The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 by Christopher Paul Curtis
Random House, October 1997
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: The Watsons Go to Birmingham by Christopher Paul Curtis

Plot Summary
Kenny and his family, the Watsons, live in Flint Michigan where the winters are almost too cold for them to stand. Kenny has two siblings, a little sister, Joetta, and an older brother, Byron. While Byron is the “god” of Clark Elementary school, Kenny is often made fun of because he enjoys reading, is very intelligent, and has a lazy eye. The other students, and even Byron, refer to Kenny as “Poindexter.” When a new boy, Rufus, moves in, Kenny thinks his problems have been solved by someone who is even easier to make fun of than he is. But to his surprise, they become close friends. Through learning to understand Rufus and through learning from a serious mistake, Kenny learns the meaning of true friendship.

Byron, on the other hand, follows the path of a juvenile delinquent, bulling Kenny and failing several grades. Unable to find a way to control him, Dad and Momma decide to take the family on a trip to Birmingham, Alabama to put him in the care of Grandma Sands. Once in Birmingham, Byron’s behavior starts to improve, but, after getting caught in a whirlpool in a pond he was warned not to swim in, Kenny takes a turn for the worst. The novel reaches its climax when a church in Birmingham is bombed, killing four black children. This experience changes Kenny and he slips into depression. Byron is finally able to help him out of it, and Kenny resolves to live life once again.

Organizational Patterns
The Watsons Go to Birmingham is organized into fifteen chapters, ranging in length from seven to twenty-one pages. Each is titled after a line contained within that chapter (i.e. “Give my regards to Clark, Poindexter”). Bringing these titles to the students’ attention could help them look for the line in the chapter as they read, and then talk about why the author felt it was important enough to use it to represent the entire chapter.

Central Question/Enduring Issue
What does it mean to be a true friend?
Through his friendships and experiences with Rufus and LJ, Kenny comes to understand what a true friend is and what it means to be one. After hurting Rufus’ feelings by laughing at him along with the other students, Kenny learns that to be a true friend he needs to stand up for Rufus and make sure that he never does anything to hurt him. This is an important question that will resonate with adolescents who are learning about the meaning of friendship.
How do we overcome our deepest fears?
After hearing Byron talk about a man-eating fish named “Wool Pooh,” Kenny finds himself seeing this monster everywhere there is danger, which eventually causes him to sink into depression rather than living and overcoming his fear. This fear is perpetuated by his experience in the whirlpool, which he thinks is “Wool Pooh,” and then again when he thinks he sees “Wool Pooh” in the smoldering remains of the Birmingham church. The only thing that finally helps Kenny overcome his fear and start living again is the consolation and encouragement of his older brother. Students can relate to this question by thinking about their own fears and the role that their families and friends have in helping them to overcome them.

What causes racism, prejudice and discrimination, and how can we stop them?
This novel is rich with instances of racism, prejudice and discrimination. With Kenny as our narrator, we feel these experiences with him first-hand and have to decide for ourselves how we will react and deal with them. Although racism is mostly confined to differences between white and black, we see prejudice and discrimination affecting relationships within the black community, such as between students at Clark Elementary school. Students can relate to the discrimination and prejudice issues they see in their own schools and communities and use what they learn from this novel to help them better deal with these issues.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Themes
- Racism, Prejudice and Discrimination – It is clear very early on in the novel that racism, prejudice and discrimination are central themes. We could guess this just by noting that Birmingham and 1963 are part of the title. The Watson family faces many instances when they are discriminated against because of their color and when they have to make decisions based on what will keep them away from controversy. This culminates in the bombing of the Birmingham church, where four black children are killed. It is important to study these themes deeply not only as they are played out in the novel, but also as they continue to impact our society today.
- Friendship – Through his experiences with LJ and then with Rufus, Kenny learns the meaning of true friendship and what it means to be a true friend. This theme is also seen in what we learn about racism and how it inhibits any kind of sincere friendship between whites and blacks. This theme helps us understand Kenny’s character, as well as how we can be better friends to those we love and those who are different from us.
- Family Relationships – The Watsons are a close family with very strong emotional connections. Even though they tease each other and have small disagreements, it is clear that they care deeply about each other and are willing to do anything to stick up for each other. Even Byron and Kenny learn that they are tightly bound to one another,
and that they actually love one another. There are many instances in the book where we glimpse Byron’s true feelings about Kenny and, in the end, it is Byron who is finally able to pull Kenny out of his depression and back into life. This theme can help us better understand how strong family relationships can help us through hard times.

- **Growing Up** – Our first impression of the Watsons leaves us feeling like Kenny is the good boy and Byron is the bad boy. But as the novel progresses, we see them switch roles as they learn new things and grow into a different stage of life. Both boys learn important lessons that mold them into more mature young men. This theme can help us look at our own progression and what we have learned as we have grown older.

- **Other Themes** – Dealing with Grief, Humor, Hatred

**Setting**

This novel takes place in three significant places: Flint, Michigan; Birmingham, Alabama; and along Interstate I-75—the route the Watsons take on their way from Flint to Birmingham. Flint is a midsize industrial city that is home to many factories and car assembly plants. Christopher Paul Curtis actually worked at one of these assembly plants (Fisher Body Flint Plant No. 1) with his father. Most of the action in Flint in the Watson home, which, even though in the midst of a big city, has a yard and is located in a friendly neighborhood. It is also significant to note that Flint has a very cold climate, which is a source of strife between Momma and Papa. Like Flint, Birmingham also has a large number of factories, mostly steel factories. The most significant fact about Birmingham is that it was a focal point for the civil rights movement in 1963. Discrimination is much more extreme here than in Michigan. There are many public areas that are racially segregated, with the facilities for blacks always being of poorer quality.

**Point of View/Narrative Voice**

This novel is a first person narrative, told from the perspective of Kenny Watson, a ten-year-old African American boy from Flint, Michigan. The middle child in his family, Kenny is an excellent student and is trusted by his parents. Being such a smart student, especially in regards to reading, makes Kenny very popular with his teachers at school, but not with his classmates, who constantly tease him. Even his own brother, Byron, the “god” of their elementary school, pokes fun at Kenny, calling him “Poindexter.” Kenny also has a lazy eye that makes him even more vulnerable to his peers’ teasing. Even though he comes to dislike the praise of his teachers because of the negative attention it elicits from his peers, Kenny loves having his parents’ approval and likes it when they pay particular attention to him.

The beginning of the story leads us to believe that we can trust Kenny as being loyal and trustworthy, but our perspective changes as we see how Kenny treats Rufus. Since the story is told through Kenny’s perspective, we get to hear his thoughts and learn that he doesn’t particularly want to be friends with Rufus because of the extra negative attention it will bring to him at school. As the book progresses, we also realize that Kenny is prone to exaggerate...
things. He gives us a hint of this when, at the very beginning of the novel, he tells us that the temperature is “about a zillion degrees below zero,” but we don’t really catch on until later in the novel as we come to know him through his narrative.

Because the entire story is told from Kenny’s perspective—a ten-year-old who is constantly changing—we learn to be careful about how much we trust him. But, despite his flaws, he is also a funny and realistic character we can relate to.

Literary Terms

- Characterization – Curtis does an excellent job of using details and emotion to help us understand and connect with each of his characters. One way he does this is by depicting each character through Kenny’s eyes, causing us to take on his perception of each character.
- Climax – The climax of this novel is the bombing of the church in Birmingham. It brings everything in the story to a head and impacts everything that happens from that point onward. Although there are still conflicts and complications throughout the rest of the story, the action falls from the climax to the end of the novel.
- Complication – There are many complications in this novel, such as Kenny’s struggle to learn about true friendship, Kenny and Byron’s relationship, the Watsons’ move to Birmingham, etc. All of these conflicts not only cause the characters to learn and grow, but also propel the plot forward, making the story exciting and compelling.
- Conflict (Internal/External) – External conflict occurs between different characters, such as between Kenny and Byron, and between characters and events or issues, such as between the Watsons and the issues of racism and discrimination. We see internal conflict in several characters, but the most obvious is in Kenny. We see him struggle with his fears and his perception of himself and the world around him after seeing the church in Birmingham bombed.
- Dialogue – Much of this novel is written in dialogue, which helps us come to know the characters and hear the language that was used in this time period.
- Falling Action – Everything that happens after the climax (the bombing of the church in Birmingham) leads toward the ending of the novel. Although important and exciting things continue to happen, the plot is fizzling out rather than building.
- Narration – This novel is a first-person narrative, so all of the details and descriptions we read come from Kenny, his thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. Everything we experience is through Kenny’s eyes, so we need to be careful that we don’t just except them as how things really are.
- Plot – The plot of this novel is complicated in that it has many conflicts and several instances of rising and falling action. It’s basic structure, though, is rising action until the climax (the bombing of the church in Birmingham) and then falling action until the end of the novel.
- **Rising Action** – Everything in the first part of the novel—the Watson's life in Flint, their decision to go to Birmingham, their journey to Birmingham, and their early experiences in Birmingham—builds up to the climax—the bombing of the church in Birmingham.
- **Setting** – Each of the three major places in which the novel takes place—Flint, Birmingham, and Interstate I-75—greatly impact the way the novel turns out. The Watson's don't really experience extreme racism and discrimination until they reach Birmingham, a place where prejudice is much more outwardly expressed. This change in setting affects the way the characters act and the way the plot moves.
- **Theme** – This novel contains many important themes (racism, friendship, family relationships, growing up, dealing with grief) that help us to understand the novel's purpose and what we can take away and remember after reading it.
- **Voice** – This novel has very strong voice because it is written as a first person narrative. The voice that we hear as we read the story is Kenny’s, so we learn about his personality as we hear his descriptions, thoughts and perceptions. We realize that Kenny’s voice isn’t always reliable because he tends to exaggerate things and loves to be praised.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

Students will be able to relate to Kenny on many levels, but especially to the fact that he experiences a lot of change and exposure to complicated issues, forcing him to grow up throughout the course of the novel. Seeing Kenny face experiences like losing a close friend, being ridiculed by his brother, being teased by his classmates, and being discriminated against because of the color of his skin will cause students to feel a little bit of what Kenny, and many other black children, must have felt growing up during this time period.

Students will also be affected by the issue of racism and the way that it complicated and impacted the lives of each member of the Watson family. All students, no matter their class or social group, will feel discriminated against at some point in their lives. They will therefore relate to and feel for Kenny and his family. Being able to relate will also help them better comprehend what it feels like to be discriminated against in the cruel and unjust way that blacks were before and during the civil rights movement. This increased understanding will help them look at their world a little bit differently because they will be a little bit more conscious of the discrimination that is still happening in our society today.

Students will relate to the different types of relationships in the novel as well. They will be attracted to the closeness of the Watson family, and see the value in true friendship as they witness Kenny’s relationship with Rufus. One of the relationships that will impact them the most is between Kenny and Byron. They will see the power of love between family and friends, despite differences and conflicts.

Finally, students will be impacted by the sometimes offensive language used in the novel. As they come to understand why the author chose the language he did, they will understand how people referred to and spoken to in this way must feel. They will learn to appreciate the value
of good and uplifting language as they see the way offensive language impacts the characters as well as themselves.

**Vocabulary Issues**

Christopher Paul Curtis is a master of dialogue in this novel. There is great value in studying the way he recreates the way African Americans in this time period sounded, as well as the way they related to and spoke to each other. Looking at the slang and colloquialisms can increase students’ understanding of what different passages really mean—what their connotations and implications are. Students will also have an opportunity to explore the reasons behind Curtis’ use of offensive language and why its use is important in the novel. There are many examples of usage that students could use as models of good writing, especially in regards to dialogue and how to recreate a certain dialect in writing.

**Background Knowledge**

Students’ enjoyment and understanding of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* could be greatly increased through a study of the history of African Americans in the context of American history, as well as a study of the Civil Rights Movement. Before and during the reading of the novel, students should be exposed to the issues relating to the Civil Rights Movement and the events that brought it about. For example, understanding slavery and the Civil War, even if not in depth, could greatly increase students’ understanding of what the Watsons experience and why black people in the book are treated the way that they are. It could also be beneficial for students to learn about the impact that the Civil Rights Movement had and the way that society has changed as a result.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

Since this novel involves so many issues associated with diversity, it would be beneficial to a study of this novel to ask students from different ethnic backgrounds to share what they know of the racial issues associated with their specific ethnicity (as long as they feel comfortable doing so). If racism, prejudice and discrimination are going to be discussed openly, students should feel free to talk about what makes them feel discriminated against and what they can do to stop these practices from occurring. Students should be encouraged to help each other to understand these issues by sharing their own stories, which can add to their understanding of Kenny and the Watsons family. It would also be appropriate for classmates to help special needs students to understand the issues being discussed through group discussions and hands-on activities.
Gender Issues

This novel does not deal in depth with any gender issues, though it might be beneficial to discuss the perception during this time period of black females compared to that of black males. A study of this novel could include a discussion of the status of white women compared to the status of any black people. The best way to bring up these issues would be to give a history of African Americans in American history in regards to the way they have been perceived throughout the past few centuries, and then to move to a discussion of what their status was perceived to be during the 1960's.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

Go Back in Time
Ask students, “If you found a time capsule from 1963, what might be in it?” Students would be asked to give a written response, as well as to produce a display or multimedia form of their answer, including pictures and evidence of research. To complete this activity, students would research what was in the news in the 1960’s, interview people they know who grew up in the 1960’s, and take evidence from the book about the major issues during the 1960’s.

What Are You Saying?
Since Curtis uses many colloquial expressions and words in his writing, students would be asked to write down some of the different expressions as the read, and then try to figure out what the character means from the context in which the expression was used and from other characters’ reactions. They can also use a dictionary of regional sayings to help them.

You’re in the News!
As individuals or in pairs, students would prepare a news broadcast from the scene of the church bombing in Birmingham. They would write a script and be prepared to act it out. To prepare for their broadcast, they would research the event, talk about the reactions of the characters in the book, and write scripts for both African American and white bystanders they would interview about their reactions. Some of the people they interview would be characters from the novel.

Enrichment Resources

Additional novels dealing with issues of racism, prejudice, and discrimination:
- Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor
- To Kill a Mockingbird by
- Adaline Falling Star by Mary Pope Osborne
- The Divine Wind: A Love Story by Garry Disher

African American writers who write for young adults:
- Mildred D. Taylor
- Ann M. Martin
- Virginia Hamilton
Non-Fiction books containing related issues:

- *The Day Martin Luther King, Jr. Was Shot: A Photo History of the Civil Rights Movement* by James Haskins
- *Free at Last: A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle* by Sarah Bullard
- *Oh, Freedom! Kids Talk About the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made it Happen* by Casey King and Linda Barret Osborne

Movies:

- *Four Little Girls* (1997), directed by Spike Lee

Websites:

- [www.kidsreads.com](http://www.kidsreads.com)