Black Negro Essay Essay, Research Paper

In John Howard Griffin’s novel Black Like Me, Griffin travels through

many Southern American states, including Mississippi. While in

Mississippi Griffin experiences racial tension to a degree that he did

not expect. It is in Mississippi that he encounters racial

stereotypical views directed towards him, which causes him to realize

the extent of the racial prejudices that exist. Mississippi is where he

is finally able to understand the fellowship shared by many of the

Negroes of the 50’s, because of their shared experiences. Although

Griffin travels throughout the Southern States, the state of

Mississippi serves as a catalyst for the realization of what it is

truly like to be a Negro in 1959. Once in the state of Mississippi,

Griffin witnesses extreme racial tension, that he does not fully

expect. It is on the bus ride into Mississippi that Griffin first

experiences true racial cruelty from a resident of Mississippi.

It was late dusk when the bus pulled into some little

town

outside of Hatteisburg for a stop. “We get about ten minutes here,”

Bill said “let’s get off here and stretch our legs” The driver stood up

and announced “Ten minute rest stop,”. The whites rose and ambled off.

Bill and I led the Negroes toward the door. As soon as he saw us, the

driver blocked our way. Bill slipped under his arm and walked away.

“Hey boy where are you going?” the driver shouted at Bill while he

stretched his arms across the opening to prevent myself from stepping

down. I stood waiting. “Where do you think your going?” he asked, his

heavy cheeks quivering with each word. “I’d like to go to the rest

room.” I smiled and moved to step down. He tightened his grip on the

door. “Does your ticket say for you to get off here?” he asked. “No

sir, but the others…” “Then you just sit your ass down.” We turned

like a small herd of cattle and drifted back to our seats. The large

woman was apologetic, as though it embarrassed her for a stranger to

see Mississippi’s dirty linen.1(pg 63) Up to this point in the novel

Griffin experiences exactly what he expects to experience. He is

taunted with typical racial slurs, and other forms of hostility, which

he is able to brush off as meaningless ignorance. This bus driver is

denying the black customers the most basic of human needs. The bus

driver attempts to not only humiliate them by forcing them to defecate

and urinate in public on the bus, but the bus driver is also attempting

to show all of the white customers what savages that the blacks are.

Griffin never expects to receive anger and hate to this degree.

Everywhere that he goes in Mississippi is full of hatred, and spite.

As I walked down Mobile Street, a car full of white men

and

boys sped past. They yelled obscenities at me. A satsuma flew past my

head and broke against a building. The street was loud and raw, with

tension as thick as fog. I felt the insane terror of it. When I

entered the store of my second contact, we talked in low voices.

Another car roared down the street, and the street was suddenly

deserted of Negroes, but then we appeared shortly.2(Page 67) For the

first time while in Mississippi Griffin realizes that there are many

individuals, who, if given the chance, would kill him simply because he

is black. It is in Mississippi that he begins to identify with the

blacks and begins to fully see himself as a black. Had he stayed in the

more Northern states he probably would never have progressed to this

state of mind. Griffin begins to understand that part of the reason for

the hatred of blacks by many whites is because of the stereotypical

image of the Negro in the 50’s.

In Mississippi he confronts racial stereotypes directed towards

him that prompt him to realize how deeply rooted society’s

prejudices are. While trying to hitchhike through Mississippi

he encounters white men willing to pick him up only because of

their preconceived notions of Negroes.

I must have had a dozen rides that evening. They blear

into

a nightmare, the one scarcely distinguishable from the other. It

quickly became obvious why they picked me up. All but two picked me up

the way they would pick up a pornographic photograph or book-except

that this was verbal pornography. With a Negro, they assumed they need

give no semblance of self respect or respectability. The visual element

entered into it. All of the men showed morbid curiosity about the

sexual life of the Negro, and all had, at base, the same stereotyped

image of the Negro as an inexhaustible sex-machine with over-sized

genitals and vast store of experiences, immensely varied. They appeared

to think that the Negro has done all of those “special” things they

themselves have never dared to do.3(pg.85) Griffin finds that

hitchhiking at night through Mississippi is the best way to experience

the underlying stereotypes found throughout Mississippi. A man will

open up at night because it gives him an illusion of anonymity. Griffin

can’t conceive of how these men can have such distorted concepts of

another human being. It becomes obvious that the reason these men have

such little respect for the Negroes is because they have absolutely no

understanding of them. Griffin realizes that before his travels as a

Negro in Mississippi he too knew very little about them. The Negroes

cope with this hate based upon ignorance by relying on each other.

Griffin is able to conceive the strong bond between many

Negroes, because of experiences that some Negroes share, while

he is in Mississippi. While on the bus heading for Mississippi

he notices how black strangers become instant friends

As we drove more deeply into Mississippi, I noted that

the

Negro comforted and sought comfort from his own. In Mississippi

everyone who boarded the bus at the various little towns had a smile

and a greeting for everyone else. We felt strongly the need to

establish friendship as a buffer against the invisible threat. Like

shipwrecked people, we huddled together in a warmth and courtesy that

was pure and pathetic.4(pg.63) Griffin speaks of his experience on the

bus as though it is a battle zone because that is exactly what it is.

The blacks realize that the key to surviving is unity and finding

something positive in their situation. They each try to provide the

others with something to be happy about and something to be grateful

for. The blacks try to counter the hate and hostility that they

encounter with warmth and kindness toward one another. Griffin can not

understand this bond until he is in a situation where he is looking for

kindness as much as the Negroes around him. Mississippi is where

Griffin learns to not only act as a black, but also feel their pain as

only a black can do.

Griffin travels throughout the Southern States but his

experience as a black in Mississippi serves as an awakening for

him to the understanding of what being a black man in 1959

entails. While in Mississippi he witnesses extreme racial

tension, which he had no idea existed until his visit to

Mississippi. It is in Mississippi that he is the victim of

racial stereotypes causing him to realize the extent of the

racial prejudices towards Negroes. Griffin is finally able to

understand the bond shared between many of the Negroes of the

time, while traveling through Mississippi. Until the novel

Black Like Me, the state of Mississippi adamantly denied that

it had any racial problems, after the novel was released

Mississippi and the world had to come to the realization that

their were serious problems in the way that blacks were being

treated. This novel is just as horrific to readers in the 90’s

as it was in the 50’s, but while the 90’s audience is convinced

that they have escaped the problem of racism, this

Bibliography Griffin, John Howard. Black Like Me. Sepia Publishing

Company. New York. 1960. \*All subsequent entries are from this

source\*

Endnotes 1. John Howard Griffin. Black Like Me. Sepia Publishing

Company. New York. 1960. \*All subsequent entries are from this

source\*

326