

## *The Cay*

### Unraveling the Thematic Threads

#### *What Is It?*

This document will help you position the *The Cay* text to your 21st century students using the critical lenses of relevance, voice, and identity. These critical factors directly impact the way students read and engage with a text. Your responsibility during this process will be to:

- cull out the **relevance** of the text that speaks to each student individually,
- allow a safe space where they can assert their independent and developing **voices**, and
- encourage them to explore the definition of their unique **identities**.

You can do this by listening to them carefully and asking them honest questions about their thoughts. Empower them by inviting them to research and write about their perspectives. Convince your students that their thoughts and ideas are worth the oxygen of expression. This will help them stay engaged, drill deep into the text, and fully own their reading experience.

#### *How to Begin*

As you guide your students through *The Cay*, use any of the thematic threads below to facilitate open discourse of the text. Encourage your students to participate freely in discussions, openly share their thoughts and ideas with their peers, and boldly question the themes in the novel. Doing so will support a safe environment for your students to appreciate each other's unique perspectives and learn to engage in civil discourse.

The following suggestions are organized by **thematic threads**. You may decide to use one or more, or create your own. Also, be sure to remind your students that taking notes is important because they will use their discoveries as a resource for subsequent activities.

#### *Thematic Threads:*

1. <b>Identity</b>	.....	2
2. <b>Setting</b>	.....	4
3. <b>Literacy/Education</b>	.....	5
4. <b>Self-Reliance</b>	.....	6
5. <b>Ethics, Equity, Equality</b>	.....	6

# 1. Identity

Wanting to be part of a group is common to everyone—children, teens, and adults. Phillip is no different, nor is Timothy. With Phillip, we experience a wide scope of his yearning to fit in, to be a part of a group.

However, we also experience Philip’s conscious, sustained refusal to be a part of a “group” *with Timothy*, initially because of what he has learned from his mother, Grace Enright. As Phillip says, “I was now beginning to believe that my mother was right. She didn’t like them [Blacks]. She didn’t like it when Henrik and I would go down to St. Anna Bay and play near the schooners. But it was always fun. The black people would laugh at us and toss us bananas or papayas.” (Ch. 3.)

As Phillip describes his every encounter throughout the novel, his personality and understanding change. This change occurs through his *inquiry*, as well as through his physical challenge, and is further compounded by the necessity for survival under circumstances that place him with “a kind of” person his mother has taught him to denigrate. Simply put, he changes his perspective, or point of view. As Phillip compares and contrasts what he has learned with and from his peers, his parents, through his own observations, and finally through his experience with Timothy, he adjusts, re-analyzes, rethinks, and *reframes for himself* how he understands and makes meaning of his world, including the relationship with Timothy, a black man.

## Opener

**NOTE:** The use of capitalization and non-capitalization of Black and White to reference and denote ethnicity is an excellent example for students to see and examine language’s living-organic nature. First, this linguistic usage is peculiar to the United States because of slavery. Second, the usage of the lowercase adjective, “black,” experienced a decisive rhetorical shift in the 1960s and the 1990s, reflecting the insistence and voices of African Americans to assert equality and equity as a recognized and respected people.

At one time both terms were lowercase, and then White was capitalized and “black” was lowercase. (Again, an example of using language to denote inequality and inequity.) However, during the Black Power movement of the 1960s, Black activists, writers, artists, actors, everyday citizens, and others capitalized the term to insist on *and illustrate* respect when used to describe Negroes—African Americans.

Transitioning from the 1960s, through the 1990s and into the present, “black” remains an adjective; whereas, “Black” denotes African Americans, as well as any person of sub-Saharan African origin. *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Chicago Manual of Style* (“Ethnic, Socioeconomic and Other Groups” 8.37-39) are clear on this distinction.

For *The Cay*, you will see both usages because Taylor lowercases black and white. When used to address you and students directly, however, the capitalized iterations are used to denote respect.

## Whole Group Discussion

As a class or in groups, explore and discuss the following; be prepared to share with the class and to keep your notes for later use:

- **Stereotype:** Sometimes, others assume they “know” a person or thing or place simply because of ethnicity, religion, culture, or even where/how one was educated.. Sometimes, a particular geographical region is stereotyped because of presumed traits and its physical location. Similarly, a tendency exists to associate objects and things with a specific group, age, gender, culture, region, etc. For example, after President Barack Obama was elected, a clearly racist cartoon portrayed him brushing his teeth with watermelon toothpaste (1 Oct 2014). The cartoonist used a racial stereotype, associating African Americans with watermelon. People all over the world eat melons, including watermelons. The intent here was to attempt shaming the President of the United States because of his ethnicity.
- **Inference:** “Whenever I am with teachers and students, I am energized and so excited; excited to share and to learn. Because of my energy and enthusiasm in this environment, people who don’t know the personal Jocelyn, assume I am this way in every situation. Their assumption is inference. The truth, however, is I am quiet and reflective by personal nature. I’m happy alone and being quiet.”
- **Conscience:** What is a conscience? What does the phrase “having a conscience” mean? Look up the word.

Explore and discuss how Phillip’s stereotyping, inferring, and conscience develop and adjust as the novel progresses.

## For the Student

The two primary characters who experience and communicate these images, encounters, and messages are both Other/Different:

- The first is a White child, initially, with and and later, without sight, but one who possesses literacy and a first and last name—a family.
- The second is a Black man of 70+ years who possesses no formal education and who has no last name nor a family he can remember, save a maternal figure, named Hannah Gumbs.

As much as we all like being a part of something, we all must still ask ourselves:

**Who Am I?**

**Who Do I Want to Be?**

Are you a part of a group? Country, culture, friends, family, clubs, sports, organization(s)? As you read and experience Phillip’s story about the people who make up his groups, take notes on the following:

- what interests you; then compare/contrast your own experiences
- what you find curious or different about Phillip’s and Timothy’s race and groups (groups include Timothy’s and Philip’s friends and family, as well as groups observed, like the Chinese sailors Phillip and his father discuss)
- what examples you find of characters’ stereotyping people, or grouping people by type:
  - Grace Enright
  - Philip Enright, Sr.
  - Timothy
  - Phillip
  - The Chinese Sailors
  - Timothy’s Mates

## 2. Setting

### Opener

Authors use different aspects of writing to drive, or create, the narrative and message, characters, conflict, and events. Theodore Taylor relies on geography, a moment in time, a series of events, and chaos to “drive” the narrative and build the message.

### Whole Group Discussion

As you read, think about the following images, feelings, locations, and events in the novel; and again, take notes:

- Fear of the unknown and the never-before experienced
- Symbols of war and power
- Other/Difference

Share your thoughts and inferences with the class.

### For Students

**Setting** plays an integral role in character development, conflict, and resolution. Geographically, this novel takes place in 1942 in Curaçao, near the coast of Venezuela in South America, surrounded by the Caribbean Sea. Curaçao was then a part of the Dutch West Indies. The moment in time is initially set as WWII during April-August 1942, but the series of events concludes in April 1943 during the height of the chaos of the war in the Atlantic.

In addition to setting, Taylor’s narrative technique also highlights the **senses**: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell. All are innate traits with which most humans are born and which they sometimes take for granted. However in *The Cay*, nothing, not even our five senses, can be taken for granted.

Choose one or more of the following categories to assign and discuss:

- **Inference:** Consider how people *infer*. For example, based on how someone may dress or where one may live, or the kind of car a person drives, we sometimes make conclusions, or *inferences*, about that individual. Sometimes, because a person lives in a certain part of the country or comes from a different place in the world, people make *inferences*, or assumptions, about how that person *is supposed to sound like*, or even about the foods a person from a region of the country *should like*. For example, I am from Texas, and many Texans find my not ever having eaten a chicken-fried steak completely unbelievable. From their perspective, *how on Earth could I be one of them—a real Texan?* We often *infer* through our senses, through geography, and other aspects of setting.
- **Geography:** Explore how Curaçao, the Caribbean Sea, and the cay (along with other geographical locations, including the United States) are critical to the unfolding of the story.
- **Scene:** The Nazis with the U-Boats: how does the way in which they are described and experienced influence the story?

### 3. Literacy/Education

#### Opener

Like the five senses, education in some countries is considered a “given” or a “right.” However, this assumption, or even *stereotype*, may be incorrect, even today.

#### Whole Group Discussion

As you read the two sections below, think about and share your thoughts and perspective with your class on comparisons and contrasts between education and literacy.

##### Education

During the 1940s in the United States and in many parts of the world, specific groups of people did not have “a right” to an *equal* and *equitable* education: class, ethnicity, and gender prohibited many people from receiving a public education. Consequently, jobs, wealth, access to a variety of possibilities, including food, clothing, health care, and quality of life were impacted.

##### Literacy

As early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (1888), this term meant (and sometimes continues to mean), “the quality, condition, or state of being literate; the ability to read and write, also including numeracy” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). From the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, literacy has assumed a broader and deeper definition, a definition that impacts everyone.

As presently defined, literacy through education aims to equip every person with the necessary skills for daily living and career. Literacy, through this instructional lens, includes reading, writing, thinking, speaking and listening, and research. It is the ability, throughout one’s lifetime, to read, interpret, and evaluate any text—written or not—and take meaning from it. With this kind of literacy, you can agree, disagree, and make new meaning during the course of daily living and career, using critical thinking. Only education can equip individuals with lifelong literacy.

#### For Students

As you read *The Cay*, think about and take notes on how *literacy/education* plays a pivotal role in the characters:

- a. Phillip
- b. Timothy
- c. Timothy and Phillip together

Feel free to add other examples as you read.

## 4. Self-Reliance

### Opener

Self-reliance and challenges combine in this novel, creating an integrated and dominant thematic thread.

### Whole Group Discussion

Discussion points:

- Survival: safety taken for granted/taken away, united family/divided family, home/no home, American/Other
- Challenge(s): war, family, country, fear, literacy, fresh water, food, shelter, trust, difference, helplessness, death

### For Students

As you read, reflect and take notes on how the following characters illustrate self-reliance, both individually and paired with other(s), when confronted with a variety of challenges: Grace Enright, Phillip, Sr., Phillip, Timothy, Henrik. Save all notes.

## 5. Ethics, Equity, Equality

### Opener

The United States of America has relied on these three words to define and further hone the ideas that every individual, regardless of any difference, is *equal* to anyone else, receives *equity* (what they need to succeed) in order to achieve *equality* (be treated the same as anyone else). To achieve and sustain *equity* and *equality*, we must believe in, and adhere to, a common sense of *ethics*—moral principles governing behaviour and conduct—that enable equity and equality to exist.

### Whole Group Discussion

*Equity* is the critical component—or nucleus—here, because without a person’s ability to experience, interact, think about, see and hear all facets of *equity* (what people need to succeed), equality and ethics cannot completely exist. In other words, many years ago, some students like you may not have had a voice and, consequently, no power. For example, if you were a female, you had no rights, even as an adult. Region, ethnicity, gender, economics—all played critical roles in access and exposure to education, food, shelter, and voting. Every facet of life so many of us take for granted today were not so in the past.

#### What Do YOU Think?

As a class or in groups, think aloud about how you would define *equity*, *equality*, and *ethics*. Next, provide some examples you have personally experienced or have seen or read or heard about that illustrate equity/inequity; equality/inequality; ethical/unethical. Once you have completed your examination, share with each other your personal and group findings.

Remember to keep your notes and examples.

### For Students

How do the three categories below allow for ethics, equity, and equality to emerge and in whom? As you read the novel, select one or more of these categories and take notes on your impressions: what you like, don't like, what you have questions about that you want to think about further and/or discuss with classmates.

- Voice
- Choice
- Freedom