

# **School Daze: Engagement Strategies for Middle School Readers**

**Joan Taylor**

*Middle Years Alternative School*

## **Overview**

This curriculum unit is intended for students in grade 8, but can be used by students through the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Students will read three short stories by and about African-Americans: “The Figure Eight” by John A. Williams; “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke; “A Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam” by C.H. Fuller; and “The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara. I chose these particular stories because they not only address cultural and historical circumstances whose ramifications continue to reverberate, but they also seemed to provide fertile material for applying strategies geared explicitly at improving student engagement with text. These are stories set in school, an environment that has resonance for my students. I wanted them to practice making connections with text, and to set this process in motion, I wanted to capitalize on the backgrounds my students were bringing to the texts I would be using.

## **Rationale**

While the anthology that forms the basis of eighth grade instruction in the School District of Philadelphia includes many cultures, its offerings reflect the demographics of our nation rather than that of my school. I would like to supplement our curriculum with additional selections written by and about African-Americans because I want my students to become more aware of their literary heritage.

Conflict is the engine that moves what happens in the short story, and this concept is examined in detail throughout the 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. Students at this age are interested in issues of identity, and conflict is one way that characters demonstrate their identities. Therefore, the guiding question that I used throughout this lesson plan was, “How can conflict affirm one’s identity and integrity?”

In addition to providing some culturally relevant texts, I had several other goals in mind as I planned this unit. Reading research demonstrates the importance of helping readers develop schema to enable them to file and retrieve information. The ability to access this information paves the way for new learning. Increasing their background of information will enable them to read a wider range of materials with greater ease. This practice has a snowball effect: the more

the students know, the easier it is to read. The easier it is to read, the more they learn from their reading, and the more they are likely to spend time reading.

A third goal was to get students to develop and use appropriate cognitive strategies. Current research has focused on teaching readers to use a variety of reading strategies to monitor and improve reading comprehension. I hope to model those strategies that are not typically accessed by my eighth graders and then to engage them in ongoing practice of these strategies. I rely on the work of Jeffrey D. Wilhelm in *You Gotta BE the Book* and of Elin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann in *Mosaic of Thought*. These authors emphasize how crucial it is for students to become active, engaged readers, and they provide many examples that illustrate how to lure students along that path. The disengaged readers—and the never-engaged readers—in our classrooms fail largely because they don't develop the experience of engagement that proficient readers almost unconsciously bring to the task of reading

### **Objectives**

1. Provide strategies and experiences that will promote engaged reading.
2. Use engaged reading to foster critical, close reading of text.
3. Evaluate conflict, especially as it relates to the affirmation of individual integrity.
4. Examine struggles for equality within the African-American community.
5. Make text connections (text to self; text to text; text to world).

### **Strategies**

The strategies upon which I will focus most in this unit are described in detail in Jeffrey D. Wilhelm's *You Gotta Be the Book*. As an experienced middle school reading teacher, Wilhelm conducted ongoing, in-depth classroom research, during which he analyzed what it was that his engaged readers were doing while they read. He then developed some activities for getting his less engaged and non-engaged readers to adopt these strategies.

Wilhelm focuses on those students who just don't seem to get it. They may be able to decode at grade level, but they do so without joy. They may see reading as something that is done to answer a series of questions or to get a grade, but nothing on the page is coming alive for them. These readers don't seem to know what more able readers have figured out intuitively, which is how to have inner dialogues with the text while reading and to make a series of connections throughout the reading process. Wilhelm's approach to this is to stimulate visualization as a means of getting into text. He points out that helping students work on their visualization of a text helps them tap into the background knowledge that aids many aspects of reading comprehension beyond factual recall, such as the ability to predict and to infer.

One method that Wilhelm uses to produce these effects is Symbolic Story Representation. As Wilhelm describes this process:

During and after their reading, the students... created cutouts symbolizing characters, character qualities, groups, or forces from the book; objects, scenes or setting of importance; motifs, themes, or ideas that played a role in the story; and a cutout symbolizing oneself as a reader. (Wilhelm, 43)

Students then worked with either the teacher or other students to explain their cutouts, after which they used the cutouts to dramatize the story. The cutout symbolizing the reader helped students to generate ideas about what someone might have been thinking as a particular scene from the story was enacted. Wilhelm notes that Symbolic Story Representation is

...appealing because it captures and encourages the creative and dramatic elements of reading. It also allows students a way to objectify the very hidden processes of reading and get them out where they can talk about them, and try to understand and improve them. (Wilhelm, 45)

My activities in this unit rely heavily upon Symbolic Story Representations. I want to mention that these are activities that cannot be rushed. They can be messy, and they involve a lot of classroom chatter. They do, however, get the students to read and reread in active and creative ways. It is vital to their success that the teacher be available to guide less proficient readers with support through these activities. These are instructional, not independent, activities.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Week One**

#### **“The Figure Eight” by John A Williams**

I chose “The Figure Eight” as the opening story in this instructional sequence because it is set in an environment familiar to students: the classroom. I knew that many of my students would identify with the humor of the story as well as its central conflict, a David and Goliath tale, which revolves around a boy (the David figure) who is bullied and physically abused by a teacher (Goliath). The teacher is a symbol of the intimidation that forces social conformity and submission to an oppressive social order. In the closing line of the story, the narrator neatly undermines the teacher’s cruel authority, using humor to affirm his independence from her social control.

#### **Lesson Plan 1 (45 minutes):**

Develop interest in the story “Figure Eight” by having students do a “Think/Pair/Share” on the topic of classroom discipline. Instruct students to compose an individual list of things teachers do

to maintain classroom control. Give students several minutes to create individual lists and then have students work with partners to share their lists. For the partner sharing, I do not allow students to read their lists to each other. They must talk about what is on their list in a more conversational way. When each partner has had a chance to talk about his or her own list, I have the partners exchange their lists and star the most important ideas on the other person's list. They have a chance at this point to ask questions about items on the partner's list.

Move on to a whole group discussion and ask students if they've ever heard people talk about classroom discipline in the "good old days." The goal here is to elicit knowledge about corporal punishment as a management technique.

Follow up this discussion by looking at images of classrooms in segregated schools in the 1950s. Looking at these photographs will help stimulate the imagination, which is vital to active reading. Be sure that children have a chance to have a clear sense of the setting before introducing the text of the story.

### **Lesson Plan Two (60 minutes):**

Instruct students to draw the number 8 in their writer's notebooks, and then to describe how they drew the figure 8. Encourage students to compare their written notes on how they drew their figure 8s.

Have students create a symbol that they must draw without lifting a hand. Have one student write this symbol on the board and have students volunteer to replicate this symbol on the board and in their notebooks.

Then ask students to think about how old they were when they learned to write numbers and if they can remember anything that was particularly hard or frightening about the task.

Tell students that they are going to read along as you read aloud a story about a boy who comes up against a teacher who disciplines her third grade students with constant raps on their hands from her ruler.

It is important to get students to think and talk about this scenario before the teacher begins to read aloud (or students read silently). The students' ability to access the text, create mental pictures of what they are reading, and monitor their comprehension depend upon their use of prior knowledge. For this reason, pictures of a segregated 1950s schoolroom would be a valuable support to less proficient readers. Many of these can be found online by entering the search term "segregated schoolroom 1950s."

This story is short and can easily be read in one sitting. Remind students that they are to take particular note of the conflict between teacher and pupil as well as of the internal struggle of the main character as he must produce the figure eight.

Pause during reading to encourage students to describe the picture that they see. Encourage students to draw pictures of what you are reading to them. Ask for some demonstrations of the teacher's approach to instruction, using empty paper towel rolls in place of rulers. Try to work in both visualization of the story and some appropriate mimicking of the action in the story to pull struggling readers into participation in the reading of the story.

Following the initial reading, direct students to write about or draw the conclusion of the story. Providing students with the option of drawing will encourage less able readers to respond more successfully to the text. Encourage students to return to the images from the Internet and talk about which images help them visualize the conflict in the story.

Class discussion should focus on who has won the battle: teacher or student.

A typical interpretation would be that the student triumphs; he has the last laugh and continues to write the letter 8 backwards all his life. His humor demonstrates his superiority to the teacher's brutality.

### **Lesson Plan 3** (Multiple 45 to 60 minute periods)

Students will reread "The Figure Eight" in partner pairs or small groups. As they reread, their task is to indicate places where they could retell the story using drawings, cutouts, and thought bubbles.

When they have reread the story, they should work in small groups or pairs to recreate the story visually. Doing so is a natural way to get the students to perform a close reading of the text in a way that allows them to be active. This is particularly important for less proficient readers who will benefit from this assistance to imagination that making physical representations of what they are reading will stimulate. (*You Gotta BE the Book* by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm provides a detailed analysis of this process and should be carefully read and digested by any middle school teacher who works with disengaged or reluctant readers.)

When students have completed these drawings, etc, have them retell the story using these props. When they have had a chance to do so, have them create another cutout, called "the reader." Have them stand the reader outside the action of the cutout story, and encourage them to figure out what the reader was thinking about as they retell the story using their cutouts. This will encourage them to think about their own thought processes as readers and may help the less proficient readers make better connections between themselves and the text.

### **Lesson Plan 4** (120 minutes):

As a final activity, give students the choice of writing a literary letter or creating a comic strip, in which they address the main conflict of the story. The letter may be addressed either to the main character or to Miss Wooley. (The website XtraNormal is a good resource for children who feel

unequal to the task or cartooning. It is also helpful to have support from both art and instructional technology teachers to reinforce the skills the students need to bring to these tasks.)

### **Lesson Plan 5 (90 minutes)**

Show the short film, “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” before introducing the text of the story. While many teachers show a film as a reward for having finished reading a story or a book, readers will be better able to respond to the challenges of print by beginning with a fairly clear idea about the story. For poorer readers in particular, it is helpful to provide some visual images that they can hang onto during the actual reading of the story. We frequently don’t want to wreck the “surprise” of an ending by giving students too much information about a text upfront, but we sacrifice opportunities for students to interact in a more knowing way with the text when we do so. It’s nice to experience surprise in a story, but more to the instructional point to have the student less mystified by what is going on in a story.

Following the film, direct students to either write a description or draw a picture of the conflicts that were portrayed in the film.

### **Lesson Plan Six (90 minutes)**

Read the story “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” aloud to the class. Students should follow along in their own copies. (See Appendix.) Stop at appropriate points to have students draw or write responses to the text.

After reading the story, ask students to work in partner pairs or small groups to describe differences between the text version and the film version of the story.

### **Lesson Plan Seven (90 to 120 minutes)**

Children should be given ample time to complete a variety of Symbolic Story Representations and to share their work with classmates. In the course of producing their Representations, the students will generate their own purposes for going back to consult the text. This is the kind of engagement teachers should encourage throughout this task. It takes time to do this, and although time can be a pressuring factor for teachers, it is important that the least able students have the time and support to succeed with this task. This will be their entrée to engaged reading. Teachers should take the time required to achieve this.

### **Lesson Plan Eight**

Have students complete a close reading of the text using the scaffolded version of the text included in the appendix.

Have students discuss and vote on whether conflict can affirm one’s identity/integrity.

### **Lesson Plan Nine (90 minutes)**

“Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam” –C.H. Fuller (1966)

In “Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam,” C.H. Fuller depicts a group of seven boys who are forced to confront racist bullies every day after school. The boys are victimized not only by these boys, who are white, but also by their teacher, who is black. In addition, the main character, Reuben, is further victimized (although more benignly) by his parents, each of whom has a different idea about why it is important for Reuben to defend himself.

This story revolves around a series of conflicts, and one effective approach to chunking the story for classroom instruction is to pause at the end of each conflict to allow students to visualize the setting and the action.

Begin by asking students to write down some predictions that they would make about a story that is called a “love song.” Elicit and chart their predictions.

Plan to stop several times during the first paragraph of “Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam.” The first three sentences set the scene, and students should be encouraged to draw their idea of what Miss Arnold’s class looks like.

Discuss Fuller’s emphasis on Reuben’s exact age, and then discuss the sentence, “He didn’t like his mother’s surprises or Miss Arnold.” Have kids speculate on what kinds of surprises they don’t like and why he might not like Miss Arnold.

By the end of the first paragraph, students should begin to revise their ideas of whether or not they will be reading about a “love song.”

Stop after paragraph three, and have the class draw quick sketches of Miss Arnold holding the hands of the two little white boys as they cross the street. The quality of these sketches is immaterial. The point is to involve the students in picturing the scene that is set. Engagement with the text will be enhanced as students visualize the text.

Pause the reading of the text after the paragraph that begins, “It was the same everyday. Reuben had gotten used to it...” Ask the class for suggestions about what ways that Reuben could avoid the fight. Have the class continue reading with these suggestions in mind.

The next part of the story deals with an interaction between the boys and Miss Arnold. This section can be dramatized after it has been read to them. Multiple performances should be encouraged to involve as many students in acting out the parts of Miss Arnold, Billy, Reuben, Harold Davis, Kenny, and Stevie. Students could script this section as a playwright would. (See Appendix B for my example.)

Following the discussion about prejudice, the fight with the older white boys begins. After reading about the fight, ask students why they think Reuben might be both attracted and repulsed by the daily ritual of the fight.

“His mother’s outrage was predictable, but the thought had just occurred to him, that if they didn’t stop those white boys they’d be chased home for rest of their lives.”

The scene between Reuben and his mother provides an opportunity to for students to add their own thoughts to the scene. They could do this by scripting out the scene, or by cartooning or making cutouts of the characters and having a separate character stand outside the dialogue between the characters in the story and comment on their words to each other. I’ve provided an example scenario for this in Appendix C.

Reuben’s torn coat serves a symbolic function. Ask students to generate ideas about what a coat might symbolize. Possible responses might be: warmth, care, and protection. Ask how the tear in the coat affects its symbolic meaning.

Discuss the author’s use of indirect characterization in the mother’s reaction to the torn coat. What motivates her? (She wants to do the right thing for her son, and she wants to be seen as doing the right thing. She does not want to be judged as a parent who can’t provide for her child properly. This adds to the idea that she has higher standards for Reuben than say, Billy’s parents do. Reuben does not feel free to speak in the fresh way that Billy does.)

The next part of the story takes place among between Reuben and his parents. Reuben’s father shows more understanding of Reuben’s plight but still expects to solve his problem with the white boys. This makes Reuben think harder, and he comes up with the plan that the boys successfully put in place the next day.

The scenes that follow with Miss Arnold and with the white boys lend themselves to the dialogue scripting that was used earlier. Alternatively, the class could draw these parts of the story or act them out. It would be beneficial to have students continue to think about themselves as an observer of the events in the story and to create some thought bubbles or other type of monologue that shows their thoughts and feelings as the events unfold.

Students should be given multiple opportunities to play creatively with the text either through dramatizations, drawing, or other visual response. These activities will force the students to refer back to the text. The point of these activities is to get the students to be engaged in an interpretation and looking for evidence that supports that interpretation in the text of “Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam.”

When students have completed these representations of the story, it is time to discuss the theme of the story. Hold off on this discussion until students have thoroughly explored the text. After working so closely with the story, they should be able to generate some big ideas about the story. Appropriate themes to explore would be that adults rarely understand the obstacles children have to overcome in the course of daily life; loyalty to true friends can lead to mutual protection and improvement in one’s circumstances; it is possible to fight one’s way to a more peaceful life; following through on a well-thought out plan can help solve problems.

## **Lesson Plan Ten (120 minutes)**

As a culminating activity, students will choose from among the following:

1. Students will use iMovie to create a video account of a scene from the novel.
2. Students will use XtraNormal to create a movie based upon an important scene or event in the novel.
3. Students will rewrite an important incident of the plot and show how this change would alter the climax and/or resolution of the story.

## **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

Works Cited:

- Adoff, Arnold, ed. *Brothers and Sisters; Modern Stories by Black Americans*. [New York]: Macmillan, 1970. Print.
- America's Dream*. Dir. Bill Duke and Kevin Rodney Sullivan. Perf. Danny Glover and Wesley Snipes. HBO Home Video, 2005. DVD.
- "Clear Standards - Common Core." *Clear Standards - Common Core*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 July 2012. <<http://www.pdesas.org/Standard/CommonCore>>.
- Keene, Ellin Oliver, and Susan Zimmermann. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997. Print.
- Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *You Gotta Be the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. New York, NY: Teachers College, 2008. Print.

## **Standards**

### **PA Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts**

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

### **Reading Standards for Literature Grade 8**

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of character, or provoke a decision.

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific words choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or the actors.

### **Appendices**

Attached are worksheets that may be used with “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” and “A Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam.”

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

He was the smartest boy in the Muskogee County School - for colored children. Everybody even remotely connected with the school knew this. The teacher always pronounced his name with profound gusto as she pointed him out as the ideal student. Once I heard her say: “If he were white he might, some day, become President.” Only Aaron Crawford wasn’t white; quite the contrary. His skin was so solid black that it glowed, reflecting an inner virtue that was strange, and beyond my comprehension.

In many ways he looked like something that was awkwardly put together. Both his nose and his lips seemed a trifle too large for his face. To say he was ugly would be unjust and to say he was handsome would be gross exaggeration. Truthfully, I could never make up my mind about him. Sometimes he looked like something out of a book of ancient history...looked as if he was left over from that magnificent era before the machine age came and marred the earth’s natural beauty.

His great variety of talent often startled the teachers. This caused his classmates to look upon him with a mixed feeling of awe and envy.

Before Thanksgiving, he always drew turkeys and pumpkins on the blackboard. On George Washington’s birthday, he drew large American flags

What can you learn about the setting from the opening sentence?

---

---

How does knowing he was an “ideal student” help you figure out what “profound gusto” is?

---

---

What text-to-self or text-to-world connection can you make to this opening paragraph?

---

---

Underline the sentence which uses parallel construction.

What conclusion can you draw about the narrator’s opinion of Aaron’s appearance? Underline the words that support this conclusion.

---

---

Underline the words that tell you how others thought about him.

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

surrounded by little hatchets. It was these small masterpieces that made him the most talked-about colored boy in Columbus, Georgia. The Negro principal of the Muskogee County School that he would some day be a great painter, like Henry O. Tanner.

For the teacher’s birthday, which fell on a day about a week before commencement, Aaron Crawford painted the picture that caused an uproar, and a turning point, at the Muskogee County School. The moment he entered the room that morning, all eyes fell on him. Besides his torn book holder, he was carrying a large-framed concern wrapped in old newspapers. As he went to his seat, the teacher’s eyes followed his every motion, a curious wonderment mirrored in them conflicting with the half-smile that wreathed her face.

Aaron put his books down, then smiling broadly, advanced toward the teacher’s desk. His alert eyes were so bright with joy that they were almost frightening. The children were leaning forward in their seats, staring greedily at him; a restless anticipation was rampant within every breast.

Already the teacher sensed that Aaron had a present for her. Still smiling, he placed it on her desk and began to help her unwrap it. As the last piece of paper fell away from it suddenly, her eyes flickered

What kind of text connection can you make?

---

---

See Tanner’s works at the Smithsonian:

[http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/tanner/tanner\\_main.html](http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/tanner/tanner_main.html)

What word would you substitute for concern in this sentence?

---

Underline the words that tell you how the teacher felt at the sight of Aaron’s bundle.

What would make the children “stare greedily” at Aaron?

---

---

What is a word you could substitute for rampant? How was Aaron feeling?

---

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

unbelievably. Amidst the rigid tension, her heavy breathing was distinct and frightening. Temporarily, there was no other sound in the room.

Aaron stared questioningly at her and she moved her hand back to the present cautiously, as if it were a living thing with vicious characteristics. I am sure it was the one thing she least expected.

With a quick, involuntary movement I rose up from my desk. A series of submerged murmurs spread through the room rising to a distinct monotone. The teacher turned toward the children, staring reproachfully. They did not move their eyes from the present that Aaron had brought her... It was a large picture of Christ -- painted black!

Aaron Crawford went back to his seat, a feeling of triumph reflecting in his every movement.

The teacher faced us. Her curious half-smile had blurred into a mild bewilderment. She searched the bright faces before her and started to smile again, occasionally stealing quick glances at the large picture propped on her desk, as though doing so were forbidden amusement.

“Aaron,” she spoke at last, a slight tinge of uncertainty in her tone, “this is a most welcome present. Thanks.

Underline all the words that describe how the teacher was feeling.

Underline the words tell you that there is something frightening about the gift.

What is going on in the classroom as the teacher looks at the gift?

---

---

Compare this reaction to how your classmates would react to a similar situation.

---

---

What would make Aaron feel triumphant?

---

---

Underline the words that tell you how the teacher is feeling as she faces the class.

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

I will treasure it.” She paused, then went on speaking, a trifle more coherent than before. “Looks like you are going to be quite an artist...Suppose you come forward and tell the class how you came to paint this remarkable picture.”

When he rose to speak, to explain about the picture, a hush fell tightly over the room, and the children gave him all of their attention...something they rarely did for the teacher. He did not speak at first; he just stood there in front of the room, toying absently with his hands, observing his audience carefully, like a great concert artist.

“It was like this, “he said, placing full emphasis on every word. “You see, my uncle who lives in New York teaches classes in Negro History at the Y.M.C.A. When he visited us last year he was telling me about the many great black folks who have made history. He said black folks were once the most powerful people on earth. When I asked him about Christ, he said no one ever proved whether he was black or white. Somehow a feeling came over me that he was a black man, ’cause he was so kind and forgiving, kinder than I have ever seen white people be. So, when I painted his picture I couldn’t help but paint it as I thought it was.”

After this, the little artist sat down, smiling broadly, as if he had

Underline words in this paragraph show you that the teacher has adjusted to the startling gift she has received.

What kind of conflict is the teacher experiencing? How do you know?

---

---

Why do you think the students pay such attention to Aaron?

---

---

Underline the simile in this paragraph. What is being compared?

---

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

gained entrance to a great storehouse of knowledge that ordinary people could neither acquire nor comprehend.

The teacher, knowing nothing else to do under prevailing circumstances, invited the children to rise from their seats and come forward so they could get a complete view of Aaron’s unique piece of art.

When I came close to the picture, I noticed it was painted with the kind of paint you get in the five and ten cents stores. Its shape was blurred slightly, as if someone had jarred the frame before the paint had time to dry. The eyes of Christ were deepset and sad, very much like those of Aaron’s father, who was a deacon in the local Baptist Church. This picture of Christ looked much different from the one I saw hanging on the wall when I was in Sunday School. It looked more like a helpless Negro, pleading silently for mercy.

For the next few days, there was much talk about Aaron’s picture.

The school term ended the following week and Aaron’s picture, along with the best handwork done by the students that year, was on display in the assembly room. Naturally, Aaron’s picture graced the place of honor.

There was no book work to be done on commencement day, and joy was rampant among the children. The

Why is Aaron smiling?

---

---

What circumstances force the teacher to invite the children to look at the picture?

---

---

Underline all the words and phrases that describe something.

How is Aaron’s Christ different from the Sunday School Christ?

---

---

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

girls in their brightly colored dresses gave the school the delightful air of Spring awakening.

In the middle of the day all the children were gathered in the small assembly. On this day we were always favored with a visit from a man whom all the teachers spoke of with mixed esteem and fear. Professor Danual, they called him, and they always pronounced his name with reverence. He was supervisor of all the city schools, including those small and poorly equipped ones set aside for colored children.

The great man arrived almost at the end of our commencement exercises. On seeing him enter the hall, the children rose, bowed courteously, and sat down again, their eyes examining him as if he were a circus freak.

He was a tall white man with solid gray hair that made his lean face seem paler than it actually was. His eyes were the clearest blue I have ever seen. They were the only life-like things about him.

As he made his way to the front of the room the Negro principal, George Du Vault, was walking ahead of him, cautiously preventing anything from getting in his way. As he passed me, I heard the teachers, frightened, sucking in their breath, felt the tension tightening.

Why do the teachers “esteem and fear” Professor Danual?

---

---

Underline the words that tell you how the children feel about the supervisor. Why do they feel this way?

---

---

How does the principal behave toward the superintendent?

---

---

Why would the teachers be frightened of the supervisor?

---

---

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

A large chair was in the center of the rostrum. It had been daintily polished and the janitor had laboriously recushioned its bottom. The supervisor went straight to it without being guided, knowing that this pretty splendor was reserved for him.

Presently the Negro principal introduced the distinguished guest and he favored us with a short speech. It wasn't a very important speech. Almost at the end of it, I remembered him saying something about he wouldn't be surprised if one of us boys grew up to be a great colored man, like Booker T. Washington.

After he sat down, the school chorus sang two spirituals and the girls in the fourth grade did an Indian folk dance. This brought the commencement program to an end.

After this the supervisor came down from the rostrum, his eyes tinged with curiosity, and began to view the array of handwork on display in front of the chapel.

Suddenly his face underwent a strange rejuvenation. His clear blue eyes flickered in astonishment. He was looking at Aaron Crawford's picture of Christ. Mechanically he moved his stooped form closer to the picture and stood gazing fixedly at it, curious and undecided, as though it were a

Why does the writer tell us about this chair and mention that the supervisor knew it was reserved for him

---

---

Is the narrator impressed with the speech?

---

---

Underline the words that tell you this.

Can you find an example of irony in this paragraph?

---

---

Substitute a word for array.

---

Underline the words that tell you what is going on in the supervisor's mind.

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

dangerous animal that would rise any moment and spread destruction.

We waited tensely for his next movement. The silence was almost suffocating. At last he twisted himself around and began to search the grim faces before him. The fiery glitter of his eyes abated slightly as they rested on the Negro principal, protestingly.

“Who painted this sacrilegious nonsense?” he demanded sharply.

“I painted it, sir.” These were Aaron’s words, spoken hesitantly. He wetted his lips timidly and looked up at the supervisor, his eyes voicing a sad plea for understanding.

He spoke again, this time more coherently. “Th’ principal said a colored person have jes as much right paintin’ Jesus black as a white person have paintin’ him white. And he says....” At this point he halted abruptly, as if to search for his next words. A strong tinge of bewilderment dimmed the glow of his solid black face. He stammered out a few more words, then stopped again.

The supervisor strode a few steps toward him. At last color had swelled some of the lifelessness out of his lean face.

“Well, go on!” he said, enragedly, “...I’m still listening.”

Underline the words that tell you how the children are feeling in this paragraph.

Can you think of a word that begins the same way as sacrilegious?

---

Underline the words that tell you how Aaron feels as he speaks to the supervisor.

Why does the author use dialect at this point in the story?

---

---

Underline the words that describe how Aaron is feeling.

Underline the words that tell you how the supervisor is feeling.

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

Aaron moved his lips pathetically but no words passed them. His eyes wandered around the room, resting finally, with an air of hope, on the face of the Negro principal. After a moment, he jerked his face in another direction, regretfully, as if something he had said had betrayed an understanding between him and the principal.

Presently the principal stepped forward to defend the school’s prize student.

“I encouraged the boy in painting that picture,” he said firmly. “And it was with my permission that he brought the picture into this school. I don’t think the boy is so far wrong in painting Christ black. The artists of all other races have painted whatever God they worship to resemble themselves. I see no reason why we should be immune from that privilege. After all, Christ was born in that part of the world that had always been predominantly populated by colored people. There is a strong possibility that he could have been a Negro.”

But for the monotonous lull of heavy breathing, I would have sworn that his words had frozen everyone in the hall. I had never heard the little principal speak so boldly to anyone, black or white.

What is the “understanding” between himself and the principal that Aaron has betrayed?

---

---

Why do you think the principal steps forth “presently” as opposed to stepping forth “now”? What does this show you about his decision?

---

---

Paraphrase the principal’s words to the supervisor when he defends Aaron’s painting.

---

---

---

Underline the words that tell you the atmosphere of the hall.

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

The supervisor swallowed dumbfoundedly. His face was aglow in silent rage.

“Have you been teaching these children things like that?” he asked the Negro principal, sternly.

“I have been teaching them that their race has produced great kings and queens as well as slaves and serfs,” the principal said. “The time is long overdue when we should let the world know that we erected and enjoyed the benefits of a splendid civilization long before the people of Europe had a written language.”

The supervisor coughed. His eyes bulged menacingly as he spoke. “You are not being paid to teach such things in this school, and I am demanding your resignation for overstepping your limit as principal.”

George Du Vault did not speak. A strong quiver swept over his sullen face. He revolved himself slowly and walked out of the room towards his office.

The supervisor’s eyes followed him until he was out of focus. Then he murmured under his breath: “There’ll be a lot of fuss in this world if you start people thinking that Christ was a nigger.”

Some of the teachers followed the principal out of the chapel, leaving

What tone does the supervisor take toward the principal?

---

---

How did the principal overstep his “limit as a principal”?

---

---

Do you think a white principal who made the same remarks receive the same treatment? Explain.

---

---

Why would there be “a lot of fuss in this world if you start people thinking that Christ was a nigger”?

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

the crestfallen children restless and in a quandary about what to do next. Finally we started back to our rooms. The supervisor was behind me. I heard him mutter to himself: “Damn, if niggers ain’t getting smarter.”

A few days later I heard that the principal had accepted a summer job as art instructor of a small high school somewhere in south Georgia and had gotten permission from Aaron’s parents to take him along so he could continue to encourage him in his painting.

I was on my way home when I saw him leaving his office. He was carrying a large briefcase and some books tucked under his arm. He had already said good-bye to all the teachers, and strangely, he did not look brokenhearted. As he headed for the large front door, he readjusted his horn-rimmed glasses, but did not look back. An air of triumph gave more dignity to his soldierly stride. He had the appearance of a man who had done a great thing, something greater than any ordinary man would do.

Aaron Crawford was waiting outside for him. They walked down the street together. He put his arms around Aaron’s shoulder affectionately. He was talking sincerely to Aaron about something, and Aaron was listening, deeply earnest.

What does his comment, “Damn if niggers ain’t getting smarter” show you about the supervisor?

---

---

Underline the words that show how the principal feels as he leaves the school.

“The Boy Who Painted Christ Black” by John Henrik Clarke

I watched them until they were so far down the street that their forms had begun to blur. Even from this distance I could see they were still walking in brisk, dignified strides, like two people who had won some sort of victory.

What is the point of view of “The Boy Who Painted Christ Black”?

---

---

Is the narrator of the story a reliable narrator?

---

Explain your answer.

---

---

---

## **Appendix B**

Dialogue for “Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam”

**Miss Arnold:** (in a weak and scratch voice): Billy! Billy Mayfield!

**Billy:** Yes, Miss Arnold?

**Miss Arnold:** What did you say to those boys?

**Billy:** I didn’ say nuthin!

**Miss Arnold:** I heard you! You want me to send a note to your mother?

**Billy:** He had no business callin’ me nigger! My name ain’t no nigger!

**Miss Arnold:** Billy, sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me!  
You ought to be glad you can go to school with different kinds of people.

**Billy:** My name ain’t nigger—Mom told me to let nobody call me that!

**Miss Arnold:** Well, we’ll see what your mother has to say!

**Billy:** I didn’t do nothin’.

**Miss Arnold:** Goodbye, Billy.

**Billy:** I didn’t do nothin’!—and my mother ain’t gonna’ do nothin’ to me either! ‘cause my name ain’t no nigger!

**Miss Arnold:** Why they kept you kids in the school I’ll never know—“

**Harold Davis** (behind her back as she walks away): Black bitch.

**Reuben:** She don't never say nothin' to them.

**Harold Davis:** My fathers said, she prejudice.

**Kenny:** What's that?

**Stevie:** You don't know nothin', Kenny! My mother said only white people are prejudice.

"Cause white people do prejudice. I know all about that.

**Kenny:** Well, Miss Arnold ain't white!

**Harold Davis:** My father said, some colored people do it too, but white people do it all the time.

**Reuben:** Ahhhh...I see.

Appendix C

*“A Love Song for Seven Little Boys Named Sam”*

**Mother:** Reuben, that you?

*Reader's thoughts:* I can hear my mom and me do this.

**Reuben:** Yeah.

**Mother:** What's the matter

*Reader's thoughts:* How do mothers always know something is wrong?

**Reuben** (silent, folds coat so Mother can't see the tear.)

*Reader's thoughts:* I've hidden stuff from my mom. I know what that feels like.

**Mother:** Reuben, what are you doing?

*Reader's thoughts:* Caught! Oh no!

**Reuben:** Nothin'! Mom, I don't wann' go to that school no more.

**Mother:** What? What's the matter, Reuben?

*Reader's thoughts:* Mom knows there's more to this.

**Reuben:** Them white boys is always fightin'.

**Mother:** Reuben, what happened to your coat?

**Reuben:** Nothin'.

**Mother:** Reuben! What?

**Reuben:** I didn't do it, Mom! That white boy tore it!

**Mother:** Reuben, you let some boy tear your coat? What is wrong with you?

*Reader's thoughts:* Typical parent being unfair.

**Reuben (crying):** It wasn't my fault, Mom! I couldn't help it! They chased us!

**Mother:** Dammit! What you let them chase you for?

*Reader's thoughts:* Seriously Mom, you know he didn't let them. How dumb do you think he is?

**Reuben:** They do it every day!

**Mother:** Well can't you fight back? Hit 'em back when they hit you!

*Reader's thoughts:* He does this all the time. It doesn't help.  
Grownups don't know what it's like.

**Reuben:** It's too many.

**Mother:** Go someplace! Go someplace before I whip you! Your father spends good money for a coat, and you let somebody tear it up? Go ahead, Reuben! Just go before I give you a beating! Wait 'til your father gets home. Get outta' my sight.

*Reader's thoughts:* Not fair. I know how that feels.

**Reuben** (going to his room): It wasn't my fault. It wasn't!

*Reader's thoughts:* You're right. It's not your fault. Grownups never help.