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Comprehension story 27

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow, using your own words wherever possible.

Language is the subject. It is the written form with I have managed to keep the wolf away from the door and in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passage fall far short of the richness of the richness of life. 05

Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell and touch.

I am not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve form of chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, mounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns meaning. And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them power. 10 15

I remember the first time I heard the word nigger. In my third grade class, our math tests were being passed down rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his 20

test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or necrophilia, I could not have been more puzzled. I did know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he should not have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a bad word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable questions that every black parent must face – Mommy, what does “nigger” mean? 25

And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realized that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural south after World War 2 and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings owned in Harlem was a weekend Mecca for immediate family, long assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bit of gossip pick up an old quarrel or referee the on-going checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. 30 35

They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet of labor in factories, laundries and shipyard of New York.

Amid the clamor, which could reach defining, propositions – two or three conversation going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby’s crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street – there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of living room when it was time to get into juicy details about “you-know-who” up the third floor who had gone and gotten herself pregnant!” But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the other out to play, beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for my ears. And so among the anecdotes of triumphs and disappointment in various workings of their lives, the 40 45 50

word nigger was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and reflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else. In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who has distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence or drive. 55

“Did Jonny really do that?”

“I am telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6000 of overtime last year”. Said he got enough for down payment on a house. “When used with a possessive adjective by a woman-“my nigger” – it became a term of endearment for husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their months it become a pure essence of manhood – disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odd onto a victorious statement of being “Yeah, that old foreman found out quickly – you do not mess with a nigger.” 60 65

In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had “overstepped the bounds of decency” as my family defined it: then parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all “trifling niggers”. This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression – they had gone through all of that themselves – but the unforgivable was the lack of self-respect. 70

A woman could never be “a nigger” in the singular, with its connotation of confirming worth. The noun “girl” was it its closest equivalent in that case, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. “Girls”, stop. You mean you said that to his face? “But if the word was used in a third – person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element or communal disapproval. And age became an important factor in these exchanges. It was only between 75 80

individuals of the same, or from older person to the young (but never the older way round), the “girl” would be considered a complement.

I do not agree with the argument that use of the word nigger at social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. 85
The dynamics were the exact opposite; the people in my grandmother’s living room took a word that Whites used to signify worthlessness and degradation and rendered it important. Gathering them together, they transformed ‘nigger’ to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that 90
room was naïve enough to believe it would disappear from white mind – Meeting the head-on, they prove it has absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

So there must be dozens of times that the “nigger” was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But didn’t ‘hear’ it until it was said by a small child by a small pair of lips that had already learned it 95
could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained

Questions

(a) Suggest a suitable title for the passage (02marks)

(b) (i) What is the original situation in which the writer recognized that “nigger” can be a hate word? (3marks)

(ii) “The write argues that definition of words emerges from consensus. How does this idea get reinforced in the last paragraph of the passage? (3marks)

(c) In about 100 words, summarize the author’s message in the passage (10marks)

(d) Explain the meaning of the following words and phrases as used in the passage, using you own words wherever possible

(i) to keep the wolf away from the door (line 02) (02 marks)

(ii) intermittent (line 12) (02marks)

(iii) the inevitable question (line 27) (02 marks)

(iv) anecdote of triumphs (line 49-50) (02marks)

(v) distinguished himself (line 54) (02marks)

(vi) a term of endearment (line 61-62) (02 marks)

(vii) overstepped the bound of decency (line 67) (02marks)

(viii) dynamics (line 86) (02 marks)

(ix) Varied and complex human being (line 88) (02 marks)

(x) Humiliate (line 96) (02 marks)

(20 marks)

Spellings, Punctuation and Grammatical Expression (SPGE) (10 marks)

Suggested answers

(a) Suggest a suitable title for the passage (02marks)

The nigger

The language use

(b) (i) What is the original situation in which the writer recognized that “nigger” can be a hate word? (3marks)

The word “nigger” was spat out by an angry/jealous student against him

(iii) “The write argues that definition of words emerges from consensus. How does this idea get reinforced in the last paragraph of the passage? (3marks)

The paragraph shows that the same word “nigger” was used in several situations for different meaning including using it to insult others.

(c) In about 100 words, summarize the author’s message in the passage (10marks)

THE AUTHOR’S MESSAGE IN THE PASSAGE

The author shows when using a language, the words only acquire meaning by consensus in the situations they are used. Spoken words are superior to written words because they can be enriched by non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures thereby enhancing the overall message. For illustration, the word ‘nigger’ in the passage, had different meanings in different contexts. Spat out by an envious little boy it was meant to demean the author yet it could be used by lovers to communicate in intimacy.

(d) Explain the meaning of the following words and phrases as used in the passage, using you own words wherever possible

(i) to keep the wolf away from the door (line 02) (02 marks)

to earn a living/ to have just enough money to be able to eat and live

(ii) intermittent (line 12) (02marks)

stopping and starting at intervals/alternate

(iii) the inevitable question (line 27) (02 marks)

- unavoidable question/important question
- (iv) anecdote of triumphs (line 49-50) (02marks)
success stories
- (v) distinguished himself (line 54) (02marks)
made himself stand out/made himself noticeable different/successful
- (vi) a term of endearment (line 61-62) (02 marks)
a word or phrase expressing love or affection /a word
of praise and affection that cause something to be
loved
- (vii) overstepped the bound of decency (line 67) (02marks)
going beyond the limits of decency
- (viii) dynamics (line 86) (02 marks)
development/tendency /trend
- (ix) Varied and complex human being (line 88) (02 marks)
Diverse/miscellaneous person
- (x) Humiliate (line 96) (02 marks)
demean /embarrass/degrade
- (20 marks)
- Spellings, Punctuation and Grammatical Expression (SPGE) (10 marks)

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Thanks

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