**Pop Bottles**

1 *With her heart banging like a drum, Frannie ran up the metal stairs to apartment seven and knocked. Uidonna Ford flung open the door and stood staring suspiciously at Frannie The odor of ammonia and urine was thick in the air.*

*-My mom told me to return this.* "*Frannie said in a quavering voice as she held*

*5 our a casserole dish. Ladonna remained mute. Her head was covered with brown shoots of braided hair bound with pink rubber bands. Her forehead was bald and smooth like an egg. In a sudden motion, she reached out and grabbed one of Frannie's while curls and rubbed it between her fingers.*

*-Who's at the door?" Mrs. Ford hollered from within the apartment.*

10 *" Ladonna?"*

*Ladonna ran to the far wall and continued to stare at Frannie. Mrs. Ford lumbered out with a small child on her hip. Her stomach was a huge balloon. When Mrs. Ford saw Frannie standing at the door she waved her in. "Come on in honey. I just got to sit Pancake down on her potty. "*

15 *Franie shuffled a few inches into the room and watched with fascination as*

*Mrs. Ford pulled off*

*Pancake's-rubber pants and plopped her on the plastic toilet. Mrs. Ford had on a white and yellow sleeveless dress hemmed just at her dimpled knees. Her hair was brushed up into a towering dome on top of her head, and her eyelashes were long and spiky. Franny had never seen anyone like her before.*

20 *Mrs. Ford turned to Frannie and smiled with full, purplish lips.*

*"So how jer family enjoy my special pork casserole? Did ja all like it?"*

*"Yes," Frannie replied staring guiltily down at Mrs. Ford's slippers. They hadn't eaten any of it because of the pork.*

*"I've never seen such skinny folks, " Mrs. Ford said, giving Frannie a pinch on*

25 *the arm. "1 figured you needed a little fattening up -jus to put some meat on those hungry bones."*

*Frannie held out the casserole dish to her, and Mrs. Ford tucked it under her arm as she bent to attend Pancake. All Frannie could see was her massive back and the broken down heels of her slippers. Mrs. Ford rattled on cheerfully.*

30 *"Now, I have some pop bottles in the kitchen. Why don't you and Ladonna take*

*them across the street to the little store and trade'em in for some candy? ill have my son Charles go with you, so you won't have no trouble with that Johnson girl, " Mrs. Ford said with a smile. "Ladonna go get them bottles for you and your friend.*

35 *Ladonna ran into the kitchen and came tottering back out with the cardboard container of glass bottles. Mrs. Ford released Pancake who ran naked around the room. As she passed Frannie, she let out a shriek of mock terror. Frannie backed slowly towards the door desperate to leave the strange atmosphere.*

*Lemme get my son, Mrs, Ford said. "Charles? Charles? Come outa your*

40 *room this instant!*

*Charles slouched into view dragging his shoes along the carpet. His face was hidden under the brim of his cap, and a paperback book hung limply from one I and He did not say a word, but led Frannie and Ladonna out the door and down the clanging stairs. They walked along the sidewalk in single file until they were*

45 *directly across from the little store. Charles sat down on the curb and deliberately opened his dog-eared book. Frannie and Ladonna stood on the edge of the crumbling curb with uncertainty. Finally Ladonna walked up to her brother and hit him with the carton of bottles.*

*"You coming?" she asked in a low voice.*

50 *"No," he mumbled. "I'll watch from here."*

*Ladonna stared at him for a moment then turned back to Frannie.*

*"Come on. Follow me, " she said and jumped into the street. Frannie glanced at Charles to see if he had changed his mind, but he was still hunched over his book, his lips moving as he read. With a sigh Frannie stepped off the curb and ran*

55 *across the hot sticky asphalt to where Ladonna was waiting. Frannie followed behind as Ladonna marched into the store and set the empty bottles on the counter.*

*"We wanna get some candy. My momma said we could, " she said with her chin high in the air. The large elderly woman sitting behind the counter in a padded armchair nodded her head and waved on the little girl.*

60 *"If that's what Beebee wants to spend her money on, I don't have nothing to say about it," she said.*

*When the old woman saw Frannie she adjusted her glasses and gave her a stern look. Addressing Ladonna she asked, "Isn 't that your neighbor girl ? I didn 't know you two were friends ? "*

65 *Ladonna didn't reply as she stared intently at the candy rack, touching all the wrappers and whispering the names. Frannie knew what she wanted, and she scooped up six colorful sticks of flavored sugar. Ladonna watched her with interest then grabbed a handful also. They walked up to the counter, and the old woman peered through her thick glasses to count the candy. Frannie saw the black hairs*

70 *sprouting from her upper lip. The store smelled like the docks Frannie visited with her parents. On the shelves were large, glass bottles filled with strange-looking roots, pickled pigs' feet and things Frannie had never seen before. In the refrigerated glass cases near the counter there were entire pig's and goat's heads -peeled and pink with empty holes where the eyes had been. There were also ropes*

75 *of intestines, a tub of chicken feet, and a whole catfish with rubbery long whiskers. Frannie couldn't pull her eyes from the catfish's resentful expression. Even its round mouth was like an angry wound accusing her. Frannie shivered. When the old woman tallied up the total, the girls snatched their candy from the counter and ran for the exit. As they pushed through the swinging screen door, Frannie looked*

*80 back and saw the old woman staring at her. Frannie's heart skittered. She leaped blindly into sunlight, letting the screen crash behind her.*

*For a moment she lost sight of Ladonna, but then her eyes adjusted, and she saw her balanced on the edge of the curb - the sun a burning orb behind her.*

*"Hurry up, girl, " Lodonn called out urgently with a furtive look around. "You*

*85 never know where trouble be."*

*"Wait.* " *Frannie said, catching up to her. She stopped and ripped the top off her candy and poured some of the flavored grains into her hand. Then she grasped Ladonna's hand and poured some into her pink palm. Greedily they licked up the red powder.*

90 *"Hey girls, watcha got there'.'"*

*It was Gaxla Johnson. She was ten years old, but her immense size made her seem adolescent. Frannie and Ladonna started to run, but Gayla caught Ladonna.*

*"Gimme your candy, girl. " she hissed.*

*"No." Ladonna said boldly. Gayla pushed her, and Ladonna fell on the ground.*

95 *Gayla laughed hysterically. Frannie looked desperately around for Charles, but he had disappeared. She jumped nervously from fool to foot until Gayla caught sight of her and stopped laughing.*

*"Hey whitey. you havla go to the bathroom or .something? Why's your hair so white any way? You some kind of freak?" She kicked at Ladonna and smirked.*

100 *"Why you hangin' out with this white trash? My momma says her parents are so poor they don't even have enough money to eat. See how skinny she is? Skinny-white trash.* "

*Ladonna glared at the ground and held onto her candy. Frannie felt tears bum her exes. Just as Gayla moved towards her, a long shadow fell across them. A*

105 *familiar voice like a bass drum rumbled.*

*"What ja doin' to my sister, Gayla Johnson?" Charles stood like a powerful giant, his arms crossed and his face dark and mask-like. Frannie felt something akin to love for him and longed to throw her arms around his tall body.*

*"Oh Charles, is this your little sister?" Gayla said with an innocent smile. "I*

110 *thought she was one of those hoodlums who's been robbing the store. My. I'm sorry. I sure am. You forgive me, Charles Ford?"*

*Graciously she helped Ladonna to her feet and brushed her off. She gave her a pat on the shoulder and a push toward the street. Ladonna stood her ground and stuck out her tongue, a bright shade of red, with all the scorn she could muster.*

115 "*I* *hate you Gayla Johnson," she shouted fiercely, then dashed across the street.*

*Abandoned, Frannie looked from Charles to Gayla. Gayla was giggling about someone who had a class with Charles. Charles stood there nodding with a trace of a smile. Franniefelt helpless. She gave Charles a hurt look and plodded across the black asphalt towards home. As she passed the Fords' apartment building*, *she*

120 *peered up at the stairway and saw Ladonna sitting on the upper steps. Ladonna*

*motioned for her to slop.*

*"Hey girl. Don't listen to thai ole Gayla. She don't know nothing. You ain't thai bad, even if you are a whitey. You wanna come play with me sometime ? " Ladonna asked.*

125 *"You mean be friends and all?" Frannie brightened.*

*"Well. I don't know about being friends. I never had a whitey for a friend before. " Then she laughed, and Frannie could see her teeth were tinged pink. "I have to go back now. My mom'll be worried.* " *Frannie said. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow?" Ladonna asked.*

130 *"Okay, tomorrow," Franny beamed and ran back home.*

*Christi A. Crutchfield:* texte donne au Capes externe, 1996.

**GUIDELINES**

Though a white and a black character are central in C.A. Crutchfield's story, "Pop Bottles", as in Gonlimer's "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?", the situation, development and tone are widely different.

1. The natural and suburban setting of Gordimer's story are to be read on a symbolic level. In "Pop Bottles", on the contrary, **the realistic dimension** prevails in the presentation of a particular environment as well as in the action which takes place or the language commonly used by the characters.

What enables us to situate the story in the USA in the eighties? Consider not only the spelling of some words but the words themselves (ex: candy instead of sweets) as well as some details which indirectly refer to this particular period.

What kind of urban and social environment is set forth? Think of the *crumbling curb* (47) and *the broken down heels* of Mrs Ford's slippers (29), for example. What about the racial context? Are some of the negative and positive features of the black community close to cliches?

Would you say that not only the incident described (an attempted child mugging) but also the prevalent tension are true to life? Draw up a list of these tension indicators which may be as trivial as a look or the use of a few common words (for example, *you ain't that bad, even if you are a whitey,* 122-123).

Speech, as seen in the analysis of "Girl", is an important index of realism. Underline in the text various instances of common language as it is spoken: familiar or slangy words, simplified syntax, concrete lexis and also grammatically incorrect structures and phonetic spelling *(jer* for your, 1. 21 or *lemme* for let me, 1. 39, for example).

2. a. Explain why Frannie is the main character - like the girl in "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" or the old man in "Flight".

Yet the story is not principally her story but that of **an evolving relationship** between a white girl and a black girl. To understand the importance of relationships in "Pop Bottles", note the number of lines devoted to dialogue and scenes and the number of those devoted to narrative. Compare **the beginning** (the first two sentences of § **1** and § 2) **and the ending** (the final dialogue 1. 122-130) to see the transformation of Frannie and Ladonna's relationship. Note the way the future opens up for the two girls as contact is established in the final dialogue (analyse the repetitions, the sentence structures, the girls' reactions, the recurrence of the colour pink previously mentioned 1. 6 and 88).

Determine **the different stages** in this evolving relationship which may be said to structure "Pop Bottles". As in Kate Chopin's and Grace Paley's stories,

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**theme and structure** cannot he dissociated. Consider the two characters' movements, gestures and speech throughout the story. What part do leadership and sharing play in this relationship? The word *friend(s)* is repeated three times by different characters in different circumstances. Show how the use and the impact of the word varies and why.

**b. Differences and similarities** are also to be found in the families' and girls' eating habits and in the colours (black or brown vs white, but what about pink?). What" may the repeated emphasis on Frannie's *white -* not blond or fair - *hair* suggest, apart from its synecdochic function? Why can it be said that the subjective assessment of thinness (Frannie and her family as seen by Mrs Ford and Gayla) or fatness (Mrs Ford as seen by Frannie) may equally apply to Frannie's *white hair* and in consequence to colour differences?

There is only one long **description** in the story: the shelves and glass cases and their contents (71-77). What connection would you draw between this **extended metaphor of alienness** and the racial theme? Pay attention to the concrete items described and remember how a racist ideology builds up an incomplete, inferior and ultimately repulsive image of the other in order to justify fear.

Are there any contrasts to this negative image of the shop as a closed space inhabited by maimed bodies and a frightening, old woman? Study line 83 and the previous presentation of Mrs Ford. How would you interpret her *huge balloon* of a stomach (12)?

3. a. This **humorous** simile of the *balloon* is revelatory of the story's tone which mainly derives from the use of a very young girl as **the organizing point of view.** Quote a few sentences or phrases that show that Frannie's vision and reactions determine the presentation of the other characters as well as the development of the action. How does this childish vision transform the outside world? Consider Gayla's and Charles' size, the black hairs sprouting from the old shopkeeper's upper lip (69-70), the details selected in the glass cases and the similes used in 1. 1,7 and 12.

b. The choice of a very young girl as the main focalizer also turns a somewhat everyday episode into a perilous adventure. Frannie's adventure across the street or "Pop Bottles" as **an initiation story. It** starts with admission (returning the casserole dish) which is fulfilled 1. 27 and carries on with another, more dangerous, one: trading the pop bottles for candy. Identify the object of this juvenile quest (which may be a double one, concrete and abstract at the same time), the obstacles which stand in the way as well as the helpers and determine the different phases in the narrative programme (contract, ability, performance and sanction). Consider how the Enemy or anti-subject is first mentioned in the middle of the first part (at the Fords') and actually intervenes in the middle of

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the second part (outside) to endanger the budding harmony hinted at in the very middle of the story (inside the shop, 1. 66-68)

c. This quest and the fight against evil forces are treated lightly, as are the racial theme and the underlying racist tension. This lightness of touch is exemplified in the **title:** soda pop evokes air or gas bubbles which may later be associated with Mrs Ford's balloon stomach. The title also refers to an item physically present in the story which originates the action and it draws the reader's attention on how humour works. Remember the transformation process due to a child's vision, hence the everyday episode presented as an adventure. The frightening mugger is a ten-year old girl who wants Frannie's candy! Yet child muggers do exist, as does racism. Try to infer from these few remarks a short definition of humour which will contrast with the ironical reversals present in "The Story of an Hour", for example.