

5. HOPE IN DESPAIR

Story: “The Sky Is Gray”

by Ernest Gaines

(Student: Thom Lee)

After a brief introduction, consisting of a comment on how the title of the story reflects its substance, Thom uses a cluster thesis statement, in which he mentions all three of the major themes. The rest of the essay is an orderly discussion of each theme that he introduces with a suitably worded topic sentence. All relevant supporting details from the story are tied to the topic sentences. The concluding comment emphasizes Ernest Gaines’ optimism in spite of the turbulent race relations. The time of the story is during World War II, which explains why James’ father had to join the army.

Before reading Thom Lee’s essay, watch the excellent film adaptation of this story starring Olivia Cole, preferably as a class. Your instructor can arrange to show this half-hour long film. If you cannot watch the film, you can read the story either online or from a library book. Because of very high permissions cost, the story’s text could not be included in this book.

Silver Lining in the Gray Sky

by Thom Lee

The title of Ernest Gaines' story "The Sky is Gray" prepares the reader for the depressed psychological atmosphere that looms over the lives of Southern Blacks. It also suggests that the human spirit's potential, like the boundless skies, can become limited by the clouds of social injustice. Gray, the mixture of black and white, is symbolic of the delicate balance of relations between the two races. The author employs such imagery to warn of the impending storms of political upheaval that are to occur if social injustice is not rectified.

The major theme of the story is that the innate dignity of the human spirit cannot be debased despite the dehumanizing effects of racism and poverty. Spiritual strength, however, is not gained merely by surviving adverse life conditions. That is why Gaines believes that one must also have the courage to challenge the false values of the status quo; otherwise complacent acceptance can lead to rigidity and submission. The story, moreover, contains a warning that the creation of two parallel societies alienated from one another can make relations between the groups extremely difficult.

Octavia, the mother in this story, clearly personifies the tenacious will of the human spirit to uphold dignity under such oppressive forces as poverty and racism. Her fighting spirit is illustrated in her refusal to surrender to the grief of losing her husband. Rather than wallow in self pity, she redirects her hopes and ambitions towards her son, James. In order to prepare James for the rigors of a harsh reality, Octavia first tells James that he must assume the responsibilities of a man. She constantly reprimands him for crying or showing any other forms of weak and what she considers unmanly behavior. In one scene, She forces him to kill the redbirds he had captured for their dinner. James tearfully resists at first, but finally submits to his mother's goading. The success of her lesson in survival is evident when, at the dinner table, James finally realizes the responsibility he has towards providing for a family. "Suppose she [his mother] had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who'd look after us?" James also concludes that being a man not only entails withstanding pain, but that one must always think of others' welfare and be able to provide for one's family.

Another example of Octavia's determination to temper James' spirit is during their trip into town. As a result of being denied a visit to the dentist, Octavia and James proceed to wander about town trying to pass the time until the dentist is available. Despite the icy and vicious sleet, Octavia speeds along with an obsessive vitality that seems amazing to James. James displays "manly behavior" when despite the hunger pangs, the bone chilling cold, and an aching tooth, he utters not one word of complaint. Octavia's love is reflected in James' awareness that expression of weakness on his part would hurt his mother. He therefore becomes even more determined to bear his discomfort. When they enter the restaurant to eat, James at first refuses the food, lying and saying that he isn't hungry.

James' desire to provide comfort and joy to his mother is shown in his determination to buy her a brand new red coat when he has enough money. After they have traversed the length of town several times, Helena, an old white lady, asks them to

come in. Helena sympathizes with James and his mother and, under the pretense of wanting her garbage moved, invites them to share her food. Octavia declares that receiving handouts is beneath her dignity, showing James that despite their impoverished condition, they are not beggars. After James moves the empty garbage cans, they prepare to leave Helena's house. When James automatically turns up his collar to shield himself from the cold, Octavia tells him to turn his collar back down saying, "You not a bum, you a man." This mother-son relationship shows responsible nurturing on the mother's part, and the deep love, respect, and understanding that James has for her. James' self-worth wells up after his mother declared him a man, making him feel that now he is capable of earning a living.

The next notable theme concerning the damaging consequences of complacent acceptance of injustice is illustrated by the debate between the student and the preacher, both of whom are African Americans. The student represents the seed of radical change while the preacher exemplifies the oppressive weight of past traditions. The total lack of respect the student has for past values is the result of his circumstances. Having lost his father and witnessed his mother working herself to death, the student is personally free of past dogmas, yet not ignorant of the abstract forces that oppress him and his people. The fact that he washes dishes to pay his way through college and further his education indicates his intense desire to investigate and communicate the causes of his people's suffering. He links the cause of their oppression to their passivity and silence: "We don't question is exactly our problem..." He also recognizes the difficulty in articulating the causes of their oppression in a language his people can understand and, therefore, encourages them to: "...question and question – question everything. Every star, every stripe, every spoken word."

The student's relentless questioning of his people's basic assumptions, from the existence of God to the color of wind, does in fact break the complacent mode of thinking that characterizes other blacks among his audience. The student not only goads them to ponder more deeply the concepts of liberty, freedom, and citizenship rights, but he also becomes a living example of courage and change. He refuses to accept the fate that society has thrust on him by declaring, "Some way or the other I'm going to make it." This is also shown vividly by his audacious questioning of the preacher's most cherished beliefs. After the preacher accuses the student of calling him submissive and ignorant and proceeds to punch him, the student displays great courage and tolerance by offering the other cheek. In this situational irony, the priest is violent whereas the student embodies the virtues of tolerance and self-control.

Gaines uses other ironic examples as well to describe the hypocrisy of the old value system. A woman asks the preacher, "I wonder why the Lord let a child like that suffer?" to which the preacher replies, "Not for us to question." She then comments, "And looks like it's the poor that suffers the most..." and the preacher answers back, "Best not even to try, He works in mysterious ways..." The dogmas that the preacher reverts back to illustrate how complacent acceptance of one's dishonorable place in society under the guise of "fate" can crush the human spirit and lead to hypocrisy. His answers typify how total submission to an abstract ideal can also ruin one's capacity for independent and critical thinking. The preacher's intolerance and rigidity is shown when he debases himself by twice punching the student. The preacher's protruding belly and

dangling gold chain is symbolic of his bondage to a racist value system that keeps him well fed, yet causes his own people to suffer.

How racism creates two parallel societies alienated from one another – the story's third prominent theme – is graphically shown when Octavia and James wander through town. While hunger and cold seem like old companions to James, the white people seem warm and well fed inside their restaurants and boutiques. James is well aware of this duality when he comments to himself, "We pass by another café, but this'n for white people, too, and we can't go in there, either." Clearly, the position that blacks occupy in life seems to be as an outsider looking in. In another example, after the dentist refuses to admit any more patients, a woman comforts Octavia by saying, "Don't feel 'jected, honey. I been around them a long time – they take you when they want to. If you was white, that's something else; but we the wrong color." The fact that whites occupy positions such as dentists and shop owners also indicates the economic privileges whites enjoy solely on the basis of skin color in this story.

The last part of the story portrays how simple human kindness must be disguised in order to bypass the rigid code of behavior inherited from a racist value system. Helena, an old white lady, sympathizes with Octavia and her son when she sees them passing by several times in the freezing cold. But in order to offer them relief from the cold, she pretends that she needs her garbage moved. Helena must impress upon Octavia that this act simply is a business deal and she in no way sympathizes with their condition: "The boy'll have to work for it. It isn't for free. I'm old but I have my pride, too..." The fact that the garbage cans were empty and the food plentiful betrays Helena's outward business-like attitude. Octavia must in turn make a pretense at "holding her own," stating, "We don't take no handouts." Later when Octavia purchases twenty five cents worth of salt meat and Helena gives her more than the purchased price, Octavia flatly refuses. Octavia must also show that despite their lowly position, they too have their pride. The elaborate pretenses that people must make in order to express simple human kindness is symptomatic of a segregated and unequal society.

Although the setting of "The Sky is Gray" is the American South it is also descriptive of race relations throughout the world. Gaines neither preaches nor is overtly political; instead he focuses on the psychological effects of racism and poverty. Each character possesses a rich, distinct, and complex psychological make-up. Having journeyed through the internal complexities of each character, one senses in each of them a record and a fear of the terrible storms of racial upheaval that are threatening to burst. The story is not without hope, for James and the student do represent the promise of a courageous new generation of young people who will not only survive the storms, but emerge with the light of understanding and humanity in their eyes.