



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

English Faculty Publications

English Department

9-1968

The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Black Like Me

Hugh Rank
Sacred Heart University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/eng_fac

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Literature Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rank, Hugh. "The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Black Like Me." *The English Journal* 57.6 (1968): 813-817.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

The Rhetorical Effectiveness of *Black Like Me*

Hugh Rank

Department of English
Sacred Heart University
Bridgeport, Connecticut

IN 1959, John Howard Griffin, a white Southern novelist, disguised himself as a Negro and traveled through the South to experience "what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down." The brief narrative account of this experience is recorded in *Black Like Me*, a book which won the *Saturday Review's* Anisfield-Wolf award in 1962 for its contribution toward race relations.

Today, almost ten years after Griffin's unique tour, this book continues to have wide sales both in a popular market and in classroom adoptions. By January 1968, *Black Like Me* was in its thirty-first paperback printing, a printing history which the publisher described (in a letter to me) as "quite unusual . . . and still going strong." The book appears deceptively simple and can be read merely as a piece of popular journalism on a timely subject. But, in a market now glutted with writings about racial problems, any single book which manages to have such a continued attraction for a large portion of the available audience deserves further attention to determine the basis for its popularity. In brief, why is *Black Like Me* rhetorically effective?

Rhetoric must be considered here, not in the limited terms of organization and style, but in the wider, more classical, sense which is concerned also with the *ethos* of the writer and the relationship between the writer and the audience. Too often readers have ignored the Aristotelian insistence on the variety of rhetorical appeals available to the writer. As a consequence, they have been unable to analyze the quality of a work which doesn't fit into a more restricted approach to rhetoric.

Black Like Me, for example, could be found deficient if judged solely on terms of organization and style. Using such criteria, some may call the book "a rough piece of hack work" or "a rush job." Even the author himself, in the preface, apologizes for its "crudity and rawness," an ambiguous remark which can be read in relation to either content or form. Yet even here, on its weakest points, a defense can be made that the book has a better structure than most readers note. This is not to claim that *Black Like Me* is a masterpiece; it is a rough-hewn book, hammered and forged, unlike Griffin's smoothly tooled novels. However, the structural and thematic elements found

in the work are often overlooked or are overshadowed by the "message" of the book. But Griffin is not unaware of structure because his background in musicology has seriously influenced his strategy of writing. Griffin's best novel, *The Devil Rides Outside*, for instance, takes its structure from one of Beethoven's Final Quartets, and his current novel-in-progress, *Passacaglia*, is structured on this complex musical form.

Black Like Me is seemingly haphazard in its structure, simply a random series of journal entries in his diary. Nevertheless, any journal is a *selection* of incidents and experiences; even the most unconsciously written report would tend to stress certain things held by the writer to be of greater value than the other, non-reported, daily experiences. Structurally, the book is divided into three main parts: a brief "prelude" introduces his plan to disguise himself, the main body of the book concerns his actual tour as a black man, and an extended "epilogue" describes some of the consequences of his experiment.

The most noticeable point here is that the "epilogue" violates the standard narrative pattern because it takes up almost one-fifth of the book. What happens is that *Black Like Me* changes to *White Liberal Like Me* as Griffin records another aspect of racism—how it is to be a white liberal crusader in the South. The later *consequences* of violating the existing social mores are given more emphasis by this seemingly undue proportion of space given to the "epilogue." Within this last section the sense of a *continuing* harassment is given by the writer's wider spacing of dates for journal entries. His experience as a black man lasts only three weeks (in November); his experience as a "marked man" extends for nine more months in the book. If Griffin were to write a postscript today to *Black Like Me*, he could continue relating nine more *years* of harassment by racists and hate

groups who have continued their attacks upon him. Thus, the length of the "epilogue," which seems at first to be too long in proportion to the book, actually serves to underline a very important part of Griffin's experience.

THE forward motion of the narrative is sustained by two major suspense devices. In the early parts of the book, the reader's anticipation is aroused as to whether or not Griffin's disguise will be discovered by either black or white, friend or foe. In the last section of the book, the ominous threats of violence are increased. The book ends the day after the threatened lynch mob fails to appear, an apt time to make a quick ending to avoid a lengthy anti-climax to the secondary theme. Within these two major devices which propel the story forward, there is also a subtle undercurrent of motion which prevents the book from becoming static. Griffin is always in motion—either walking on the streets or hitchhiking or riding on the busses—and even when he rests temporarily in a hotel room or on a farm the sense of motion is given by his preparations to go on the road again.

Other structural devices which deserve attention are Griffin's frequent use of repetition and juxtaposition. Key themes are repeated in the book showing an apparently unconscious selection of critical issues. While the reaction of Griffin to the word "nigger" gets only one paragraph, in spite of the word's omnipresence, the bus episodes get a great deal of repeated attention, probably because of the important symbolic nature of the bus integration attempts going on at the time under Martin Luther King's leadership. There is also a major repetition of focus on sexuality and the fantastic stereotypes and myths of Negro sexuality, an area, according to many scholars, of critical psychological problems between black and white in the

South. But Griffin's major repetition seems to be the idea that he is the "same man," whether his skin is white or black. The "same man" theme recurs throughout the book, the dominant plea for brotherhood and tolerance.

Juxtaposition of contrasting incidents or contrasting characters to heighten the irony is commonly used. In some of the most intense sections, two divergent things will play counterpoint to each other. For instance, in both "sexuality" sections (Nov. 19, Nov. 24), the perversity emphasized in the beginning of the section is countered by a discussion of Maritain's ideas on *caritas* and by a description of the poor Negro family in the swamps, a living example of such genuine love. In the closing pages of the book, both Griffin's hopes for progress in race relations (as seen in the analysis of Atlanta) and his fears of a violent black reaction are linked together. This ambivalence of his feeling here is certainly understandable in view of the changing moods of race relations in the past few years, but Griffin's attitude is noteworthy as it was written at a time when many people involved in the civil rights movement were more optimistic about progress.

Such frequent use of juxtaposition has encouraged some criticism that the book is too "black and white." The good guys are black; the bad guys, white. Such a reaction is understandable because the book does involve emotional response on an issue which many readers are affected by a pre-conditioning. But if the choice of "characters," or persons described, is analyzed more closely, then the "black and white" criticism has less validity because Griffin attempts to show a whole spectrum of shades. While it is true that the bigotry of the white racist is emphasized, the reader is also introduced to a variety of other white men—a crusading liberal editor in the South, a Southern boy agonized by his

own confusion about the problem, an obsequious Northern white "liberal," and, of course, the author himself. While there seem to be too many God-fearing, Bible-reading, kindly Negroes in parts of the book, the reader is also aware of the frustrated madman Christophe on the bus, the petty tyranny of the Negro shoeshine attendant to the beggar, the crudities of life in the back of the bus and in the ghetto, and all shades of black from Uncle Tom to black racist. Certainly a selection from the actual number of people encountered during the experience has been made to illustrate the many different types of people and their responses to the problem.

Although a defense of the structural and stylistic methods of Griffin can be extended, the reasons for the continued popularity and readability of *Black Like Me* are not primarily concerned with his organization and style. Nor are they simply the result of the widespread interest in all phases of the Negro problem, because this would not explain why this one book has had such a unique impact. What best explains the durability of *Black Like Me* can probably be described by the writer-reader relationship and the *ethos* of the writer.

PERSONAL narratives of Negroes frequently have created a close *sympathetic* reaction from the audience, but still, in our society, the gap between black and white exists. *Empathy*, the close identification of reader and writer in this case, is much easier to establish with a white narrator speaking to a predominantly white audience. *Black Like Me* has severe limitations because it has been written by a white man, but this book also gains a great deal because of the white narrator who has less of a gap to bridge between himself and his audience. For part of this white audience, the book may also be more credible and less likely to be accused of exaggeration, special pleading, or self-pity.

Another factor which helps to bring a closer empathy between reader and writer is Griffin's adoption of the "undercover agent" role, the solitary individual secretly in combat with an evil system. The popularity of this theme grows increasingly more widespread in twentieth-century literature as the actual presence of large organizations, massive institutions, and super-states becomes more obvious. Both the pulp writer and the literary craftsman have recently produced a wealth of stories concerning one man covertly fighting against the oppression of an unjust system. Griffin's adventure in *Black Like Me* parallels that of the spy, the prisoner-of-war, or the "innocent prisoner" plotting alone, in secret, against the evil institution. Whether we consider the weekly TV episodes of POW escapes from Nazi camps or Malamud's prize-winning novel, *The Fixer*, we can see the powerful appeal being made to get the reader's empathy toward the individual who is at odds with an oppressive system. The satisfaction of this vicarious experience is apt to be widespread in a society concerned with the diminishing role of the individual.

The vicarious participation of the reader of *Black Like Me* is aided by the narrator's humility and self-effacement. Griffin establishes a favorable *ethos*, or image, by focusing on his work, on his experiment, rather than on any self-centered claims of heroism or daring for his unique adventure. In fact, by revealing his own fears and loneliness, he emphasizes his normality and makes it easy for the average reader to re-live his experience. Griffin's only personal claim is that he has tried to be objective: "I tried to see the whites' side, as I have all along. I have studied objectively the anthropological arguments, the accepted clichés about cultural and ethnic differences. . . . I have held no brief for the Negro. I have looked diligently for all aspects of 'inferiority' among them and I cannot

find them. . . . When all the talk, all the propaganda has been cut away, the criterion is nothing but the color of skin. My experience proved that. They judged me by no other quality. My skin was dark."

Another aspect of the techniques used by Griffin to create a favorable *ethos* is his use of the "plain folks" approach. Griffin is just a "regular guy" trying to understand the situation. In reality, Griffin is much more than a "regular guy," a common man, or "plain folk." Whether one would emphasize his work in the French underground during the Second World War, his demonstrated musical ability as a pianist and musicologist (on Chopin), his philosophical research and writings (tutored by Jacques Maritain), or his ten-year period of blindness during which he wrote *The Devil Rides Outside* (a novel highly praised in Maxwell Geismar's *American Moderns*), the general conclusion would be that Griffin possesses not only a superior intellect but also is a man of rare courage, endurance, and integrity. Yet none of these accomplishments is mentioned in *Black Like Me*. If one were to consider the effect of such information added to the book, either in the text or in an introduction, it would seem that such biographical data would serve to elevate the status of the author, to emphasize the superiority of the author to the average reader. What would normally be a desirable thing to do, here would work against the empathy or close identification with the author which is so effective in *Black Like Me*.

The *ethos* of the writer communicated in this book is that of the "good man" searching for truth through a painful experiment. The informed reader will also be aware, from Griffin's occasional religious and literary allusions, that the image suggested can be described in terms of the Christian Humanist or Personalist, deeply concerned with bearing witness to his beliefs.

The mere fact that a "good man" writes a book does not automatically make the work good; enough poorly written tracts have been published by sincere people to prove that integrity alone is no substitute for craftsmanship. Yet Aristotle points out that the ethical appeal, the projection of the image of being a "good man," is often more effective than the logical or emotional appeals. Ideally, all three should function together for the most persuasive writing. In *Black Like Me*, the emotional appeal is obvious throughout the book; the logical appeal resides primarily in the concealed syllogism behind the "same man" theme. But the major strength of the book seems to be in the ethical appeal, in the ability both to convey the image of the "good man" and to achieve a

close reader-writer empathy through the "plain folks" and "undercover agent" devices used naturally and unconsciously by the author in this situation.

Such reader empathy probably inspired the following anonymous tribute:

Open Letter to the White Nigger—
John Howard Griffin

There are those, John, who could
Never listen to a black voice
Because it smelled so odd.
And so, you lived a lie
And wrote the truth.

Then somewhere, manywhere,
We read. And instead
Of fury, we felt grief.
For an hour, we were you
And you were black
And we were black like you.

In Retrospect

180 summers started today.
And as I stare at 180 final exams,
I remember their faces as their
Buses lurched away from the curb.

They were frantic with freedom,
And at the time, I didn't bother to
Wonder if Julius Caesar and split infinitives
Would help them this summer.
I knew.

And now as I grade their final papers,
A heavy sadness lumps together in my throat
And chokes me.

But to cry would be too easy,
Too quick a relief
From the sadness of 180 summers.
And so my throat can only
Ache to explain
The hurt, the sorrow,
The realization:
Too much was left untouched.

Diane Godsoe Pheil

Lynwood, California