“Shame”—from the Autobiography of Dick Gregory

1. I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that. I was about seven years old when I got my first big lesson. I was in love with a little girl named Helene Tucker, a light-complexioned little girl with pigtails and nice manners. She was always clean and she was smart in school. I think I went to school then mostly to look at her. I brushed my hair and even got me a little old handkerchief. It was a lady's handkerchief, but I didn't want Helene to see me wipe my nose on my hand.

2. The pipes were frozen again, there was no water in the house, but I washed my socks and shirt every night. I'd get a pot, and go over to Mister Ben's grocery store, and stick my pot down into his soda machine and scoop out some chopped ice. By evening the ice melted to water for washing. I got sick a lot that winter because the fire would go out at night before the clothes were dry. In the morning I'd put them on, wet or dry, because they were the only clothes I had.

3. Everybody's got a Helene Tucker, a symbol of everything you want. I loved her for her goodness, her cleanliness, her popularity. She'd walk down my street and my brothers and sisters would yell, "Here comes Helene," and I'd rub my tennis sneakers on the back of my pants and wish my hair wasn't so nappy and the white folks' shirt fit me better. I'd run out on the street. If I knew my place and didn't come too close, she'd wink at me and say hello. That was a good feeling. Sometimes I'd follow her all the way home, and shovel the snow off her walk and try to make friends with her momma and her aunts. I'd drop money on her stoop late at night on my way back from shining shoes in the taverns. And she had a daddy, and he had a good job. He was a paperhanger.

4. I guess I would have gotten over Helene by summertime, but something happened in that classroom that made her face hang in front of me for the next twenty-two years. When I played the drums in high school, it was for Helene, and when I broke track records in college, it was for Helene, and when I started standing behind microphones and heard applause, I wished Helene could hear it too. It wasn't until I was twenty-nine years old and married and making money that I finally got her out of my system. Helene was sitting in that classroom when I learned to be ashamed of myself.

5. It was on a Thursday. I was sitting in the back of the room, in a seat with a chalk circle drawn around it. The idiot's seat, the troublemaker's seat.

6. The teacher thought I was stupid. Couldn't spell, couldn't read, couldn't do arithmetic. Just stupid. Teachers were never interested in finding out that you couldn't concentrate because you were so hungry, because you hadn't had any breakfast. All you could think about was noontime; would it ever come? Maybe you could sneak into the cloakroom and steal a bite of some kid's lunch out of a coat pocket. A bite of something. Paste. You can't really make a meal of paste, or put it on bread for a sandwich, but sometimes I'd scoop a few spoonfuls out of the big paste jar in the back of the room. Pregnant people get strange tastes. I was pregnant with poverty. Pregnant with dirt and pregnant with smells that made people turn away. Pregnant with cold and pregnant with shoes that were never bought for me. Pregnant with five other people in my bed and no daddy in the next room, and pregnant with hunger. Paste doesn't taste too bad when you're hungry.

7. The teacher thought I was a troublemaker. All she saw from the front of the room was a little black boy who squirmed in his idiot's seat and made noises and poked the kids around him. I guess she couldn't see a kid who made noises because he wanted someone to know he was there.

8. It was on a Thursday, the day before the Negro payday. The eagle always flew on Friday. The teacher was asking each student how much his father would give to the Community Chest. On Friday night, each kid would get the money from his father, and on Monday he would bring it to the school. I decided I was going to buy a daddy right then. I had money in my pocket from shining shoes and selling papers, and whatever Helene Tucker pledged for her daddy I was going to top it. And I'd hand the money right in. I wasn't going to wait until Monday to buy me a daddy.
9. I was shaking, scared to death. The teacher opened her book and started calling out names alphabetically: "Helene Tucker?" "My Daddy said he'd give two dollars and fifty cents." "That's very nice, Helene. Very, very nice indeed."

10. That made me feel pretty good. It wouldn't take too much to top that. I had almost three dollars in dimes and quarters in my pocket. I stuck my hand in my pocket and held on to the money, waiting for her to call my name. But the teacher closed her book after she called everybody else in the class.

11. I stood up and raised my hand. "What is it now?" "You forgot me?" She turned toward the blackboard. "I don't have time to be playing with you, Richard."

12. "My daddy said he'd..." "Sit down, Richard, you're disturbing the class." "My daddy said he'd give...fifteen dollars."

13. She turned around and looked mad. "We are collecting this money for you and your kind, Richard Gregory. If your daddy can give fifteen dollars you have no business being on relief."

14. "I got it right now, I got it right now, my Daddy gave it to me to turn in today, my daddy said. .."

15. "And furthermore," she said, looking right at me, her nostrils getting big and her lips getting thin and her eyes opening wide, "We know you don't have a daddy."

16. Helene Tucker turned around, her eyes full of tears. She felt sorry for me. Then I couldn't see her too well because I was crying, too.

17. "Sit down, Richard," And I always thought the teacher kind of liked me. She always picked me to wash the blackboard on Friday, after school. That was a big thrill; it made me feel important. If I didn't wash it, come Monday the school might not function right.

18. "Where are you going, Richard! "

19. I walked out of school that day, and for a long time I didn't go back very often.

20. There was shame there. Now there was shame everywhere. It seemed like the whole world had been inside that classroom, everyone had heard what the teacher had said, everyone had turned around and felt sorry for me. There was shame in going to the Worthy Boys Annual Christmas Dinner for you and your kind, because everybody knew what a worthy boy was. Why couldn't they just call it the Boys Annual Dinner-why'd they have to give it a name? There was shame in wearing the brown and orange and white plaid mackinaw' the welfare gave to three thousand boys. Why'd it have to be the same for everybody so when you walked down the street the people could see you were on relief? It was a nice warm mackinaw and it had a hood, and my momma beat me and called me a little rat when she found out I stuffed it in the bottom of a pail full of garbage way over on Cottage Street. There was shame in running over to Mister Ben's at the end of the day and asking for his rotten peaches, there was shame in asking Mrs. Simmons for a spoonful of sugar, there was shame in running out to meet the relief truck. I hated that truck, full of food for you and your kind. I ran into the house and hid when it came. And then I started to sneak through alleys, to take the long way home so the people going into White's Eat Shop wouldn't see me. Yeah, the whole world heard the teacher that day-we all know you don't have a Daddy.
It lasted for a while, this kind of numbness. I spent a lot of time feeling sorry for myself. And then one day I met this wino in a restaurant. I'd been out hustling all day, shining shoes, selling newspapers, and I had googobs of money in my pocket. Bought me a bowl of chili for fifteen cents, and a cheese-burger for fifteen cents, and a Pepsi for five cents, and a piece of chocolate cake for ten cents. That was a good meal. I was eating when this old wino came in. I love winos because they never hurt anyone but themselves.

The old wino sat down at the counter and ordered twenty-six cents worth of food. He ate it like he really enjoyed it. When the owner, Mister Williams, asked him to pay the check, the old wino didn't lie or go through his pocket like he suddenly found a hole.

He just said: "Don't have no money." The owner yelled: "Why in hell did you come in here and eat my food if you don't have no money? That food cost me money."

Mister Williams jumped over the counter and knocked the wino off his stool and beat him over the head with a pop bottle. Then he stepped back and watched the wino bleed. Then he kicked him. And he kicked him again.

I looked at the wino with blood all over his face and I went over. "Leave him alone, Mister Williams. I'll pay the twenty-six cents."

The wino got up, slowly, pulling himself up to the stool, then up to the counter, holding on for a minute until his legs stopped shaking so bad. He looked at me with pure hate. "Keep your twenty-six cents. You don't have to pay, not now. I just finished paying for it."

He started to walk out, and as he passed me, he reached down and touched my shoulder. "Thanks, sonny, but it's too late now. Why didn't you pay it before?" I was pretty sick about that. I waited too long to help another man.
“Shame”
Topical Considerations

Answer all parts using complete sentences.

1. What words does Gregory use to describe Helene Tucker? What do you think influenced his view?

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2. How old was Gregory at this time? What do you think of the way Gregory handled himself in school the day the teacher embarrassed him? How did he deal with the problem? At his age, how would you have responded?

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3. Why did the memory of Helen Tucker’s presence the day he was shamed in class motivate Gregory to excel as a teenager? Do you think this is a useful motivational device? What other incentives can be effective?

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4. How sensitive was the teacher? How else might she have responded to Gregory?

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5. Do you think most welfare recipients are like Gregory and do not want to be on welfare? Why?

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Rhetorical Considerations

6. Where does Gregory place his thesis? Is this the best place for it? Why?

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7. Look again at the adjectives Gregory uses to describe Helen. Does he use too many? Not enough? Are the essential to the development of his thesis? Why or why not?

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8. Does Gregory *tell* or *show* his reader how he feels about Helene Tucker? Explain?

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**Shame**

**Distinguishing Between Fact and Opinion**

A fact is something known to be true. Facts can usually be checked and proved by examining something in the world around you. It is a fact that Dick Gregory grew up in a poor household. An opinion is what someone thinks or believes about something. Opinions may or may not be based on facts. It is an opinion that Dick Gregory is an outstanding comedian.

**Directions:** Here are 11 statements about the selection “Shame” and the short biography of Dick Gregory. Circle F if the statement is a fact or O if it is an opinion. Refer to the selection if necessary.

1. **F O** As a child, Dick Gregory was undernourished and small for his age.
2. **F O** Dick Gregory should not have been ashamed of being poor.
3. **F O** Helene Tucker was a symbol to Dick Gregory of everything he wanted.
4. **F O** Everyone has a symbol like Helene Tucker.
5. **F O** In college, Dick Gregory broke track records.
6. **F O** Through his writing, Dick Gregory makes us feel his shame.
7. **F O** Dick Gregory earned money by shining shoes and selling newspapers.
8. **F O** Dick Gregory wouldn’t have been ashamed if Helene Tucker hadn’t felt sorry for him.
9. **F O** Dick Gregory used to wash his clothes in melted ice.
10. **F O** Dick Gregory had no business donating money to charity when his family needed food.
11. **F O** Dick Gregory cared too much about what others thought.
Identifying Tone

(Keyed to “Shame” Pages 99–102)

Tone refers to the writer’s attitude toward the subject and possibly, toward the reader. This attitude is revealed by the kind of language the writer uses. For example, a writer may choose words that create a serious or a humorous tone. In the selection “Shame,” Dick Gregory uses everyday language to create an informal tone. This informal tone reflects Gregory’s deep feelings about the subject matter and his desire to share those feelings with his readers.

Directions: Circle the letter next to the word that best describes the tone of each passage below.

1. You couldn’t have called Caleb mean. On the other hand, to say that he was kindhearted would certainly have been stretching the point. Best to leave it at this: He was a man who spoke his mind—fully.
   (a) ironic   (b) formal   (c) light

2. It would be difficult to exaggerate the advantages of the word processor over the ordinary electric typewriter. For the professional writer or the student, to whom time is always of the essence, the ease of correcting typographical errors alone is enough to justify the purchase of one of these marvels of the electronic age.
   (a) humorous   (b) formal   (c) folksy

3. There on the front steps sat Rover, obviously exhausted by his tremendous effort to reach home. To this day I cannot recall the scene without tears of relief welling up in my eyes. But when I recall that I, in my carelessness, was the cause of that ordeal, then sobs rack my body. If I but see a dog that resembles Rover, I am thrown into a storm of grief and guilt that may last for hours.
   (a) emotional   (b) scholarly   (c) formal

4. When is this senseless waste of human lives going to stop? Statistic upon statistic has shown that seat belts save lives. And yet, the non-thinking, the pigheaded, the profoundly selfish continue to insist upon the almighty supremacy of their individual freedom to go out and get themselves killed on the highways.
   (a) formal   (b) humorous   (c) angry

5. Stevens was a rank amateur. Oh sure, he had won a few schoolyard fights, but I was not talking about bloodying someone’s nose or banging heads against concrete. I was referring to the manly art of self-defense, to fisticuffs, to donning the gloves and entering the ring. Stevens clearly was out of his league.
   (a) argumentative   (b) superior   (c) light

6. For years scientists have debated the demise of the dinosaurs. What causal factors resulted in the mass extinctions of 65 million years ago? I say “mass extinctions” because, of course, it was not only the dinosaurs that died out but also four out of the five orders of mammals extant at that time, as well as numerous species of marine invertebrates.
   (a) scholarly   (b) informal   (c) personal