

How does alice walker discuss various cultural issues that faced america during t...



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For the black music is a way of life, a way of defining their culture and community. They couldn't read or write or paint so they sang.

This started off in churches when they sang the blues and eventually black jazz clubs became popular. When segregation was in place the whites used to go and socialize in the jazz clubs at night and then go back to segregation. Jazz developed from 'the blues'. The blues is a product of slavery. In order to relieve their misery the slaves sang the blues in the fields. This evolved into the jazz, which Gracie Mae sings.

Jazz is sexy and seductive music and life as we see from the story was tough yet glamorous for jazz singers. Gracie Mae was violently beaten by her husbands who also stole her clothes, but this inevitably led to her becoming a strong woman. We see this when she fights with Bessie Smith for her song Hound Dog and wins. Ironically though segregation was in place many whites found the jazz clubs seductive. This was the beginning of the white appropriation of black music we see in the story.

The deacon and indeed Traynor effectively con Gracie out of her song Hound Dog. Traynor copies her black American style of singing; this in time becomes Rock 'n' Roll. Whilst the song is not successful for Gracie yet as a Rock 'n' Roll song with a white male singer it is successful. This Rock 'n' Roll white man's music is ironically derived from black music, more specifically from the misery of slavery.

Despite this exploitation Traynor does not truly understand the song's meaning. His relationship with Gracie is based on his search for the meaning of the song that made him have such a god-like status. Yet since he does not

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have a black background he cannot understand the song based on another culture. Religion defines a culture.

Many blacks during the 1960's especially Malcolm X believed that Christianity was the religion of the whites who oppressed them so they converted to a religion that condoned slavery in favour of Islam, a black religion. Thus Malcolm X and indeed Mohammed Ali rejected their Christian names in favour of Muslim names. Consequently Gracie may does not trust the deacon because he reminds her of southern religious men who condoned slavery. She mistrusts his eyeballs, which make a clear reference to the past of so many slaves crying from misery.

Yet ironically it is the Baptist church that taught Gracie to sing. Here the style and passion of jazz was born and it is this that the white men appreciate, yet like Traynor cannot understand. Most of the black singers learnt to sing in gospel choirs in their black Baptist churches and this became part of a tradition. It is clear that Gracie mistrusts the Deacon and Traynor. She feels he is trying to 'sell her something'. He in time patronises her by saying she will never succeed with the song and offers her money for fancy clothes and such luxuries.

Indeed both the Deacon and Traynor's guards reminded her on the Klu Klux Klan who still posed a threat at this time. Simple references to them indicate just how powerful and notorious they would be to her audience. Clearly JT and Horace have a problem with white men since they leave the room. This reflects the idea that they have been conditioned since slavery, to feel inferior to white men and are not even comfortable around them in their own

homes. Yet Traynor is not racist and the developing relationship shows the persistence of equality between them. Traynor indeed develops a mother son relationship with Gracie; he hugs her physically and buys her many presents.

In time she calls him 'son' suggesting "they are all their sons" and this harks back to the period of slavery when black women were mother figures to the white children. History played a part in the culture and tradition, especially due to slavery and segregation. Blacks had always been known as slaves and the reputation and way they were treated wasn't going to suddenly change. When slavery was less of an occurrence and more blacks were free, segregation became part of the way of life, as the whites were not willing to mix with the blacks. The black community was generally thought of as the lower class and as being poorer than the white community. White self-image is taken very seriously and it was not nice if you were fat, as people would think less of you for example Traynor eats what he likes and ends up over weight but instead of going on a diet or helping himself to get fit he took drugs and consumed large amounts of alcohol.

Gracie Mae on the other hand is a large woman but no one thinks any less of her because of it, as she wouldn't be herself if she were thin. She occasionally goes on a diet and loses a couple of pounds a year but it isn't a big deal to her, or the black community as a whole. She feels it gives her status and her weight also shows she is well fed and far removed from her slave roots. America is built on a dream of becoming rich and a success. Traynor is the symbol of this. He in effect is seen as a god, he replaces religion.

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He is adored to the extent that he has to isolate himself with guards and a house that is a palace yet also seen as a fortress. Yet as the symbol of success he is deeply unhappy. He is lonely, isolated and needs drugs and drink to survive. Indeed his comfort eating of his childlike food shows his need to go back to his childhood. In contrast Gracie is content with her lifestyle.

She rejects many of the lavish gifts. Indeed she has little respect for the fans 'fixation' that worship a man they don't even know. In return Traynor is just as confused as to why he is so worshiped. In short Traynor may be a public success but really he is a failure. He is lonely, has a failed marriage and has no close friends.

The story deals with the American dream of working hard and achieving greatness and a high status. They want to become famous but this is not always a good thing as it led to Elvis and others like him having a sad and wasted life. They are in theory making gods to worship but this isn't necessary as there are more important things in life. Gracie Mae understands this and does not approve of Traynor's screaming fans.

Related to this is the stories reference to the consumerist boom in the 1950's. In order to build up the country the American dream became liable to goods and structure. Even Gracie Mae as a TV and Traynor has access to mass consumption of goods. Indeed as a product himself his fans in turn consume him. Although it may not seem it, Gracie is in fact politically aware. The 1960's entry to death, with a list of deaths of individuals, vital to the civil rights cause.

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That she places Malcolm X first is significant. Clearly she supported his more aggressive stance. Martin Luther King is referred to simply as the ' King' indicating his importance to everyone. Their deaths were both so important to her culture that she feels she cannot express the grief she feels about their loss.