

The diction and tone of an essay are subtle forces, but they exert a tremendous influence on readers. They are instrumental in determining how we will feel while reading the essay and what attitude we will have toward its argument or the points that it makes. Of course, readers react in a variety of ways. An essay written informally but with a largely angry tone may make one reader defensive and unsympathetic; another may feel that the author is being unusually honest and courageous and may admire these qualities and feel moved by them. Either way, the diction and tone of the piece have made a strong emotional impression. As you read the essays in this chapter and throughout this book, see if you can analyze how the diction and tone shape your reactions.

Things Gregory uses to make effective -
 - varied, purposeful, select use of metaphors

- using a verb / idea that doesn't really fit the situation, i.e. pregnant...
- lack of punctuation to set a tone
- vivid descriptions
- delayed start to story
- using symbol like Helene →
- using wording / repetition → used by teacher
- short sent.
- clear, subtle tone
- varied tones
- difference between school + home.
- reliable
- purposeful word choice!
- contrast in character - teacher

What is it? Nigger?

CRISIS
 Shame

■ Dick Gregory

Dick Gregory, activist, comedian, and nutrition expert, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1932. While attending Southern Illinois University on an athletic scholarship Gregory excelled in track, winning the university's Outstanding Athlete Award in 1953. In 1954 he was drafted into the army. After his discharge, he immediately became active in the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. In the 1960s, Gregory was an outspoken critic of America's involvement in Vietnam. This in turn led to his run for the presidency in 1968 as a write-in candidate for the Freedom and Peace Party. Throughout his life he has been a tireless crusader for economic reform, anti-drug issues, and minority rights. In 2000 he published Callus on My Soul, the second volume of his autobiography. In recent years Gregory has been active in the diet and health food industry.

In the following episode from Nigger (1964), the first volume of his autobiography, Gregory narrates the story of a childhood experience that taught him the meaning of shame. Through his use of dialog, he dramatically re-creates the experience for readers. Notice in particular how his concrete nouns and strong action verbs give vividness to the scene he describes and substance to the emotional impact of the experience.

For Your Journal

We all learn many things in school beyond the lessons we study formally. Some of the extracurricular truths we learn stay with us for the rest of our lives. Write about something you learned in school that you still find very useful—something that has made life easier or more understandable for you.

ok students use it? or write the common.

never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that. I was about seven years old when I got my first big lesson. I was in love with a little girl named Helene Tucker, a light-complexioned little

Innocence!

girl with innocence tails and nice manners. She was always clean and she was smart in school. I think I went to school then mostly to look at her. I brushed my hair and even got me a little old handkerchief. It was a lady's handkerchief, but I didn't want Helene to see me wipe my nose on my hand. The pipes were frozen again, there was no water in the house, but I washed my socks and shirt every night. I'd get a pot, and go over to Mister Ben's grocery store, and stick my pot down into his soda machine. Scoop out some chopped ice. By evening the ice melted to water for washing. I got sick a lot that winter because the fire would go out at night before the clothes were dry. In the morning I'd put them on, wet or dry, because they were the only clothes I had. synonym

Everybody's got a Helene Tucker, a symbol of everything you want. I loved her for her goodness, her cleanness, her popularity. She'd walk down my street and my brothers and sisters would yell, "Here comes Helene," and I'd rub my tennis sneakers on the back of my pants and wish my hair wasn't so nappy¹ and the white folks' shirt fit me better. I'd run out on the street. If I knew my place and didn't come too close, she'd wink at me and say hello. That was a good feeling. Sometimes I'd follow her all the way home, and shovel the snow off her walk and try to make friends with her Momma and her aunts. I'd drop money on her stoop late at night on my way back from shining shoes in the taverns. And she had a Daddy, and he had a good job. He was a paper hanger. element of addition

I guess I would have gotten over Helene by summertime, but something happened in that classroom that made her face hang in front of me for the next twenty-two years. When I played the drums in high school it was for Helene and when I broke track records in college it was for Helene and when I started standing behind microphones and heard applause I wished Helene could hear it, too. It wasn't until I was twenty-nine years old and married and making money that I finally got her out of my system. Helene was sitting in that classroom when I learned to be ashamed of myself.

It was on a Thursday. I was sitting in the back of the room, in a seat with a chalk circle drawn around it. The idiot's seat, the trouble-maker's seat.

The teacher thought I was stupid. Couldn't spell, couldn't read, couldn't do arithmetic. Just stupid. Teachers were never interested in finding out that you couldn't concentrate because you were so hungry,

¹nappy: shaggy or fuzzy.

because you hadn't had any breakfast. All you could think about was noontime, would it ever come? Maybe you could sneak into the cloakroom and steal a bite of some kid's lunch out of a coat pocket. A bite of something. Paste. You can't really make a meal of paste, or put it on bread for a sandwich, but sometimes I'd scoop a few spoonfuls out of the paste jar in the back of the room. Pregnant people get strange tastes. I was pregnant with poverty. Pregnant with dirt and pregnant with smells that made people turn away. Pregnant with cold and pregnant with shoes that were never bought for me, pregnant with five other people in my bed and no Daddy in the next room, and pregnant with hunger. Paste doesn't taste too bad when you're hungry. brought back to mind

The teacher thought I was a troublemaker. All she saw from the front of the room was a little black boy who squirmed in his idiot's seat and made noises and poked the kids around him. I guess she couldn't see a kid who made noises because he wanted someone to know he was there. off ten

It was on a Thursday, the day before the Negro payday. The eagle always flew on Friday. The teacher was asking each student how much his father would give to the Community Chest. On Friday night, each kid would get the money from his father, and on Monday he would bring it to the school. I decided I was going to buy me a Daddy right then. I had money in my pocket from shining shoes and selling papers, and whatever Helene Tucker pledged for her Daddy I was going to top it. And I'd hand the money right in. I wasn't going to wait until Monday to buy me a Daddy. impudence again

I was shaking, scared to death. The teacher opened her book and started calling out names alphabetically.

"Helene Tucker?"

"My daddy said he'd give two dollars and fifty cents."

"That's very nice, Helene. Very, very nice indeed."

That made me feel pretty good. It wouldn't take too much to top that. I had almost three dollars in dimes and quarters in my pocket. I stuck my hand in my pocket and held onto the money, waiting for her to call my name. But the teacher closed her book after she called everybody else in the class. again - key to past addition

I stood up and raised my hand.

"What is it now?"

"You forgot me."

She turned toward the blackboard. "I don't have time to be playing with you, Richard."

17 “My Daddy said he’d . . .”
 18 “Sit down, Richard, you’re disturbing the class.”
 19 “My Daddy said he’d give . . . fifteen dollars.”
 20 She turned around and looked mad. “We are collecting this
 money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory. If your Daddy can
 give fifteen dollars you have no business being on relief.”

21 “I got it right now, I got it right now, my Daddy gave it to me to
 turn in today, my Daddy said . . .”

22 “And furthermore,” she said, looking right at me, her nostrils
 getting big and her lips getting thin and her eyes opening wide, “we
 know you don’t have a Daddy.”

23 Helene Tucker turned around, her eyes full of tears. She felt sorry
 for me. Then I couldn’t see her too well because I was crying, too.

24 “Sit down, Richard.”

25 And I always thought the teacher kind of liked me. She always
 picked me to wash the blackboard on Friday, after school. That was
 a big thrill, it made me feel important. If I didn’t wash it, come Mon-
 day the school might not function right.

26 “Where are you going, Richard?”

27 I walked out of school that day, and for a long time I didn’t go
 back very often. There was shame there.

28 Now there was shame everywhere. It seemed like the whole world
 had been inside that classroom, everyone had heard what the teacher
 had said, everyone had turned around and felt sorry for me. There
 was shame in going to the Worthy Boys Annual Christmas Dinner for
 you and your kind, because everybody knew what a worthy boy was.
 Why couldn’t they just call it the Boys Annual Dinner; why’d they have
 to give it a name? There was shame in wearing the brown and orange
 and white plaid mackinaw² the welfare gave to three thousand boys.
 Why’d it have to be the same for everybody so when you walked
 down the street the people could see you were on relief? It was a nice
 warm mackinaw and it had a hood, and my Momma beat me and
 called me a little rat when she found out I stuffed it in the bottom of a
 pail full of garbage way over on Cottage Street. There was shame in
 running over to Mister Ben’s at the end of the day and asking for his
 rotten peaches, there was shame in running out to meet the relief truck
 of sugar, there was shame in running out to meet the relief truck.

there was shame → followed by an explanation.

²mackinaw: a short, double-breasted wool coat.

metaphora
 love +
 → sets a tone by using it here,
 + not throughout!

I hated that truck, full of food for you and your kind. I ran into the house and hid when it came. And then I started to sneak through alleys, to take the long way home so the people going into White’s Eat Shop wouldn’t see me. Yeah, the whole world heard the teacher that day, we all know you don’t have a Daddy.

Thinking Critically about This Reading

In paragraph 28 Gregory states, “Now there was shame everywhere. It seemed like the whole world had been inside that classroom, everyone had heard what the teacher had said, everyone had turned around and felt sorry for me.” What did Gregory’s teacher say, and why did it hurt him so greatly?

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. How do the first three paragraphs of the essay help to establish a context for the narrative that follows? (Glossary: *Narration*)
2. What does Gregory mean by “shame”? What precisely was he ashamed of, and what in particular did he learn from the incident? (Glossary: *Definition*)
3. In a word or phrase, how would you describe Gregory’s tone? What specific words or phrases in his essay lead you to this conclusion?
4. What is the teacher’s attitude toward Gregory? In arriving at your answer, consider her own words and actions as well as Gregory’s opinion.
5. What role does money play in Gregory’s experience? How does money relate to his sense of shame?
6. Specific details can enhance the reader’s understanding and appreciation of a subject. (Glossary: *Details*) Gregory’s description of Helene Tucker’s manners or the plaid of his mackinaw, for example, makes his account vivid and interesting. Cite several other specific details he gives, and consider how the essay would be different without them.
7. Reread this essay’s first and last paragraphs, and compare how much each one emphasizes shame. (Glossary: *Beginnings and Endings*) Which emotion other than shame does Gregory reveal in the first paragraph, and does it play a role in the last one? Is the last paragraph an effective ending? Explain.