

Teaching Characterization and Metacognition using African-American Short Stories

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Overview

The ninth grade curriculum is centered on the short story, but very few readings are either about African-American characters or by African-American authors. A majority of my students are of African descent, and I know that the lack of representation in the literature that we read perturbs them. I am not as well versed as I should be in African-American literature in general, and I am using this opportunity to build a repertoire in the content area that my students most relate with. I have also noticed that my students lack metacognitive skills. While I encourage metacognition within my classes, I never actually discuss the idea. This is clearly an area in which I can improve, and I think that a unit on characterization would be an appropriate tie-in. My hope is that I can have my students use metacognitive skills to analyze stereotypes that they use and perpetuate with each other.

I plan on achieving these goals through the use of Toni Morrison's "Recitatif." There are several reasons that I selected "Recitatif" as the reading for this unit. The first reason is that when I read the story, I was forced to confront my own stereotypes as a white woman about black and white people. I read meaning into the text where there was none, and when prompted, I realized the error in my thinking. I would like to recreate the same experience for my students by letting them read meaning into Toni Morrison's words, and then having them analyze their assumptions. Because characterization is taught at the beginning of the year, I am using this unit to introduce metacognition to my students. After we complete our studies of characterization, I want to continue encouraging my students to think about the ways that they think and the effects, both

positive and negative, that your assumptions can have on yourself and others. The other reasons I selected “Recitatif” is because it is written by a black woman and it breaks down assumptions that people make about African-American literature. Morrison removes any possibility of determining which character is white or black, and that will challenge my students, most of which are used to having the answers given to them with little to no effort. At the end of the story, they will have more questions than answers, but they will also be well equipped to analyze literature, specifically character, without bias.

Rationale

A specific subject related to African-American short stories in the 21st century is how authors develop characters and how those characters differ from stereotypical African or African-American characters in other forms of media. Dealing with teenage students means dealing with stereotypes all day. I hear comments about the types of food everyone likes and I am treated as a rare specimen when I reveal that I am a vegetarian. Then arguments ensue over whose mom or grandmother makes the meal. I hear students call each other racist slurs and then tell me that they don’t mean it “like that.” I find it difficult to explain to my mostly African-American students that using those words is just as offensive whether you use them “like that” or not, especially considering I am a white woman. I would love to use these short stories to introduce topics of racism and stereotypes in my class.

The focus of the ninth grade curriculum is the short story and the theme for the year is “Search for Self.” I am excited to really examine the focus and theme for the ninth grade in a different way. Developing a curriculum unit on characterization in African-American short stories will help me enrich my students’ learning experiences. The stories provided in the literature book are entertaining, but they do not make students think on a deeper level. My school emphasizes using the third and fourth levels of Webb’s Depth of Knowledge, but the stories that we have truly only require a surface level of thinking to understand. “Recitatif” will keep my students engaged to a level where they question everything. If they approach a text at the beginning of the year from a point of inquiry, they will learn that it is beneficial to question what they read, see, and hear in order to gain deeper understanding. I also know that my students will have a much easier time relating with the short stories that I select than they will with the stories that are in the textbook because I can tailor the stories to their experiences and interests. The short story “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison will not initially interest all of my students, but I know that after a few activities they will be enthralled and possibly obsessed with proving which character is white and which is black.

This curriculum unit will improve how my students relate with their texts. If they are able to relate with the materials they read, they will use prior knowledge to make connections and notice an improvement in their understanding of both the text and the skills being emphasized in that unit. I want to introduce this way of thinking and learning

at the beginning of the year so that we can work on mastering the eligible content for the state assessment. While I would like for the emphasis of my class to be on learning, my performance as a teacher (and their performances as students) on standardized tests is more important to most, if not all, administrators and politicians. My goal is to teach my students the skills that they need to perform well on these standardized tests while engaging them and ensuring that they also learn 21st century skills and how to be productive citizens.

Objectives

This unit is intended for students in grade 9 English; however, because of the content the curriculum can be adjusted up for grades 10 through 12. The standards for high school years are all written for grade 11. My students spend their day rotating through different classrooms and learning in 50-minute blocks. They may not have access to computers or the library on a regular basis. They may not have individual copies of the story to take home to read, but it is my goal to have a copy for each student. The objective of this unit is to teach core curriculum skills and strategies from a different perspective by using texts that students can relate with. I am writing this unit under the assumption that every student has a copy of “Recitatif.” The unit is intended to last for two weeks, not including the culminating project; however, there is enough material for the unit to be expanded. The following list identifies my intended objectives and topics, and time frames for this unit:

The student objectives for the unit will include the following:

- Define new vocabulary words
- Identify and Analyze the main character(s) of a short story
- Analyze the author’s development of character(s) within a short story
- Collaborate in groups
- Compare and contrast character and stereotype from 21st century African-American short stories

My objectives for the unit will include the following:

- Increase homework completion with high-interest assignments
- Increase student comprehension with class-wide debate project
- Increase student participation with relatable texts

The topics for the unit will include the following:

- Part 1 – Character, Characterization, and African-American Literature (Two days)
- Part 2 – Reading, Writing, and Metacognition (Six days)

Strategies

For this curriculum unit, I will be implementing several different strategies. My lessons will all make use of a smart board, laptop, and projector. Students will have the opportunity to use the smart technology for projects. For homework assignments,

students will have to keep reading journals in which they take notes, make inferences, and question the text. I will administer quizzes to ensure the completion of homework assignments; students will be permitted to use their reading journals on these quizzes. I will be using graphic organizers to check for understanding. Students will work individually on a culminating essay.

Do Now/Exit Pass

I have an opening and closing activity for every class, every day. I generally use these activities to check for understanding or review. I collect them every Friday and grade for completeness. These assignments form an entire section of their overall grades and provide time for students to switch back into learning mode or collect themselves before their next classes. Do Nows are given at the beginning of class and do not last longer than seven minutes. Exit Passes are given during the last five minutes of class.

Reading Journal

For the short story, students will keep a journal of the setting, characters, important events, reader opinions/reactions (see formatting below), figurative language, and vocabulary, all with the corresponding page numbers. Journals should be bulleted and thorough because students will need them for quizzes and writing assignments. I will also supply writing prompts and questions to be answered in the journal. The questions will track student reading at home, while the prompts will require students to assess and/or reflect on the reading assignment. I will collect the journals and comment on their responses. The writing prompts will serve as class discussion points and essay questions (Wong, et al 179). The prompts will mostly relate with writing about character clues to be in line with the chapter's focus of character and characterization. Writing about character clues in conjunction with general responses will provide the highest mean on posttest scores as evidenced by Wong (185).

Students will record their opinions and reactions to the reading assignments in their journals using text rendering. I will model and review the following symbols with students prior to beginning a reading assignment: ?, \$, and *. Students will use a question mark (?) to note where they need clarification, a dollar sign (\$) where they are noting something they think is "money" or important, and a star (*) where they are excited or surprised (Shupik).

Collaborative Groups

For this unit, I will use teacher-assigned groups for various activities. The groups will be formed based on student behavior instead of data because at this point in the year I only have one or two forms of assessment to base groups on. My goal is to split up the cliques that have formed and get students used to working with people they do not necessarily

know or like. Ideally, there would be one high achieving student, two mid-level students, and one low achieving student in each group with a maximum of four students in each group. However, I am not sure that I will have enough data to ensure this distribution of skills and knowledge by the time the unit begins. The group size will be adjusted based on the number of groups needed and the number of students in each class. Each group member will have a task in addition to completing the assignment. There will be one timer to alert group members to deadlines, one scribe to record ideas, one mediator to be sure that everyone's voice is heard, and one task manager to make sure everyone is completing the assignment. If there are more than four members in a group, the additional members will be researchers. At the end of the assignment, group members will have to assess their own performance, as well as the performance of the rest of their group members.

Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share is a structured activity in which students think about a question or prompt, tell each other their thoughts in pairs, and then share with the class as a whole.

Talking Head

A good way to have students analyze character is with a talking head. It is an outline of a male or female head (depending on the hair). Inside the head, students record thoughts that the character has or might have. Outside the head, students record the actions the character has taken or might take. Analysis of characters becomes easier when students complete several talking heads to compare and contrast.

Vocabulary Four-Square

One of the best ways that I have seen students learn vocabulary is by using four-squares. The idea is to appeal to different styles of learning to aid with memory. A vocabulary four-square can be made and distributed to students, or you can give them a sample and have them draw their own. I have included a sample in the Appendices.

Peer-Editing

One of my goals for the year is to turn my students into critical readers. In order to achieve this goal, I will introduce proofreading symbols at the beginning of the year and have them proof their own papers using the symbols. Once they are capable of correctly using the proofreading symbols, I will have students exchange small assignments and check each other's work for something specific, like proper use of periods, to teach them objectivity. They will read for correctness and will not be allowed to ask questions or make comments about their partner's writing. When students write their first essay drafts,

they will put their objective skills to use. Instead of reading for correctness, they will read for content without making negative comments or unconstructive criticisms. Students will focus on the good and question the text as the audience would. Each student will be given the same tasks: underline the topic sentence, circle transition words, put a star next to something you think the author did well, and ask questions (by writing them on the paper) if you do not understand something or think that the author could clarify a point. They will also proof the text if there is time. If I notice that students are still focusing on what a paper is lacking, I will add other tasks, such as pointing out what the author did well and recommending they use it to fix another issue. Generally, making students express their concerns more eloquently than “this is stupid” forces them to recognize that they do not understand what the author is saying and it is an issue in clarity.

Jigsaw

I will be using jigsaw activities in conjunction with collaborative groups to help students better understand new material. Each group will analyze a different text then develop a presentation in which they teach the rest of the class about their texts. Every group member is required to speak in order to receive credit. The students become teachers during their presentations, which deepens their understanding of their texts and topics.

Classroom Activities

Plan #1: Character, Characterization, and African-American Literature

Objectives:

Students will be able to define new vocabulary words, identify and analyze the main character(s) of a short story, collaborate in groups, and analyze the author’s development of character(s) within a short story.

Materials:

For this plan, I will need dictionaries, poster paper, markers, newspapers and magazines available for each student in my class. I will have students in groups prior to the start of the unit. Vocabulary for characterization will be divided among groups for a jigsaw activity. I will also be referring back to short stories that we have already read and a list of fairy tales that we have used for discussing plot and setting. A talking head graphic organizer will be distributed to each student for homework.

Learning Plan (2-3 day lesson):

Day 1

Students will individually define the word “character” for their Do Now assignment. As a class, we will complete a think-pair-share on the word “character” to review each other’s definitions and create a class definition for character. Students will move into their collaborative groups and I will jigsaw the following vocabulary words evenly among the groups: speech/dialect, first-person narration, dialogue, main character, minor character, protagonist, antagonist, direct characterization, and indirect characterization. Each group will use a dictionary or computer with Internet connection to research definitions of their word. When they have an understanding of the word, they will create their own definitions. They will also decorate a poster that details what their words mean, how the concepts are used when authors are developing characters, and pictorial representations of their words to help visual learners. The posters will be put on the walls and students will visit each poster and leave a comment or question at every station. As an Exit Pass, students will individually explain the way that their words were used in a fairy tale. For example, *Three Little Pigs* uses dialogue between the wolf and each pig to show that the wolf is evil and the pigs are good. For homework, students will analyze the author’s use of the vocabulary words in one of the stories we have previously read.

Day 2

Students will individually write what they think differentiates short stories written by African-American authors from authors of other races for their Do Now assignment. The class will review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. We will have a class discussion on African-American literature and the assumptions we make about African-American authors and their writing. Some discussion points may be: differences between black and white voices, why African-American literature is taught as “otherness” instead of as regular literature, and why African-American literature tends to be censored in education. I will ask students what their stereotypes are (good and bad) about different races, accents/dialects, and social classes. We will make a chart and assess each stereotype’s validity and usefulness (Beavers). I will conclude the class by explaining metacognition and explaining that the work we completed is an example of metacognition. As an Exit Pass, students will individually tell me their opinions on the following aspects of racial stereotype: who uses racial stereotypes, is there a purpose to racial stereotypes, do we make a conscious choice to use racial stereotypes or do we use them without thinking, and is there a need for racial stereotypes? For homework, students will skim through a short story that we have read and make notes about their use of stereotypes to classify the races of each character.

Plan #2: Reading, Writing, and Metacognition

Objectives:

Students will be able to make inferences, use context clues to define vocabulary words, identify and analyze the main character(s) of a short story, collaborate in groups, analyze

the author's development of character(s) within a short story, and compare and contrast character and stereotype from 21st century African-American short stories.

Materials:

For this plan, I will distribute student copies of "Recitatif," discussion questions (see appendix), vocabulary words (see appendix), and journal prompts. There will be six journal prompts: knowing nothing but the names Roberta and Twyla, which girl do you think is black and which do you think is white; after reading the first act, why do you think that Toni Morrison makes the reader guess about the races of Roberta and Twyla instead of specifying their races; after reading the second act, how does Toni Morrison use direct and indirect characterization to develop the characters of Roberta and Twyla; after reading the third act, who do you think has more power, Roberta or Twyla, and why; after reading the fourth act, why did Roberta and Twyla act the way they did and how do they feel about each other; after finishing the story, who do you think is black, who do you think is white, and how have your predictions changed since before you started reading ("Toni Morrison" 96).

Learning Plan (5-6 day lesson):

Day 1

Students will individually write about their understanding of metacognition and stereotypes for their Do Now assignment. The class will review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. I will give the following definition of recitatif to my students: a musical, formal speech used in the narrative and dialogue parts of an opera ("Toni Morrison" 89). The story, "Recitatif," is a memory that is delivered in five acts, similarly to an opera. My students will make note of the relation of the title to the format of the story and any instance in which they think they have figured out Roberta and Twyla's races. We will review the reading journal format as a class, and I will distribute copies of "Recitatif" to the class. I will tell the class that we will be reading this story to analyze our own stereotypes and practice reading with metacognition. After learning the main characters' names, students will respond to the first journal prompt individually. As an Exit Pass, students will write their predictions about Roberta and Twyla's races on an "opinion poster." The poster will be divided into six sections with Roberta and Twyla's potential races in each section. See appendix for a suggested poster layout. For homework, students will read and take notes on Act 1, paying special attention to the discussion questions for Act 1. Students will also complete vocabulary four squares for the Act 1 vocabulary words.

Day 2:

Students will individually write about their initial assumptions as to Roberta and Twyla's races using specific examples from the text for their Do Now assignment. The class will

review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. Students will have a discussion on the characters and setting of Act 1 paying attention to historical significance. Any lingering questions will be addressed in collaborative groups. Students will be able to look up historical facts on computers. They will use the historical information in relation to racial tension to explain the encounter between Roberta's mother and Twyla's mother. As an Exit Pass, students will write their assessments of Roberta and Twyla's races on the opinion poster. For homework, students will read and take notes on Act 2, paying special attention to the discussion questions for Act 2.

Day 3:

Students will individually write about their assumptions as to Roberta and Twyla's races using specific examples from the text for their Do Now assignment. The class will review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. Students will review the definitions of direct and indirect characterization while providing examples of each from the text. Students will then write two descriptive paragraphs about another member of their collaborative groups. The first paragraph will use direct characterization and the second paragraph will use indirect characterization ("Toni Morrison" 92). As an Exit Pass, students will write their assessments of Roberta and Twyla's races on the opinion poster. For homework, students will read and take notes on Act 3, paying special attention to the discussion questions for Act 3. Students will also complete vocabulary four squares for the Act 3 vocabulary words.

Day 4:

Students will individually write about their assumptions as to Roberta and Twyla's races using specific examples from the text for their Do Now assignment. The class will review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. Students will individually complete an open-notebook reading quiz based on the reading questions from last night's homework. As an Exit Pass, students will write their assessments of Roberta and Twyla's races on the opinion poster. For homework, students will read and take notes on Act 4, paying special attention to the discussion questions for Act 4. Students will also complete vocabulary four squares for the Act 4 vocabulary words.

Day 5:

Students will individually write about their assumptions as to Roberta and Twyla's races using specific examples from the text for their Do Now assignment. The class will review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. Students will have a debate as to what the exchange about Maggie tells the reader about Roberta and Twyla's characters. The class will be divided into two groups according to their assumptions of the characters' races. In their groups, they will have five minutes to prepare textual evidence to support their theories. The teacher will then mediate an informal debate between both

sides. As an Exit Pass, students will write their assessments of Roberta and Twyla's races on the opinion poster. For homework, students will read and take notes on Act 5, paying special attention to the discussion questions for Act 5. Students will also complete vocabulary four squares for the Act 5 vocabulary words.

Day 6:

Students will individually write about their assumptions as to Roberta and Twyla's races using specific examples from the text for their Do Now assignment. The class will review the homework and share responses from the Do Now. The class will review the culminating essay and information that will be on the test. The essay will be about stereotypes they applied to Twyla and Roberta and how that has shaped their perception of each character. Students will have a final discussion about how their own stereotypes about different races made them read meaning into "Recitatif" and which race each character is, including Maggie. As an Exit Pass, students will write their assessments of Roberta and Twyla's races on the opinion poster. For homework, students will study for the test and write an outline for their essays. The final copy of the culminating essay will be due in two weeks.

Annotated Bibliography

Morrison, Toni. "Recitatif." 1983. Web. 21 Feb. 2012.

<<http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/5/morrison/recitatif.htm>>

"Recitatif" is a personal narrative of a girl's life experiences with and in relation to another girl. The girls, Twyla and Roberta, meet in an orphanage and become friends at a young age partly due to the uncomfortable situations they go through together. Toni Morrison has removed any definitive evidence of either girl's race, though the reader is aware that one girl is black and the other is white.

Teacher Resources

Beavers, Herman. "But Mostly I Lie A Lot: African-American Short Stories in the 21st Century." Teachers Institute of Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA. 31 January 2012. Lecture.

"The Search for Identity: American Prose Writers 1970-Present." 2012. Web.

<www.learner.org/amerpass/unit16/pdf/unit16ig.pdf>.

Shupik, Jessica. "Using Children's Literature to Teach Symbolism and Allegory."

2011. Web. <http://www.tip.sas.upenn.edu/2011_volume_01.html>.

"Toni Morrison "Recitatif"." *"Recitatif" by Toni Morrison*. Web. June 16, 2012

www.orr.org/teachers/lesson6.PDF.

Wong, Bernice Y. L., Sonia Kuperis, Dianne Jamieson, Lois Keller, and Robin Cull-Hewitt. "Effects of Guided Journal Writing on Students' Story Understanding." *The Journal of Educational Research* 95.3 (2002): 179-91. Print.

Materials List

1. Posters, poster paper, or large rolls of paper.
2. Markers, crayons, or colored pencils.
3. Class sets of "Recitatif."
4. Reading questions for "Recitatif."
5. Journal prompts for "Recitatif."

Appendices/Standards

The Core Curriculum of the School District of Philadelphia is aligned with the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. These standards include instruction on the following topics: independent reading, interpretation of literature, and speaking and listening skills. Characterization is tied to these topics. Students need to be fluent independent readers to understand characterization. The literary devices will help students interpret literature. To convey knowledge of content, students will need to use good listening and discussion skills. Students will focus on literary devices, specifically characterization.

1.1 Learning to Read Independently

- Vocabulary Development
- Comprehension and Interpretation
- Fluency

1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

- Literary Elements
- Literary Devices

1.6 Speaking and Listening

- Listening Skills
- Discussion

Vocabulary Four-Square

Complete a Vocabulary Four-Square for each vocabulary word.

Vocabulary Four-Square

<p>What is the denotation of this word?</p> <p>In your own words, what does the word mean?</p>	<p>Write the sentence in which the word is used.</p>
<p>Vocabulary Word:</p>	
<p>Here are three synonyms for this word:</p> <p>Here is one antonym for this word:</p>	<p>Illustrate the word.</p>

Reading Questions

Act 1

1. What details does the author provide about the race and background of each of the girls?
2. In Act 1, what do we learn about the girls and food?
3. What do we know about the characters' clothing in Act 1?
4. Does any of this information help us make predictions about the girls' races?
5. What would you have thought about the mothers if you had met them at the luncheon?
6. Who is the most powerful person at the orphanage? Least powerful? ("Toni Morrison" 91)

Act 2

1. How are the girls different now, and what does this tell us about their social class and possibly their races?
2. How does Roberta treat Twyla when they meet at the restaurant?
3. Why does each character act the way she does?
4. What does Twyla mean when she says, "I was dismissed without anyone saying goodbye"?

5. How do you think Roberta feels toward Twyla at the moment?
6. How would you feel if you were Twyla?
7. Why do you think Twyla asks Roberta, “How is your mother?”
8. Do you think Twyla succeeds in whatever she wants that question to accomplish? Why or why not? (“Toni Morrison” 93)

Act 3

1. According to the information in this act, which woman do you think is black and which is white?
2. What information does the Toni Morrison give the reader about the characters in this act?
3. Group the information from the question above into the following categories: food, clothing, and social position.
4. Who has more power in this interaction, Twyla or Roberta? What leads you to this conclusion?
5. What parts of Twyla’s description of Maggie in Act 1 are direct characterization, and what parts are indirect characterization?
6. How did eight-year-old Twyla feel about Maggie?
7. Do you think Twyla and Roberta were afraid of Maggie? Why do you think they called her names?
8. How does Twyla describe the incident in Act 1?
9. In Act 3, Twyla repeats this memory word for word. “Remember Maggie? The day she fell down and those gar girls laughed at her?” Why do you think the author used almost exactly the same sentence in both acts?
10. How does Roberta react to Twyla’s memory of Maggie? How does Roberta’s reaction make Twyla feel?
11. When she thinks about Maggie, Twyla says to herself, “I wouldn’t forget a thing like that. Would I?” Why might Twyla not remember Maggie the same way Roberta does? Is it possible for a memory to change over time?
12. How do you think Twyla feels at the end of this act? How do you think Roberta feels? What information leads you to this conclusion?
13. At the end of Act 3, Roberta asks Twyla, “Did your mother ever stop dancing?” Twyla answers, “No. Never. Did yours ever get well?” How is this exchange different from the one at the end of Act 2 when Twyla asks Roberta, “How’s your mother?” What does this dialogue tell us about the relationship between these characters now, as opposed to their relationship in the previous act? (“Toni Morrison” 94)

Act 4

1. In Act 4, Twyla once again asks Roberta about her mother. How does she do this? What is the result?
2. Does Twyla’s question about Roberta’s mother remind you more of the end of Act 2 or the end of Act 3? Why?

3. What does Twyla say about Maggie at the end of Act 4? What does she mean by this?
4. At the very end of this act, Twyla says that she knew Maggie “couldn’t scream—just like me—and I was glad about that.” Why do you think she identifies with Maggie?
5. Why do you think Twyla would have been “glad” that Maggie couldn’t call out for help? (“Toni Morrison” 96)

Act 5

1. Why is it important for the characters to know what happened in the orchard that day?
2. How has Toni Morrison used the characters’ dialogue about their mothers to illustrate the changes in their relationship over time?
3. Why does the story end the way it does?
4. Do you think Twyla and Roberta will ever see each other again?
5. What do you think this story says about friendship? About memories? (“Toni Morrison” 97)

Reading Vocabulary List

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Hymn – Act 1 | 11. Integrate – Act 4 |
| 2. Scalloped – Act 1 | 12. Jostling – Act 4 |
| 3. Traipse – Act 1 (“Toni Morrison” 90) | 13. Lagging – Act 4 |
| 4. Gargoyle – Act 3 | 14. Picket – Act 4 |
| 5. Gourmet – Act 3 | 15. Protest – Act 4 |
| 6. Renovate – Act 3 | 16. Puttering – Act 4 |
| 7. Skiff – Act 3 | 17. Strife – Act 4 (“Toni Morrison” 95) |
| 8. Widower – Act 3 (“Toni Morrison” 93) | 18. Bawl – Act 5 |
| 9. Bigot – Act 4 | 19. Economize – Act 5 (“Toni Morrison” 96) |
| 10. Dignified – Act 4 | |

Suggested Poster Layout

Race Tracking Chart for “Recitatif”

Clearly print your name under your assessment of Roberta and Twyla’s races.

Prediction: Roberta is black and Twyla is white	Prediction: Roberta is white and Twyla is black
First Act: Roberta is black and Twyla is	First Act: Roberta is white and Twyla is

white	black
Second Act: Roberta is black and Twyla is white	Second Act: Roberta is white and Twyla is black
Third Act: Roberta is black and Twyla is white	Third Act: Roberta is white and Twyla is black
Fourth Act: Roberta is black and Twyla is white	Fourth Act: Roberta is white and Twyla is black
Fifth Act: Roberta is black and Twyla is white	Fifth Act: Roberta is white and Twyla is black

Potential Test Questions (Essay)

1. What does “recitatif” mean? Why does Toni Morrison use it for the title of her story?
2. Identify Roberta’s and Twyla’s races based on textual clues. How do you know? Are you sure? Why or why not? How does any uncertainty affect your reading of the story?
3. Why do Roberta and Twyla have to live in the orphanage as children? How are they different from the other children there?
4. Why did some people oppose and some support racial desegregation in schools? What issues were involved?
5. In the story, the town of Newburgh has changed dramatically because of an influx of IBM employees. For example, the Food Emporium stocks very different types of food for the new residents. Consider these changes in relation to “urban renewal” and “urban relocation.”
6. Think about this story while you analyze images of protesters. Interpret the language of picketing signs, as well as the picketers’ facial expressions and body language. What are they “saying”?
7. Why are Twyla’s and Roberta’s diverging memories of Maggie so important? Consider Maggie’s race, her muteness, and her abuse by the schoolgirls. What does Toni Morrison suggest about why people remember things in certain ways?

8. Roberta and Twyla picket over the issue of racial desegregation in schools, each holding signs that are as much about their personal relationship as they are about the larger issues. In Twyla's words, "People changed signs from time to time, but Roberta never did and neither did I. Actually my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's." What do their signs mean and why do they make sense only together? Also, think about the prevalence of marches and protests at this time. Why did people march for rights? Was it effective? ("Search for Identity" 11)