by the author to illustrate the parallels of the novel to the author's actual life.

The formatting of these books are especially different mainly because *I Love My Hair* and *Nappy Hair* are children's picture books and a *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel. The picture books are filled with vibrant colored pictures to help tell the intended story. The novel, on the other hand, is filled with colorful language and strong imagery so despite the lack of pictures, the reader was able to construct phenomenal mental imagery.

These books and their discussion of hair is important to day because they provide a variety of way that to address many different issues of diversity but hair most of all. These books explore hair in such a way that the reader is able to looks past the surface level idea of hair and really understand what it represent in both the books and society as a whole. The discussion of Afro hair is still very important today because there are minimal representations and because of the aspiration of Afro-beauty being desirable to the masses. Both consciously and subconsciously, young black girls are being told by society that the beauty that they possess as African-Americans, is not good enough to be accepted by the mainstream. Therefore, I worked

to include a sample lesson plan for high school English Language Arts students based on utilizing these three books ( See Appendix B).



## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the portrayal of Afro-beauty, with a particular focus on the children's books *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair*, paired with the young adult book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In conducting this research, I have found that hair, as it pertains to Afro-beauty, is used in both children's picture books as well as the young adult piece of text as a means of cultural pride, an illustration of beauty, and most of all a display of the strength Afro women possess. In these three pieces of literatures, though set and written in different times, there were common threads that were evident to the audience, and that was the celebration of hair. In my research, I have found that society doesn't present Afro textured hair as desirable to the masses. However, for Afro women, it is our glory, and while we are not our hair, it tells a marvelous story that dates back as far back as the *Bible*.

### **Educational Implications**

When the educational implications of this research is brought to the table, we are also focusing on diversity in the classroom. This research is important to teachers because students want to see themselves in the materials that are being used in the classroom on a daily basis. Jackson and Boutte (2009) state, "It stands to reason that in cases where there is a match between the gender and ethnicity of student and teacher, teachers are highly likely to understand and relate to the students. Children whose networks are small regarding support and validation from the curriculum, imagery, and actual teachers (e.g., African Americans) are likely given the message that they are invisible, unimportant, and inferior" (Jackson & Boutte, 2009).

When students feel like they can relate to the material that is being presented to them, they are more inclined to participate in their learning environments. An effective learning environment is one that is inclusive for everyone. That ranges anywhere from developmentally disabled students, to students who represent a plethora of different cultures and diverse backgrounds. This teaches students cultural sensitivity for their peers and the world outside of the classroom. This research is a way for teachers to open up the conversation about stereotypes with students and really discuss the way that they affect the environment in which we coexist. The images that are illustrated in the picture books used in this research, are present to introduce students to a different idea of beauty. These images give students the go ahead to define beauty in their own way. Exposing students to these new ideas of beauty opens the door for a more respectful learning environment because when students see each other as equals, they are more likely to respect each other's likes and differences. Due to the fact that students have the media showing them a one-sided perspective on beauty, those who exhibited that specific look, may feel/act superior to those who do not embody or possess the same mainstream characteristics. Those students who may be underrepresented may feel inferior and refrain from engaging in a learning community.

Contrary to popular belief, picture books can be just as effective at the secondary level as at the primary and developmental level which is my reason behind selecting two picture books and a young adult novel. In actuality, picture books might be even more effective at the secondary level because of its ability to spark real, raw, and honest conversation among teens. When a student is presented with a picture, it evokes real emotions and responses that reading a novel wouldn't necessarily spark without the teacher posing guiding questions. Using a picture book

separate from a novel and vice versa can definitely be effective, but when paired, that makes for a stimulating and more involved learning environment. This means that students have both words and pictures evoking a response that will bring learning to life in a way that many teachers crave. *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* can be used a precursor for the information that student's will ultimately come across in the young adult book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Despite the simple displays that are found in these two picture books, the effectiveness of those picture are thought provoking as it pertains to diversity. The picture books *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* does not come up short when paired with the young adult *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This research is an open invitation for the discussion of diversity.

### **Limitations and future research**

There are a few main factors that would play a role in my future research. These factors include; selecting an additional four novels by African-American female authors and an additional three children's picture books. In incorporating multiple books from a variety of eras, it would not only add diversity to my research, but it would give both me and my audience the opportunity to see what was being said about hair over the course of time. Using both novels and children's books opens up the conversation of hair to both you black girls as well women.

Including interviews of the perception of Afro women from a variety of backgrounds and all ages would also add to the depth of my future research. The focus for my current research was based in three books and their analyses, but I utilizing other pieces of literature representing Afro beauty involved would really make room for a real conversation with young impressionable women. Also, interviewing and involving culturally responsive literature in regard to a variety of women from a many different ethnicities outside the mainstream are important because no two

people have lived the same life. Conducting these interviews might provide the opportunity to get a better understanding of the truths of these women as it pertains to their images of beauty and their hair. Hearing what others have to say about hair as it pertains to Afro beauty is very important because we are all affected by standards and perceptions of beauty that confront us every day by society.

Another thing that I would look aspect to explore is the way hair is perceived by men in the African-American culture as it pertains to Afro women and beauty. Gender likely plays a role in the way that women perceive their hair, no matter the role they play in a woman's life. Examining the understandings of perceptions, perspectives, and the attitudes that Black men and other ethnicities perceive Afro hair would be quite interesting because that may open a door for a greater conversation. This thesis provides a foundation of research for future explorations of the way Afro women think of their own tresses and the larger impacts upon society.

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**APPENDIX A: 10 QUICK WAYS TO ANALYZE CHILDREN'S  
BOOKS FOR RACISM AND SEXISM**

## **Appendix A: 10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books For Racism and Sexism**

### **10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books For Racism and Sexism**

Both in school and out of school, young children are exposed to racist and sexist attitudes. These attitudes expressed repeatedly in books and other media – gradually distort children’s perceptions until stereotypes and myths about minorities and women are accepted as reality. It is difficult for librarians or teachers to convince children to question society’s attitudes; but if children can learn to detect racism and sexism in books, they can transfer that skill to other areas. The following ten guidelines can be used by teachers, librarians, and other educators to evaluate children’s books and to help students detect racism and sexism in the books they read.

#### **1. Check the Illustrations**

*Look for stereotypes.* A stereotype, which usually has derogatory implications, is an oversimplified generalization about a particular group, race, or sex. Some infamous (overt) stereotypes of blacks are the happy-go-lucky, watermelon-eating Sambo and the fat, eye-rolling “mammy;” of Chicanos, the sombrero wearing peon or fiesta-loving, macho bandito; of Asian Americans, the inscrutable, slant-eyed oriental; of American Indians, the naked savage or primitive brave and his squaw; of Puerto Ricans, the switch blade toting teenage gang member; and of women, the domesticated mother, the demure little girl, or the wicked stepmother. While you may not always find stereotypes in the blatant forms described, look for descriptions, depictions, or labels that tend to demean, stereotype, or patronize characters because of their race or sex. *Look for tokenism.* If racial minority characters

appear in the illustrations, do they look like white people except for being tinted or colored? Do all minorities look stereotypically alike, or are they depicted as individuals with distinctive features?

*Look for active doers.* Do the illustrations depict minorities in subservient and passive roles or in leadership and action roles? Are males the active doers and females the inactive observers?

## **2. Check the Story Line**

Publishers are making an effort not to include adverse reflections or inappropriate portrayals of minority characters in stories; however, racist and sexist attitudes still find expression in less obvious ways.

Examples of some subtle (covert) forms of bias include the following:

- *Standard for success:* Does it take “white” behavior standards for a minority person to “get ahead?” Is “making it” in the dominant white society projected as the only ideal? To gain acceptance and approval, do persons of color have to exhibit extraordinary qualities, excel in sports, get A’s, and so forth? In friendships between white and nonwhite children, is it the child of color who does most of the understanding and forgiving?
- *Resolution of problems:* How are problems presented, conceived, and resolved? Are minority people considered to be “the problem?” Are the oppressions faced by minorities and women represented as related to social injustice? Are the reasons for poverty and oppressions explained, or are poverty and oppression accepted as inevitable? Does the story line encourage passive acceptance or active resistance? Is a particular problem faced by a racial minority person or a female resolved through the benevolent intervention of a white person or a male?

• *Role of women:* Are the achievements of girls and women based on their own initiative and intelligence, or are their achievements due to their good looks or relationships with boys? Are sex roles incidental or critical to characterization and plot? Could the same story be told if the sex roles were reversed?

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### **3. Look at the Life-Styles**

Are minority persons and their settings depicted in ways that contrast unfavorably with the unstated norm of white middle-class suburbia? If the minority group in question is depicted as “different,” are negative value judgments implied? Are minorities depicted exclusively in ghettos, barrios, or migrant camps? If the illustrations and text depict other cultures, do they go beyond oversimplifications and offer genuine insights into other life-styles? Look for inaccuracies and inappropriateness in the depictions of other cultures. Watch for instances of the “quaint-natives-in costume” syndrome, which is noticeable in areas such as clothing, customs, behaviors, and personality traits.

### **4. Weigh the Relationships Among People**

Do white people in the story possess the power, take the leadership, and make the important decisions?

Do racial minorities and females of all races primarily function in supporting roles?

How are family relationships depicted? In black families is the mother always dominant? In Hispanic families are there always many children? If the family is separated, are social conditions – unemployment and poverty, for example – cited as reasons for the separation? Are both sexes portrayed in nurturing roles with their families?

### **5. Note the Heroes**

For many years books showed only “safe” minority heroes – those who avoided serious conflict with the white establishment. Today, minority groups insist on the right to define their own heroes (of both sexes) based on their own concepts and struggle for justice. When minority heroes do appear, are they admired for the same qualities that have made white heroes famous or because what they have done has benefited white people? Ask this question: “Whose interest is a particular hero serving?”

### **6. Consider the Effects on a Child’s Self-Image**

Are norms established that limit any child’s aspiration and self-concept? What effect can it have on black children to be continually bombarded with images of the color white as the ultimate in beauty, cleanliness, and virtue and the color black as evil, dirty, and menacing? Does the book counteract or reinforce this positive association with the color white and negative association with the color black?

What happens to a girl’s self-image when she reads that boys perform all brave and important deeds?

What is the effect on a girl’s self-esteem if she is not fair of skin and slim of body?

In a particular story is there one or more persons with whom a minority child can readily and positively identify?

### **7. Check Out the Author's Perspective**

No author can be entirely objective. All authors write from a cultural as well as personal context.

In the past, children's books were written by members of the middle class. Consequently, a single ethnocentric perspective has dominated children's literature in the United States. Read carefully any book in question to determine whether the author's perspective substantially weakens or strengthens the value of his or her written work. Is the perspective patriarchal or feminist? Is it solely Eurocentric, or are minority cultural perspectives respected?

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### **8. Watch for Loaded Words**

A word is "loaded" when it has insulting over-tones. Examples of local adjectives (usually racist) are *savage, primitive, conniving, lazy, superstitious, treacherous, wily, crafty, inscrutable, docile,* and *backward*.

Look for sexist language and adjectives that exclude or ridicule women. Look for use of the male pronoun to refer to both males and females. While the generic use of the word man was accepted in the past, its use today is outmoded. The following examples illustrate how sexist language can be avoided: substitute the word ancestors for forefathers; chairperson for chairman; community

for brotherhood; firefighters for firemen; manufactured for manmade, and the human family for the family of man.

### **9. Look at the Copyright Date**

With rare exceptions nonsexist books were not published before 1973. However, in the early 1970s children's books began to reflect the realities of a multiracial society. This new direction resulted from the emergence of minority authors who wrote about their own experiences.

Unfortunately, this trend was reversed in the late 1970s, and publishers cut back on such books. Therefore, although the copyright date can be a clue as to how likely the book is to be overtly racist or sexist, a recent copyright date is no guarantee of a book's relevance or sensitivity. The copyright date indicates only the year the book was published. It usually takes about two years from the time a manuscript is submitted to the publisher to the time it is printed. This time lag meant little in the past; but today, publishers attempt to publish relevant children's books, and this time lag is significant.

### **10. Consider Literacy, Historical, and Cultural Perspectives**

Classical or contemporary literature, including folktales and stories having a particular historical or cultural perspective, should be judged in the context of high-quality literary works. In many cases it may be inappropriate to evaluate classical or contemporary literature according to the guidelines contained in this brochure. However, when analyzing such literary works, remember that although a particular attitude toward women or a minority group was prevalent during a certain period in history, that attitude is in the process of changing.

Adapted from the original brochure, which was published by the Council on Interracial Books for Children by the CALIFORNIA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Bill Honig, Superintendent of Public Instruction Sacramento, 1998

This brochure, adapted with permission for the Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1841 Broadway, New York, NY 10023, is provided by Project SEE (Sex Equity in Education), California State Department of Education, P.O. Box 944272, Sacramento, CA 94244-2720; telephone 916-322-7388.

A related filmstrip, *Identifying Sexism and Racism in Children's Books*, is also available on loan from Project SEE. In addition, detailed criteria for evaluating children's books is contained in *Standards for Evaluation of Instructional Materials with Respect to Social Content*, which is available for \$2.25, plus sales tax for California residents from Publications Sales, California State Department of Education, P.O. Box 271, Sacramento, CA 95802-0271.

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## **APPENDIX B: LESSON PLANS**

## Appendix B: Lesson Plans

Day 1

*Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair*: Symbolism

Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss the use of symbols in literature
- Using a list of the prominent symbols in *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* analyze what the symbols represent, where the symbols appear in the Books , and why the author used it.
- Write a short analysis (or longer essay) of the symbol of choice and/or create an illustration of the meaning of the symbol.

Materials:

- Pens, pencils, paper
- Word Wall
- Copies of *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair*

Concepts in this lesson:

What is a symbol?

An object or physical thing that suggests, expresses, or represents a reality beyond itself.

Examples include: a sunrise literally showing the beginning of a new day and symbolically standing for a new beginning; a rose is literally a flower and symbolically it stands for beauty and purity.

Symbolism in literature: Not every writer chooses to use symbols that are recognizable to everyone. Often, writers create their own symbols for the purposes of expressing larger, more

abstract ideas and concepts. When you are reading literature, ask

- “Which objects or physical things have a central place in this book?”
- “Which objects or physical things appear repeatedly in the narrative and/or appear at seemingly significant moments?”
- “Which object or physical thing seems to transform other elements in this book?”

Activity:

Place all the words from *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* on a word wall. (Allows students to get acquainted with the terms they will hear when I read both picture books to them)

Read *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* to students.

Break students up in groups of fives and have students select thirty words per group from the wall.

Students will then be given the option of writing a poem, song, or a short story and will choose one option as a group.

Student will have to use the selected words in at least ten different arrangements to construct metaphors in their group writings.

An example will be illustrated for students.

Students will get the opportunity to present their writing in class as well as discuss the metaphors they constructed and discuss why.

Read *Nappy Hair* and *I Love My Hair* to students again but have them listen for symbols in both books and jot them down.

Discuss symbols present in both books and why the author selected to use them.

Assessment:

Have students select symbols from their choice of the two books and write about how they identify with that symbol and why.

Day 2

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Symbolism

Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss the use of symbols in literature
- Using a list of the prominent symbols in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, analyze what the symbols represent, where the symbols appear in the novel, and how the characters in the novel are affected by each symbol.
- Select one symbol from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to focus on and analyze.
- Write a short analysis (or longer essay) of the symbol of choice and/or create an illustration of the meaning of the symbol.

Materials:

- Pens, pencils, paper
- “Powerful Symbols” handout for each student
- Copies of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston

Concepts in this lesson:

What is a symbol?

An object or physical thing that suggests, expresses, or represents a reality beyond itself.

Examples include: a sunrise literally showing the beginning of a new day and symbolically

standing for a new beginning; a rose is literally a flower and symbolically it stands for beauty and purity.

Symbolism in literature: Not every writer chooses to use symbols that are recognizable to everyone. Often, writers create their own symbols for the purposes of expressing larger, more abstract ideas and concepts. When you are reading literature, ask

- “Which objects or physical things have a central place in this book?”
- “Which objects or physical things appear repeatedly in the narrative and/or appear at seemingly significant moments?”
- “Which object or physical thing seems to transform other elements in this book?”

*I love My hair/Nappy Hair Activity*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there are several important symbols that appear in the novel, including:

- the horizon
- the porch
- Janie’s hair
- the mule/the yellow mule
- the gate
- the pear tree

These are the prominent ones (though students may find others). Most of these symbols show up numerous times throughout the novel. Even if a symbol only appears in a single chapter (as the yellow mule does in Chapter 6), it can still carry symbolic importance.

How do students engage with the concepts in this lesson?

Once students are confident they understand the definition of symbolism and how symbols work in the novel, have them choose a symbol from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to focus on as they read.

Have them keep track of the symbol by keeping a running log of the occurrences of the symbol in the book, including page number, quotation, and a short response to the significance of the symbol in that instance and which characters are affected by it.

Step-by-step:

1. Begin the lesson by having a class discussion about the role of symbols in literature. Include such questions as:

- Why do authors use symbols?
- What do symbols convey?
- Do students think of symbols as powerful or effective literary devices?

2. Then ask students to think about symbolism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Discuss the compelling symbol of the horizon which appears at the beginning of the novel. Ask students:

- What do you think the horizon could potentially represent?
- Do you have any personal association with the symbolic power of horizons? Describe it.
- What seems important to Janie about horizons and those who talk about them?
- Why is she trying to reach a more distant or expansive horizon?

3. Go over the *Powerful Symbols* worksheet with students, showing them, explaining directions to them, filling in the questions for the first symbol, the horizon, and discussing how they should fill out the rest the worksheet as they read the novel.

4. Tell students that they will have an opportunity to experiment using symbols in a piece of

writing. Working individually or in pairs, students should choose a symbol from the novel. They should then either discuss their chosen symbol within the pair, or write a short analysis with or without an illustration, of the symbol. If students are advanced enough to write a longer essay on their symbol's significance to the novel overall, assign them the essay at the end of the book.