



## An In-Depth Analysis

### The Plot and Conflict in One Book

Christopher Paul Curtis's *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, a 1996 Newbery Honor book, provides an excellent source for both literary analysis and historical authenticity. It is a book that changes mood at about the halfway point in the story. At the beginning of the book, the author depicts a typical African American family who lives and works in Flint, Michigan. The problems of the various characters are typical for many families. The main character, 10-year-old Kenny, is a bright boy who reads very well. Kenny's scholastic achievements frequently place him in conflict with his older brother, Bryon, whose escapades vary from the humorous to the more serious. When the parents decide that Bryon is heading for a life of delinquency, they decide that he should spend time with his strict grandmother in Birmingham.

When they decide to travel to Alabama, the tone of the book changes. In this time of racial tension, person-against-society conflict is the most prominent. The racial conflict is developed early in the story when the mother wants to go from Flint to Birmingham because life is slower in Alabama and the people are friendlier. Dad responds, "Oh yeah, they're a laugh a minute down there. Let's see, where was that 'Coloreds Only' bathroom downtown?" (p. 5). The culmination of this person-against-society conflict results toward the end of the book when a church is bombed and several African American children are killed.

Curtis develops parallels between the person-against-society and person-against-self conflicts. As Kenny tries to understand the hatred that could cause such deaths he also, with the help of his older brother, reaches a point where he releases his personal feelings and begins to cry. The author shows the impact of this release in the following quote: "He knew that was some real embarrassing stuff so he closed the bathroom door and sat on the tub and waited for me to stop, but I couldn't. I felt like someone had pulled a plug on me and every tear inside was rushing out" (p. 199).

At the moment of complete self-understanding, Kenny admits to his brother that he was no longer afraid of the bombing incident; instead, he was ashamed of himself because he ran from the church rather than try to find his sister, who he believed was inside the church. His older brother helps him clarify the situation and makes him realize that he has no reason for embarrassment.

The themes and language in the book also relate to the person-against-society and person-against-self conflicts. Through the actions of various characters, we learn that prejudice and hatred are harmful and destructive forces. To increase understanding of these conflicts, Curtis effectively uses comparative language and symbolism. For example, he compares the steering of a big car to being grown up when the father tells Kenny that both are scary at first, but that with a lot of practice, the car and life are under control. The symbolism of the Wool Pooh (Winnie-the-Pooh's evil twin brother) is of particular interest: When Kenny swims in dangerous waters, he almost drowns. He believes it is the Wool Pooh who is trying to kill him. Later, in the bombed church, he believes he sees this same faceless monster. Students of literature may find interesting comparisons for discussion as they analyze the possible significance of this evil symbolism as it relates to both the conflicts and themes developed in the book.

When using this book with older students, adults can ask them to trace the parallels between person-against-society and person-against-self conflicts, conduct historical studies to analyze the 1963 setting and conflicts for authenticity and to relate them to the church burnings in 1996, and trace the emergence of the themes. Curtis's text provides an interesting discussion to show the relationships among conflict, theme, and author's style. Students then can read Janice N. Harrington's *Going North* to compare the experiences of an African American family who decides to leave Alabama in the 1960s and move north to Nebraska.