

## What Is Black?<sup>28</sup>

It started off like any other day in my job as a language arts resource teacher. Upon arrival at my school, I greeted teachers and began working on my current project. Shortly after the bell, Miss Samuel, another teacher, came over and asked me if I'd come to her class to teach a lesson on color poems.

"No problem," I told her. I smiled to myself because this was one of my favorite lessons. The kids love it, and it really seems to bring out their creativity.

Later that day, I marched confidently into her class bearing my "tools of the trade": my colorfully lettered chart, my extra pencils, my chalk, my paper, and my already prepared examples of color poems. The lesson began by soliciting color images from the students.

"What things can you think of that are green?" I asked enthusiastically.

"A bluggoe leaf . . . an unripe mango . . . grass . . . skin-ups . . . trees . . . a lunch kit . . . a hair clip . . . an exercise. . . ." they responded. I eagerly recorded each and every one of their responses on my chart.

I then shared some examples of color poems (which came from a handout I received from the Ministry). Here are a few examples.

### What is Red?

Red is a heart filled with love.  
Red is a face when it's angry and mean.  
Red is when the door is slammed.  
Red is Moses and the burning tree.  
Red is a volcano erupting.

### What is Black?

Black is the color of hatred.  
Black is a gloomy night, ashes,  
Tar on the road, a car's tyre.  
Black is the funeral, dragging slow,  
A midnight sound, dark and low.

### What is Pink?

Pink is the sky at sunset.  
Pink is a kitten's tiny nose.  
Pink is the inside of a rabbit's ear.  
Pink is how I feel inside on my birthday.  
Pink is the joy of being alive.

I then encouraged the children to write a descriptive color poem as a class, with all students offering ideas and suggestions. Hands went up like rockets and children bobbed up and down in their seats, begging to be called on. We composed quite a nice color poem, "What is Blue?" Finally, I put the students into small groups to write their own color poems. They worked well together, cooperating and sharing.

When the lesson was over, I quickly conferred with Miss Samuel to see how she felt about the lesson. We both agreed that the students had made a good effort and have some excellent poems to prove it. I left the class feeling satisfied and went about my duties, without thinking again of the lesson.

The next morning, Miss Samuel came over to have a "piece-a-chat" with me. She told me that something about the lesson I taught had bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on it at the time. Throughout the evening she thought about it and finally realized it was my example color poem, "What is Black?" She found that my poem used negative images to describe black and decided to try her hand at presenting black in a poem with positive images. This is what she came up with.

### What is Black?

Black is the shine of ebony  
And the color of some people's hair.  
Black is the feather of the Corbeau King  
And the skin of my ancestors.  
Black is the seed of the sweet Sapodilla.  
Black is the forerunner of the fair dawn.

Black is Truth.  
Black is Justice.  
Black is Beautiful.  
Black is the writing of Martin Luther King  
And the words of Malcolm X.  
Black is the philosophy of Marcus Garvey  
And the teaching of Bustamante.  
Black is the roll of the Tumba drums  
And the dancing of the Shango women.  
Black is the taste of molasses sweet  
And the culture of my people.  
Black is the son of King Shaka  
And the daughter of Queen Nazinga.  
Black is the ring of the Short-Knees' gullo.  
Black is Free.  
Black is We.  
Black is being Me.

As I finished reading her poem, every hair on my body stood on end and tears welled in my eyes. I stammered out some words of praise for her powerful poem and she went on to see about her class.

Unknowingly, Miss Samuel had opened my eyes to my own hidden prejudice. This was upsetting to me because I consider myself extremely open to and accepting of other races and cultures. I've lived and taught in a rural village in Kenya and now in the West Indies. I appreciate, even celebrate, the richness and beauty in other cultures. I am an avid listener of African music like Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Miriam Makeba, and Hugh Masekela. I enjoy reading the works of African writers like Bessie Head, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Chinua Achebe. I choose to see movies like **Cry Freedom** and **A Dry White Season**. I have participated in anti-Apartheid rallies and believe in the ideas of Stephen Biko and Nelson Mandela. Currently, I'm involved in the most significant relationship of my life, a cross-cultural one with a Grenadian. To me, all these things show my belief in the unity of all people, regardless of race or color, and my profound respect for African culture. I consider myself free of racial prejudice. And yet, I found myself in a black culture, clearly and unconsciously contributing to negative images associated with black that have been around for many years. I'm ashamed to admit this and disappointed in myself for this lack of cultural sensitivity.

It started me thinking: Why is it that bad guys always wear black and good guys wear white? Why do we wear black for grieving our dead and white to celebrate the joy of the union of marriage? Why is black associated with death, evil, and hatred while white is associated with angels, purity, and goodness? What kind of message is this sending?

What I know is, I taught the same lesson to nearly every class in my school. Each time, I was unconsciously perpetuating the "negative images" of black and showing my own "true colors" (excuse the pun). If it wasn't for Miss Samuel, I would have continued my subtle prejudice without even realizing it. So, I owe a lot to her for reminding me, gently, that although we consciously believe in racial equality and unity, sometimes our actions don't show it.

For now, my former example of the color poem "What is Black?" lies at the bottom of my trash bin. I'll be using her powerful images of black from now on. Thank you, Miss Samuel.

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