

# Nafissa Thompson-Spires: *Heads of the Colored People* – Analysing two short stories

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Die Lernenden lesen die beiden Kurzgeschichten *Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology* und *Fatima, the Biloquist: A Transformation Story*. Jede *short story* wird von *pre-reading* sowie diversen *while-* und *post-reading activities* begleitet, die Textverstehen und Kontextualisierung unterstützen. An jede Kurzgeschichte schließen sich Aufgaben an, die den Schülerinnen und Schülern eine kreative Auseinandersetzung mit dem jeweiligen Text ermöglichen. Abschließend vergleichen die Lernenden beide *stories* und diskutieren deren Intention vor dem Hintergrund der aktuellen Gesellschaftsstrukturen der USA. Außerdem schreiben sie einen persönlichen Kommentar in Form eines *reviews*.

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## Competences and skills:

This unit first and foremost practises **literary competences** such as text comprehension and the analysis of plot structure, character constellations, literary devices and language. **Close reading** as one of the most relevant reading strategies when it comes to literature is trained in each topic. As students repeatedly share their results on analysis, research and creative tasks and discuss certain aspects within the short stories, they train their **speaking skills** in authentic settings. Students' **creative writing skills** are trained when they write an additional paragraph to *Fatima, the Biloquist: A Transformation Story*. Their **generic writing skills** are trained when they write their own review about the short stories. **Listening/viewing skills** are practised when students receive input on certain technical terms via video in topics 3 and 4.

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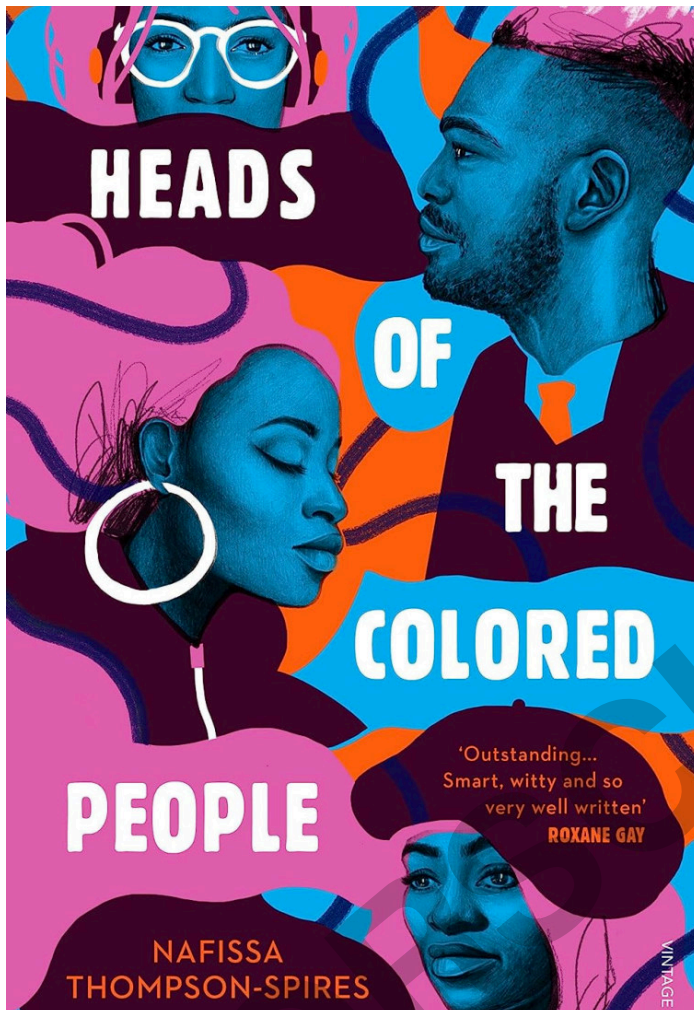
## Facts

Nafissa Thompson-Spires is an African American writer, who was born in 1983 and currently teaches Creative Writing at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Her short story collection *Heads of the Colored People* is her debut, which won several literature prizes and was long listed for the U.S. National Book Award. It consists of eleven vignettes of people of colour and their everyday experiences. The stories focus on the characters and their psychological make-up rather than on the action and show the subtle challenges and their effects that these characters face within U.S. society. Nafissa Thompson-Spires has been labelled a bold new voice and is said to set new standards for the short story as a genre. Her stories themselves have been called vivid, fast, funny, way-smart, compassionate, verbally-inventive, soulful, intimate, wise, wicked, tender, awkward – and the list of praise goes on and on (see <http://www.nafissathompsonspires.com>). And indeed – the two short stories selected for this unit, *Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology* and *Fatima, the Biloquist: A Transformation Story*, represent all these diverse descriptors: they are complex, dense, disarming, personal, provocative, confrontational and challenging.

*Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology* addresses the themes police brutality and racial stereotypes as eminent problems within U.S. society. The focus is on four Black characters who interconnect within the story. The plot that leads to the fatal climax of the story is withheld from the readers and happens in the off. The readers are asked to fill in the gaps on their own, which confronts them with the undeniable frequency of police shootings and the shocking realisation that we know their typical scheme due to their recent media presence. The narrator of the story plays an important role in this regard as he/she comments on the plot from a meta-level and mediates between story and reader. What remains after the fatal climax at the end of the story are the detailed sketches of the characters the story revolves around. The story thus picks up the idea of the character Kevan to preserve Black

Worksheet – Introducing *Heads of the Colored People*

M2



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**Working with the book cover**

1. Look at the cover of the short story collection *Heads of the Colored People*.
  - a) Describe the cover.
  - b) Considering the title and the cover, what kind of short stories do you expect? Why?
  - c) Find out more about the author Nafissa Thompson-Spires by doing a web search. Use your findings to come up with more expectations.

**Working with the text**

2. Read the interview with Nafissa Thompson-Spires (M1). What does she say about her goals when writing *Heads of the Colored People*? To what extent do her goals match your expectations? Explain.



## Topic 2: *Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology*

### M3 Worksheet – Before reading the short story



1. *Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and No Apology* contains many references to U.S. culture. In your class, distribute the names, novels, TV shows and expressions. Become an expert and do research.
2. Write an explanatory text (4–5 sentences) about your chosen subject and add a photograph.
3. Use *TaskCards* to upload your texts and photographs. You will receive a link from your teacher.
4. While reading the story, use your bulletin board to make sense of the cultural context.



Toni Morrison: <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	William Wilson: <i>The Afric-American Picture Gallery</i>
Ralph Ellison: <i>Invisible Man</i>	Frances Harper
Solomon Asali: <i>Disgruntled</i>	James McCune Smith
Drake	Olaudah Equiano
Fetty Wap	Phyllis Wheatley
John Mayer	Nat Turner
United Colors of Benetton	Haruhi Fujioka/ <i>Ouran High School Host Club</i>
Frederick Douglass	Eucliwood Hellscythe
<i>Dr. Who</i>	Tupac
<i>Rurouni Kenshin</i>	Biggie
Tamaki Suo	<i>Martin</i> (TV series)
Kise Ryouta	Spike Spiegel
<i>Naruto</i>	Neil DeGrasse Tyson
Super Saiyan	Flannery O'Connor
Richard Simmons	Donika Kelly
Harriet Beecher Stowe: <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>	Bruh Man
Octavia Butler	

### Reading section IV



19. Read pp. 80/81 (“The conventions of such a transformation [...]” to “[...] she just grabbed Mike’s arm and walked away”).



20. How does the story end? Compare its ending with your ideas from task 18.

21. Take into account what you know about Violet and comment on her reaction at the end of this scene.

22. “The conventions of such a transformation dictate that a snaggletooth or broken heel threatens to return the heroine to her former life. The snaggletooth, for Fatima, was either Rolf or Violet, depending on how you looked at things, and Fatima wasn’t sure how she did” (p. 80).

Compare the opening paragraph of this section with the end of the story and analyse what it means.

23. Examine the role of biloquism in this scene.

24. At the beginning of the story, Fatima is described as “colorless gas”.

a) How would you describe her at the end? Use your results from tasks 20–22 and create a metaphor that expresses your impression of Fatima at the end of the story.

b) Then read “And like that...” to the end. Compare your metaphor to the description of Fatima in the text and analyse its meaning. Does it reveal anything about whether Fatima has learned anything through her downfall? Interpret.

## M8 Worksheet – After reading the short story



1. Explain the meaning of the title.



2. Two novels by Charles Brockden Brown are referenced in the short story: *Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist* and *Arthur Mervyn*.



Work with a partner. Do a 5-minute research on one of the two novels each. Meet and share your results. Then analyse: To what extent and in what ways are their plots connected to the short story?



3. How will things go on for Fatima? Write an additional paragraph that describes her life after the end of the short story.

## Key: M6 Worksheet – Before reading the short story

1. *According to its title, the protagonist of the short story you are going to read is a biloquist. Check the meaning of the term biloquist. What skills does a biloquist need?*
  - A biloquist is someone who has the ability to speak in different voices.
  - “Biloquist” is a word that is rarely used, it does not have an entry in any of the renowned online dictionaries (such as Macmillan, Cambridge, Collins, Oxford, Longman).
  - According to other sources ([www.definitions.net](http://www.definitions.net)), it was probably coined by the American novelist Charles Brockden Brown, who used the term in one of his novels.
  - Biloquism is closely related to ventriloquism, i. e. the ability to speak without moving your lips. Most definitions of the term refer to ventriloquism.
  - In order to convincingly create a voice other than his/her natural one, a biloquist must have conscious control over his/her vocal organs.
  - Speaking in another voice not only includes applying different linguistic features such as volume, pitch, accent, tone etc. It also refers to content-related and sociolinguistic aspects, i. e. knowledge about what to say and how to say it in which situation. So, a biloquist not only imitates a different voice, but that different voice also needs to represent a different identity.
  - A biloquist thus needs extensive knowledge about society, milieus, identities and must be able to act accordingly. He/She must be able to code-switch interculturally, interpersonally and linguistically.
2. *The term biloquist is ascribed to Charles Brockden Brown. Do a 5-minute research on Charles Brockden Brown. Take notes and be prepared to share your findings.*
  - Charles Brockden Brown lived from 1771 to 1810. He was born and raised in Philadelphia and later moved to New York City.
  - He was an American novelist and historian and a crucial figure in the early USA. He is mostly unknown today, however.
  - He published short stories, novels, essays, poetry and historiography.
  - He is sometimes called the father of the American novel.
  - In his novels, he explored gothic themes: terror, horror, the unknown and the human psyche.
  - He was influenced by British radical writers/democratic writers and in turn influenced them and their younger students, such as Mary Shelley, who reread Brown when she worked on her novel *Frankenstein*.
  - Also, renowned American writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne regarded Brown as an influential predecessor.