

## Glover Then/Now Handout

Color Coding: Now/Present – Then/Past – Future

Long ago my father and I were servants at Cripplegate, a cotton plantation in South Carolina. That distant place, the world of my childhood, is ruin now, mere parable, but what history I have begins there... —Charles Johnson, Oxherding Tale

When he had met Pauline in Kentucky, she was hanging over a fence scratching herself with a broken foot. The neatness, the charm, the joy he awakened in her made him want to nest with her. He had yet to discover what destroyed that desire. But he did not dwell on it. He thought rather of whatever had happened to the curiosity he used to feel. Nothing, nothing, interested him now. Not himself, not other people. Only in drink was there some break, some floodlight, and when that closed, there was oblivion. —Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

In my childhood—it had not been so long ago—I had thought her beautiful. She had been quick witted and quick-moving and very generous with all the children and each of her visits had been an event. At one time one of my brothers and myself had thought of running away to live with her. Now she could no longer produce out of her handbag some unexpected and yet familiar delight. She made me feel pity and revulsion and fear. It was awful to realize that she no longer caused me to feel affection. —James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”

The unconscious brutality of the proceeding grated harshly upon the colonel's nerves. Delinquents of some kind these men must be, who were thus dealt with; but he had lived away from the South so long that so sudden an introduction to some of its customs came with something of a shock. He had remembered the pleasant things, and these but vaguely, since his thoughts and his interests had been elsewhere; and in the sifting process of a healthy memory he had forgotten the disagreeable things altogether. He had found the pleasant things still in existence, faded but still fragrant. Fresh from a land of labour unions, and of struggle for wealth and power, of strivings first for equality with those above, and, this attained, for a point of vantage to look down upon former equals, he had found in old Peter, only the day before, a touching loyalty to a family from which he could no longer expect anything in return. Fresh from a land of women's clubs and women's claims, he had reveled last night in the charming domestic, life of the old South, so perfectly preserved in a quiet household. Things Southern, as he had already reflected, lived long and died hard, and these things which he saw now in the clear light of day, were also of the South, and singularly suggestive of other things Southern which he had supposed outlawed and discarded long ago. "Now, Mr. Haines, bring in the next lot," said the Squire.

The constable led out an old coloured man, clad in a quaint assortment of tattered garments, whom the colonel did not for a moment recognise, not having, from where he stood, a full view of the prisoner's face. —Charles Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*

I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny. I almost called his name. Then I saw that it wasn't Sonny, but somebody we used to know, a boy from around our block. He'd been Sonny's friend. He'd never been mine, having been too young for me,

and, anyway, I'd never liked him. And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy. I used to run into him from time to time and he'd often work around to asking me for a quarter or fifty cents. He always had some real good excuse, too, and I always gave it to him. I don't know why.

But now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child. I wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing in the school courtyard. —James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

Whenever the colonel visited the cemetery, or took a walk in that pleasant quarter of the town, he had to cross the bridge from which was visible the site of the old Eureka cotton mill of his boyhood, and it was not difficult to recall that it had been, before the War, a busy hive of industry. On a narrow and obscure street, little more than an alley, behind the cemetery, there were still several crumbling tenements, built for the mill operatives, but now occupied by a handful of abjectly poor whites, who kept body and soul together through the doubtful mercy of God and a small weekly dole from the poormaster. —The Colonel's Dream

He produced an envelope, once white, now yellow with time, on which was endorsed in ink once black but faded to a pale brown, and hardly legible, the name of "Malcolm Dudley, Esq., Mink Run," and in the lower left-hand corner, "By hand of Viney." —The Colonel's Dream

So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood. These streets hadn't changed, though housing projects jutted up out of them now like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea. Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn't. —"Notes of a Native Son"

While the preacher talked and I watched the children—years of changing their diapers, scrubbing them, slapping them, taking them to school, and scolding them had had the perhaps inevitable result of making me love them, though I am not sure I knew this then—my mind was busily breaking out with a rash of disconnected impressions. Snatches of popular songs, indecent jokes, bits of books I had read, movie sequences, faces, voices, political issues—I thought I was going mad; all these impressions suspended, as it were, in the solution of the faint nausea produced in me by the heat and liquor. For a moment I had the impression that my alcoholic breath, inefficiently disguised with chewing gum, filled the entire chapel. Then someone began singing one of my father's favorite songs and, abruptly, I was with him, sitting on his knee, in the hot, enormous, crowded church which was the first church we attended. It was the Abyssinian Baptist Church on 138th Street. We had not gone there long. With this image, a host of others came. I had forgotten, in the rage of my growing up, how proud my father had been of me when I was little. Apparently, I had had a voice and my

father had liked to show me off before the members of the church. I had forgotten what he had looked like when he was pleased but now I remembered that he had always been grinning with pleasure when my solos ended. I even remembered certain expressions on his face when he teased my mother—had he loved her? I would never know. And when had it all begun to change? For now it seemed that he had not always been cruel. I remembered being taken for a haircut and scraping my knee on the footrest of the barber's chair and I remembered my father's face as he soothed my crying and applied the stinging iodine. Then I remembered our fights, fights which had been of the worst possible kind because my technique had been silence.

I remembered the one time in all our life together when we had really spoken to each other. It was on a Sunday and it must have been shortly before I left home. We were walking, just the two of us, in our usual silence, to or from church. I was in high school and had been doing a lot of writing

and I was, at about this time, the editor of the high school magazine. But I had also been a Young Minister and had been preaching from the pulpit.

Lately, I had been taking fewer engagements and preached as rarely as possible. It was said in the church, quite truthfully, that I was "cooling off."

My father asked me abruptly, "You'd rather write than preach, wouldn't you?" I was astonished at his question—because it was a real question. I answered, "Yes." That was all we said. It was awful to remember that that was all we had ever said. The casket now was opened and the mourners were being led up the aisle to look for the last time...

The first twigs are thin, green, and supple. They bend into a complete circle, but will not break. Their delicate, showy hopefulness shooting from forsythia and lilac bushes meant only a change in whipping style. They beat us differently in the spring. Instead of the dull pain of a winter strap, there were these new green switches that lost their sting long after the whipping was over. There was a nervous meanness in these long twigs that made us long for the steady stroke of a strap or the firm but honest slap of a hairbrush. Even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer. —The Bluest Eye

"You are a fine, strong man now, but I can see you as you were, the day you went away to the war, in your new gray uniform, on your fine gray horse, at the head of your company. You were going to take Peter with you, but he had got his feet poisoned with poison ivy, and couldn't walk, and your father gave you another boy, and Peter cried like a baby at being left behind. I can remember how proud you were, and how proud your father was, when he gave you his sword—your grandfather's sword, and told you never to draw it or sheath it, except in honour; and how, when you were gone, the old gentleman shut himself up for two whole days and would speak to no one. He was glad and sorry—glad to send you to fight for your country, and sorry to see you go—for you were his only boy."

The colonel thrilled with love and regret. His father had loved him, he knew very well, and he had not visited his tomb for twenty-five years. How far away it seemed too, the time when he had thought of the Confederacy as his country! And the sword, his grandfather's sword, had been for years stored away in a dark closet. His father had kept it displayed upon the drawing-room wall, over the table on which the family Bible had rested. Mrs. Treadwell was silent for a moment. —The Colonel's Dream

We reached Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables. It was empty now, but sweetly expectant of clean, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there above the lake in summer before half-running, half-stumbling down the slope to the welcoming water. Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams.—The Bluest Eye

Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men—but not now. Not in impotence but later, when the hatred could find sweet expression. For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. The hee-hee-hee's. He recalled Darlene's dripping hair ribbon, flapping against her face as they walked back in silence in the rain. The loathing that galloped through him made him tremble. —The Bluest Eye