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.

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.

Everybody's got a Helene Tucker, a symbol of everything
you want. I loved her for her goodness, her cleanness, 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.

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.

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.

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

Questions:

1. How do the first three paragraphs of the essay establish a context for the narrative that follows?
2. What does Gregory mean by “shame”?
3. In a word or phrase, how would you describe Gregory’s tone? What specific words or phrases in his essay lead you to this conclusion?

4. What is the teacher’s attitude toward Gregory? In arriving at your answer, consider her own words and actions as well as Gregory’s opinion.

5. What role does money play in Gregory’s experience? How does money relate to his sense of shame?

6. Specific details can enhance the reader’s understanding and appreciation of a subject. Gregory’s description of Helene Tucker’s manners or the plaid of his mackinaw, for example, makes his account vivid and interesting. Cite several other specific details he gives, and consider how the essay would be different without them.

7. Reread this essay’s first and last paragraphs, and compare how much each one emphasizes shame. Which emotion other than shame does Gregory reveal in the first paragraph, and does it play a role in the last one? Is the last paragraph an effective ending? Explain.