



LITERATURE

IN

GRACE ABOUNDING

All Stories Are Anansi's¹

Anonymous



In the beginning, all tales and stories belonged to Nyame,² the Sky God. But Kwaku³ Anansi, the spider, yearned to be the owner of all the stories known in the world, and he went to Nyame and offered to buy them.

What does Anansi the Spider want? Who has what he wants?

The Sky God said: "I am willing to sell the stories, but

the price is high. Many people have come to me offering to buy, but the price was too high for them. Rich and powerful families have not been able to pay. Do you think you can do it?"

Anansi replied to the Sky God: "I can do it. What is the price?"

"My price is three things," the Sky God said. "I must first have Mmoboro,⁴ the hornets. I must then have Onini,⁵ the great python. I must then have Osebo,⁶ the leopard. For these things I will sell you the right to tell all stories."

Anansi said: "I will bring them."

He went home and made his plans. He first cut a gourd from a vine and made a small hole in it. He took a large calabash, and filled it with water. He went to the tree where the hornets lived. He poured some of the water over himself, so that he was dripping. He threw some water over the hornets, so

that they too were dripping. Then he put the calabash on his head, as though to protect himself from a storm, and called out to the hornets: "Are you foolish people? Why do you stay in the rain that is falling?"

The hornets answered: "Where shall we go?"

"Go here, in this dry gourd," Anansi told them.

The hornets thanked him and flew into the gourd through the small hole. When the last of them had entered, Anansi plugged the hole with a ball of grass, saying: "Oh, yes, but you are really foolish people!"

In what way have the hornets been foolish?

He took his gourd full of hornets to Nyame, the Sky God. The Sky God accepted them. He said: "There are two more things."

Anansi returned to the forest and cut a long bamboo pole and some strong vines. Then he walked toward the house of Onini, the python, talking to himself. He said: "My wife is stupid. I say he is longer and stronger. My wife says he is shorter and weaker. I give

¹ **Anansi.** The name is variously spelled in written versions of the stories. Common variants include *Ananzi* and *Ananse*.

² **Nyame.** The chief god in traditional Ashanti religion, who, like Zeus in Greek mythology, is identified as both a sky god and as the great father. The name is pronounced NYAH-meh.

³ **Kwaku.** The word *Kwaku* means, literally, "Uncle."

⁴ **Mmoboro.** Pronounced mmoh-BOH-roh

⁵ **Onini.** Pronounced oh-NEE-nee

⁶ **Osebo.** Pronounced oh-SAY-boh

VOCABULARY IN PLACE

- **calabash, n.** A large gourd used as a vessel, jar, or bowl

“Ar’n’t I a Woman” Speech at the Akron Convention, Akron, Ohio, May 28-29, 1851

from *Reminiscences by Frances D. Gage
of Sojourner Truth*

The leaders of the movement trembled on seeing a tall, **gaunt** black woman in a gray dress and white turban, surmounted with an **uncouth** sun-bonnet, march deliberately into the church, walk

How did the crowd react when Truth entered the church? Why?

with the air of a queen up the aisle, and take her seat upon the pulpit steps. A buzz of **disapprobation** was heard all

over the house, and there fell on the listening ear, “An abolition affair!” “Woman’s rights and niggers!” “I told you so!” “Go it, darkey!”

I chanced on that occasion to wear my first laurels¹ in public life as president of the meeting. At my request order was restored, and the business of the convention went on. Morning, afternoon, and evening exercises came and went. Through all these sessions old Sojourner, quiet and **reticent** . . . sat crouched against the wall on the corner of the

pulpit stairs, her sun-bonnet shading her eyes, her elbows on her knees, her chin resting upon her broad, hard palms. At intermission she was busy selling the “Life of Sojourner Truth,” a narrative of her own strange and adventurous life. Again and again, **timorous** and trembling ones came to me and said, with earnestness, “don’t let her speak, Mrs. Gage, it will ruin us. Every newspaper in the land will have our cause mixed up with abolition and niggers, and we shall be utterly denounced.” My only answer was, “We shall see when the time comes.”

Why did the conference attendees complain about Sojourner Truth?



Sojourner Truth with President Abraham Lincoln
Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-16225

¹ **laurels**. In ancient Greece, champions wore a wreath made of branches from the laurel tree. Gage did not literally wear laurels, but writers sometimes refer to any accomplished person as “wearing laurels.”

VOCABULARY IN PLACE

- **gaunt**, *adj.* Thin and bony; haggard
- **uncouth**, *adj.* Crude, unrefined
- **disapprobation**, *n.* Condemnation; moral disapproval
- **reticent**, *adj.* Restrained in expression; shy
- **timorous**, *adj.* Nervous

elements into a common area of contact and interaction. Within this area, race sympathy and unity have determined a further fusing of sentiment and experience. So what began in terms of segregation becomes more and more, as its element mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding. Hitherto, it must be admitted that American Negroes have been a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The



Harlem was a bustling community, circa 1930, as documented in this scene of 125th Street. The marquee of the Apollo Theater appears on the left side of the street.

chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination.¹⁵

It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital. That is why our comparison is taken with those nascent centers of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world today. Without pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia.

Harlem, I grant you, isn't typical—but

it is significant, it is prophetic. No sane observer, however sympathetic to the new trend, would contend that the great masses are **articulate** as yet, but they stir, they move, they are more than physically restless. The challenge of the new intellectuals among them is clear enough—the “race radicals” and realists who have broken with the old epoch of philanthropic guidance,¹⁶ sentimental appeal and protest. But are we after all only reading into the stirrings of a sleeping giant the dreams of an agitator? The answer is in the migrating peasant. It is the “man farthest down” who is most active in getting up. One of the most characteristic symptoms of this is the professional man, himself migrating to recapture his constituency after a vain effort to maintain in some Southern corner what for years back seemed an established living and clientele. The clergyman following his errant flock, the physician or lawyer trailing his clients, supply the true clues. In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following. A transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses.

Why was Harlem so special?

¹⁵ **Hitherto . . . self-determination.** *Hitherto* means “until now.” One cannot overstate the importance of this paragraph with regard to the essay as a whole. Locke recognized that a social and cultural phenomenon was taking place, the creation of a center of African-American culture.

¹⁶ **old epoch . . . guidance.** An *epoch* is a particular period in history. The author refers to the period, especially between Reconstruction and the 1920s, when many white activists and charities—despite good intentions—fostered, according to Locke, an atmosphere of dependence and low self-respect.

VOCABULARY IN PLACE

- **nascent**, *adj.* Emerging; coming into existence
- **articulate**, *adj.* Capable of clear expression

When the racial leaders of twenty years ago¹⁷ spoke of developing race-pride and stimulating race-consciousness, and of the desirability of race solidarity, they could not in any accurate degree have anticipated the abrupt feeling that has surged up and now pervades the awakened centers. Some of the recognized Negro leaders and a powerful section of white opinion identified with “race work” of the older order have indeed attempted to discount this feeling as a “passing phase,” an attack of “race nerves” so to speak, an “aftermath of the war,” and the like. It has not **abated**, however, if we are to gauge by the present tone and temper of the Negro press, or by the shift in popular support from the officially recognized and **orthodox** spokesmen to those of the

What were the “tone and temper of the Negro press,” according to Locke?

independent, popular, and often radical type who are unmistakable symptoms of a new order. It is a social

disservice to blunt the fact that the Negro of the Northern centers has reached a stage where **tutelage**, even of the most interested and well-intentioned sort, must give place to new relationships, where positive self-direction must be reckoned with in ever increasing measure. The American mind must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro.

The Negro too, for his part, has idols of the tribe to smash.¹⁸ If on the one hand the white man has erred in making the Negro appear to be that which would excuse or **extenuate** his treatment of him, the Negro, in turn, has too often unnecessarily excused himself because of the way he has been treated. The intelligent Negro of today is resolved not to make discrimination

an extenuation for his shortcomings in performance, individual or collective; he is trying to hold himself at par, neither inflated by sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social discounts. For this he must know himself and be known for precisely what he is, and for that reason he welcomes the new scientific rather than the old sentimental interest. Sentimental interest in the Negro has ebbed. We used to lament this as the falling off of our friends; now we rejoice and pray to be delivered both from self-pity and condescension. The mind of each racial group has had a bitter weaning, apathy or hatred on one side matching disillusionment or resentment on the other; but they face each other today with the possibility at least of entirely new mutual attitudes.

It does not follow that if the Negro were better known, he would be better liked or better treated. But mutual understanding is basic for any subsequent cooperation and adjustment.

The effort toward this will at least have the effect of

Did Locke express hope for the future? Why, or why not?

remediating in large part what has been the most unsatisfactory feature of our present stage of race relationships in America, namely the fact that the more intelligent and representative elements of the two race groups have at so many points got quite out of vital

¹⁷ **racial leaders . . . years ago.** For example, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois

¹⁸ **idols . . . to smash.** The philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1629), in his work *Novum Organum*, coined the term *idols of the tribe* to describe false beliefs resulting from natural human tendencies.

VOCABULARY IN PLACE

- **abated**, *past part.* Lessened; decreased in intensity
- **orthodox**, *adj.* Adhering to accepted or traditional beliefs
- **tutelage**, *n.* The activity of a guardian or tutor
- **extenuate**, *v.* To lessen the magnitude or seriousness of



UNDERSTANDING THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. According to Schomburg, what is a “luxury for most Americans,” but “a prime social necessity for the Negro”?
2. Review the “three outstanding conclusions” mentioned on page 306. Write one sentence to summarize each of these conclusions in your own words.
3. What kind of exhibit was housed at the Public Library of Harlem?
4. What, according to Schomburg, is “weightier surely than any evidence of individual talent”?
5. What academy did Alexander Crummell found and why?
6. Why has the Negro been considered “a man without history”?

Interpreting

- ▶ 1. How will African Americans change their future by remaking the past?
- ▶ 2. How have these conclusions been established? What impact has each of these conclusions had on the “Negro historian”?
- ▶ 3. Why were white people “astonished” by this exhibit?
- ▶ 4. How might this factor set African Americans apart from other American ethnic or racial groups?
- ▶ 5. Why has scholarly work in this academy been stifled?
- ▶ 6. How have African native crafts and sculpture helped to change this false notion?

Synthesizing

1. What does Schomburg mean when he calls for African Americans to remake their “group tradition”? How will this provide an “antidote for prejudice”?
2. What was Schomburg’s main purpose in writing this essay?
3. Does Schomburg seem optimistic about the future of African-American scholarship? Provide examples from the text to support your answer.

DELVING DEEPER

Writing

Names Worthy of Remembrance. Arthur Schomburg cites at least 50 historical figures in his essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” Take out references to major figures like George Washington, King Philip V, and the Queen of Sheba, and you are left with dozens of notable people, every one of whom contributed directly to the world as you know it today.

This is a three-part project:

1. Working in small groups or as a class, compile a complete list of every single name mentioned by Schomburg in his entire essay, beginning with Abbé Grégoire. If you do not find at least 45 names, then look again. Once the list is complete, divide the names equally among workgroups or individual students.
2. Using your library and the Internet, create a short biography for each name to which you are assigned. If possible, include the person’s lifespan, birthplace, education, major accomplishments, and a one-sentence synopsis of any important publications or speeches. A basic Internet search may not provide adequate resources for many of the names on the list. Prepare to dig deep!
3. Assemble the final drafts in a single packet. Make copies so that everyone in the class will have a reminder that we must all work to preserve and interpret our cultural heritage.

About the Author

Arturo (Arthur) Schomburg (1874–1938), writer, historian, **bibliophile** (lover and collector of books), and curator, was born in Puerto Rico. He moved to New York City in 1891, where he finished his high-school education.

Schomburg became active in several fraternal organizations, including the black Freemasons, where he befriended fellow bibliophiles and scholars. He soon became intensely interested in collecting evidence of black cultural heritage. His vast collection was purchased for the New York Public Library in 1926, but Schomburg continued to work as a curator and collector for the rest of his life.

Schomburg published numerous articles in scholarly and literary journals, befriended, and influenced nearly every major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, and belonged to more than 30 organizations, including the NAACP and the Urban League.



The Heart of a Woman

by Georgia Douglas Johnson

- 1 The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales¹ does it roam
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.
- 5 The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars,
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars. ■



¹ **turrets and vales.** A metaphor for life's ups and downs. A *turret* is a tower, and a *vale* is a valley.

The Black Finger

by Angelina Weld Grimké

- 1 I have just seen a beautiful thing
 Slim and still,
Against a gold, gold sky,
 A straight cypress,¹
- 5 Sensitive
 Exquisite,
A black finger
Pointing upwards.
Why, beautiful, still finger are you black?
- 10 And why are you pointing upwards? ■



Cypress Trees in South Carolina, Library of Congress, LC-B811-3569

¹ **cypress.** A large family of evergreen trees. The trees are common in the Deep South, where they take root in swamps and can grow to impressive heights.

PREREADING

“The Bouquet”

by Charles W. Chesnutt

This writer is often cited as the first “great” African-American novelist. While there were several successful and accomplished novelists before him, he was the first who consistently produced masterful works of literature. He was also a great short-story writer who could expose truth and injustice in the simple, everyday actions of his beautifully composed characters.

Charles W. Chesnutt was born and raised during a pivotal time in American history—the Reconstruction era—and spent much of his life frustrated by the mistreatment of black people all around the United States. Chesnutt’s perspective on racial matters is somewhat unusual because a person passing him on the street might easily have assumed that he was white. He never pretended to be white, but his physical features made the reality of racism in America all the more acute and painful to him.

The following background information and analysis will help you get the most out of this masterpiece of American fiction:

1. “The Bouquet” is set in North Carolina shortly after the Civil War. Mary Myrover and her mother are descended from a long line of wealthy slave owners.
2. Most of Chesnutt’s stories centered on racial themes. Pay attention to details in the story related to racial discrimination.
3. Analyze this exemplary model of the short story form. Examine the ways in which a writer can use details and carefully chosen actions to reveal the essence of a character, setting, or historical era. Make an informal character chart in your notebook, and jot down important details and quotations, along with page and paragraph citations, to assist in a later analysis of short-story elements.
4. The word *juxtapose* means “to place side by side, especially for comparison or contrast.” As you read, pay attention to the way in which the writer juxtaposes Sophy (the main character) and Prince (the dog).