

MERIDIAN

BY ALICE WALKER

Meridian by Alice Walker, also a Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Color Purple*, is a work that underscores the complexities of motherhood and how racism affects it in American society. The chief character, Meridian, is a young girl who unexpectedly becomes pregnant. She must learn to deal with enormous challenges in an effort to find some positive meaning in her life. Fortunately, for Meridian, the Civil Rights Movement is in progress. She is able to see and recognize in herself some of the characteristics the movement is trying to accomplish, namely, truth, justice, and love. Morrison does not portray her character as a victim who gives in to society's negative images of the African American female and mother. Certainly, Meridian has many trials and tribulations to meet and overcome, and she recognizes the negative stereotype society has created for her to easily become the victim, but she avoids this role. On the contrary, Meridian sees herself as a powerful and determined African American female.

Morrison shows through *Meridian* how the picture of the self can be created and promoted by society. She also shows how it can be discerned for truth, justice, and love. Ultimately, the individual must recognize the role she must play in life, if her life is to have any positive meaning. After looking at herself and her situation, Meridian realizes that if a change is to come into her life, she will have to make it herself. Her self-image, positive or negative, depends on her.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

BY ERNEST GAINES

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by Ernest Gaines reflects his interest and concern for Southern traditions. The search for self in this novel involves a working knowledge of how setting plays a significant role in determining who we are and who we think we are. The idea of freedom associated

with the North was very common at some point in history; but the reality of freedom, Miss Jane learns, comes not from geography, but from a realistic perspective of who she is where she is at this time. Gaines employs his knowledge and experience of the South to create a strong sense of the search for freedom in Jane. Freedom for Jane means, among other things, the power of self-determination. She realizes that the battle for self-determination must begin where one happens to be at the time. Miss Jane understands that if change is to come, it must be on the shoulders of those strong enough or courageous enough to carry it. She decides to act on her convictions to bring about not only change in her community, but also a new way for African Americans to look at themselves. Jane's attitude and perspective in the novel are a work in progress. Her knowledge and understanding of her reality grows as the story progresses. At the appropriate time, she will find the strength and courage to stand against the things that seek to hold her back, to keep her from making progress, to see herself in a totally different light.

FOR FURTHER READING

Bob Burke & Danyetta Davis, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*
W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait*
Paul R. Lehman, *The Development of a Black Psyche in the Writings of John O. Killens. The Making of the Negro in Early American Literature*
Nella Larsen, *Passing*
James McBride, *The Color of Water*
Toni Morrison, *Sula*
Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place*
Patricia Raybon, *My First White Friend*

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Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma



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National Endowment for the Humanities

the People



OKLAHOMA
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INVISIBILITY AND IDENTITY:

THE SEARCH FOR SELF
IN AFRICAN
AMERICAN FICTION





INTRODUCING:

INVISIBLE MAN

BY RALPH ELLISON

LITTLE SCARLET

BY WALTER MOSLEY

THE BLUEST EYE

BY TONI MORRISON

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

BY ERNEST GAINES

John Oliver Killens, the spiritual father of the new African American writer of the 70s and 80s, was asked if he minded being called a black writer, or was he just a writer who happened to be black. He answered, "I consider myself a black writer, not a writer who happens to be black, 'cause I wasn't born writing, but I was born black in a white society." From his response, we understand that the African American writer uses his or her own knowledge and experiences as well as talent in creating and telling a story. What makes the experiences of African American writers different from other American writers is the unique relationship and encounters with the majority society experienced by the writer. The theme of the search for self is an important one for any American, but especially for the African American because of all the historical and social restrictions and challenges presented to him.

African American identity has been a point of concern for well over two hundred years. When the first African captives were brought to America, they had a positive African identity. Once the African captives were in America, their African identity was taken away and a new identity was given

to them; they were no longer called Africans, but Negroes, niggers, black, colored, and slave. This new identity deprived them of their history, culture, and a positive sense of self. The search for a positive identity has been a constant challenge for the African American since the beginning of slavery in America. That search is one of the primary legacies of the slave experience. However, regardless of the term used to identify the African American, the real self-identity comes from the character of the individual, not from color, culture, or ethnicity.

History plays an important role in the lives of African American people because it provides a yardstick for measuring the progress or lack of it over time. History manifests its significance in some degree in each of the five selections chosen for this series. The African American characters' search for self is impacted by historical events. In addition, relationships play an important role in the search for self as far as the African American writer is concerned. More specifically, the interaction between the majority society (white) and the African American society (black) is determined by the way in which the writer depicts how each one views the other.

The reader will follow the plot of each novel and the characters' search for an identity or how their identity influences their experiences in society. The responsibility of the African American writer, as Killens stated, depends on how he or she views himself or herself in society.

INVISIBLE MAN

BY RALPH ELLISON

Oklahoma native Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* was awarded the National Book Award in 1952 and continues to be one of the most significant works in American literature. This novel has come to represent the quintessential experience of an African American's search for self-identity. Ellison uses both social and cultural history in showing the reader just how much influence society has on the

individual. The search for the self by the African American is necessary because the majority society has defined him in an uncomplimentary fashion. To accept society's definition of who he is would be to relinquish all powers of determination or self-control. Ellison shows how different elements of society, such as school, church, social and political organizations, play on the self-image of the innocent seeker not certain of who he is.

One cannot overlook the part that history plays in this novel from the early days of Jim Crow to the phenomenal 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance that witnessed the artistic and political outpourings of African Americans. These historical activities all have an impact on the chief character's self-identity and on the readers' understanding of how society can manipulate the way in which one sees one's self through many spectrums. This novel supplies an endless list of areas of concern and discussion regarding the African American's search for a positive self-image.

LITTLE SCARLET

BY WALTER MOSLEY

Little Scarlet by Walter Mosley combines murder, suspense, history, police and ethnic relations, and, most importantly, the search for self. Part of Mosley's detective series featuring Easy Rawlins, *Little Scarlet* takes place in Watts during the riots of 1965. While the plot shows Easy attempting to solve the murder of a redheaded woman known as Little Scarlet, at the request of the police department, Mosley, the writer, incorporates not only Easy's continuous search for a positive identity in the midst of crime, violence, personal and family relationships, he also shows in the social views of some of his characters how the stereotypes of African Americans held by the majority society and especially the police force affect all concerned.

When the majority society creates a standard of beauty that fits, for the most part, the majority society, what is expected of the rest of society? The minority segment of society that doesn't

meet the requirements try either to make themselves physically like the majority or to find some way to rationalize who they are and how they are viewed in society. For some, the recognition of the stereotype as a creation of the privileged majority with no foundation in reality promotes a search for a positive self-image outside of the stereotype. For others, the challenge might take other avenues of approach that include self-hatred and confusion. Mosley brings to this novel his knowledge, experience, and observations of a segment of society forced to deal with the results of a self-image gone awry.

THE BLUEST EYE

BY TONI MORRISON

The Bluest Eye by Pulitzer Prize winning author Toni Morrison tells the story of an American tragedy. A young girl, Pecola, realizes that she does not come close to America's standard of beauty—blond hair and blue eyes, thin lips, white skin. Morrison does not simply focus on the character of Pecola, however, but also includes other characters and settings that impact Pecola's perceptions of who she is—her self-image. When living in the rural South, Pecola is insulated from the negative images of African Americans by the majority society. However, when she is removed from her protective environment to urban midwestern Ohio, she becomes a self-made victim because she cannot physically reflect the American standard of beauty. As she sees herself in society, she cannot ever be the recipient of romantic love or a positive self-image as measured by her physical attributes.

Morrison, in this novel, not only deals with the challenges facing the character, Pecola, but also engages the reader in the history, myths, and facts that contribute to the perceptions of a people by themselves in a number of ways. The African American community views itself through its own eyes, through the eyes of the majority society, and through a combination of both. In this work, the search for self is also a search for the truth, and an acceptance of the truth, especially as it pertains to African American women.