

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963**

by Christopher Paul Curtis

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## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. cite examples from the story of the discrimination that people with Southern dialects must put up with when they move to the northern states.
2. comment on the author's choice of first-person narration and point out how much of the humor in the story is a result of it being told from a child's perspective.
3. recognize these literary devices in the story: foreshadowing, flashback.
4. point out examples of the following terms: simile, metaphor.
5. identify and comment on how the author's use of allusion (to celebrities, slang phrases, and vocabulary from the 1960's) gives the readers a feel for the time period.
6. discuss the significance of the colors of the American flag as symbols for equality and freedom; relate an event in the story demonstrating that bigotry and hatred destroys that symbol.
7. show that this is a "Loss of Innocence" story for both brothers in the story.
8. cite examples from the story to support the following overall theme from the story: It is important to learn from your mistakes and prepare for the difficulties you may face in life.
9. support by referring to the novel the following thematic statements:
  - Hate may turn ordinary humans into monsters.
  - Life is not fair, but it must be lived anyway.
  - The warmth and love in the family can make each individual both better and stronger.
10. make inferences about characters and events when these meanings are not explicitly stated.
11. discuss laws of the 1960's which made the Civil Rights Movement necessary.
12. comment on the contributions each of the following made to the Civil Rights Movement:
  - NAACP
  - Dr. Martin Luther King
  - Rosa Parks
13. point out the significance of the title; relate the title to Mrs. Watsons' journal and the journey from Flint to Birmingham.

### **Questions for Discussion and Essay**

1. Why was the Civil Rights Movement necessary? What is the “I have a dream” speech? Who was Rosa Parks?
2. List three ways the NAACP used “nonviolent” resistance to work toward changing unfair laws permitting discrimination.
3. How do Byron and his friends treat Kenny at the beginning of the story? In what ways does his attitude change after their experiences in Birmingham?
4. Why do the children on the bus laugh at Rufus and his brother? What does Kenny do to lose Rufus as a friend?
5. Why do you think Kenny is confused by Byron’s behavior with the dead dove?
6. What is wrong with the parting gift Mrs. Davidson gives to Joey?
7. How is the title of Chapter Ten “Tangled up in God’s Beard” an example of a metaphor?
8. What is the “Ultra Glide”? Do you think Mrs. Watson approves of its purchase?
9. What is the significance of the color of Joey’s dress the Sunday of the bombing in Birmingham?
10. Describe the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital. Why does Kenny choose to hide there?
11. Why do the Watsons take Byron to his grandmother? Despite the trauma of the explosion is their trip successful as far as their son is concerned?
12. What is there in Kenny’s appearance and behavior that makes him a target for teasing? What makes Kenny an excellent narrator for this story?
13. Write a brief character sketch of Mrs. Watson. In what ways does her Southern background contribute to her frustration with Byron?
14. Describe Grandma Sands. How are she and Byron alike?
15. Compare Kenny’s behavior in Birmingham with Byron’s behavior in Flint. How are they similar?
16. What is the significance of the title of the novel?
17. Support or refute the following statement: The great appeal of this book is the warmth and love we observe the Watsons family share.

# The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

## CHAPTER ONE

### And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons

#### VOCABULARY

**flypaper** – an old method of fly control that was a sheet of paper covered with very sticky goop. Flies landed on it and couldn't fly away.

**punk** – a slightly insulting term meaning someone who isn't cooperating or who is an outsider. "Punks" were social rebels in the 1970's, who intentionally violated social conventions by dying their hair unusual colors, dressing oddly, and having multiple piercings.

**square** – someone who is overly conservative in the eyes of the speaker. It is the opposite of "cool."

1. Find an example of a simile in the first paragraph of the story.

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2. Why does Mrs. Watson give her husband "bad" looks?

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3. Who is Hambone Henderson? How did he get his name?

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**CHAPTER SIX****Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese**

1. Why does By make Kenny take the groceries to the cashier?

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2. Explain why the following passage is an example of foreshadowing: “This is just too much, all you gotta do is sign that stupid card and that old fool Mitchell’ll give you what you want! Too, too much!”

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3. What is By’s definition of a peon?

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**CHAPTER ELEVEN****Bobo Brazil meets the Sheik**

## VOCABULARY

**blubbering** – crying and sobbing and trying to talk all at once.  
**troll** – a monster that usually lives under bridges

1. Describe the two mind games Dad plays to keep driving for so long.

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2. How is Birmingham similar to Flint? Different?

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3. What did Kenny expect his Grandma Sands to look like? How does he feel when he sees her?

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