

## A comparative analysis of racism in the original and modified texts of *The Cay*

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### Abstract

Ten high-school students of English as a second language (ESL) intensively studied the modified version of *The Cay* (retold by Strange, 1997). During their study the teacher asked questions designed to elicit students' comprehension and understanding of racism and prejudice as the main themes of *The Cay*. Analysis of classroom discourse data indicated that none of the students independently identified these themes. This article shows the results of a comparative analysis of extracts from the original version of *The Cay* (Taylor, 1994) with the modified *The Cay* (Strange, 1997) in order to provide an explanation for ESL students' inability to identify the themes of racism and prejudice in *The Cay*. An example from classroom discourse data is used to illustrate students' difficulty in answering the teacher's theme-related questions. This article also outlines several pedagogical implications and suggestions for using modified fiction texts in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** graded readers, simplification, interpretation, intensive reading, *The Cay*

In classrooms of English as a second language (ESL), students read fiction texts intensively for a variety of reasons. Amongst the reasons are (a) to consolidate vocabulary knowledge, learn new vocabulary, and grammatical structures (Nation, 2001); (b) to learn and practice reading skills (e.g., predicting and deriving meaning from a text; Nuttall, 2000); and (c) to be exposed to English literature (which is part of an educational curriculum) and to learn and practice the academic skills involved in reading, comprehending, and responding to written texts in an academic setting (Ministry of Education, 1994). Non-native speaking (NNS) students whose English proficiency is not comparable with native speaking (NS) students often read modified texts—graded readers—in their ESL classes. The novel *The Cay* was originally written by Theodore Taylor in 1969, and the edition used in this article was published in 1994 and was retold by Derek Strange for Pearson Education in 1997.

Pearson Education (2000) stated that graded readers are books whose language and content are controlled to match the language competence of the learners reading the book. This means that vocabulary and grammatical structures are restricted and that information is controlled, “references to cultural background explained,” and “complex sub-plots avoided” (Dawson, 2000, p. 4). Since racism and prejudice are the main themes (not sub-plots) of *The Cay* (Taylor, 1994) it is reasonable to expect that the modified version of *The Cay* (Strange, 1997) will control the

vocabulary and grammatical structures used whilst retaining those themes.

Often significant changes occur in modifying a text (see Simensen, 1987, for an overview). It has been argued that such modifications do not always make a text more readable (e.g., Honeyfield, 1977; Swaffar, 1985; see also Carrell, 1987, for an overview of empirical research critical of readability formulas), although it should be noted that Claridge (2005) disputed the method of analysis undertaken by Honeyfield (1977) and Swaffar (1985).

In contrast to research which investigates specific issues of vocabulary, syntax, cohesion, and content requiring prior knowledge in modified texts, the present article looks at how the themes of racism and prejudice in *The Cay* (Taylor, 1994) were simplified for the modified version (Strange, 1997) and draws on classroom data to consider the pedagogical implications of such modification. As we will see, the modified text was within the language proficiency level of the students, yet they comprehensively failed to identify the text's themes of racism and prejudice. The question for research was: What features of the modified text made it difficult to interpret or understand that text as a text about racism and prejudice?

## Background and Methodology

As part of a year-long qualitative research program in a high school in a large New Zealand city, I was embedded in a Year 10 ESL class as a researcher. The 10 students were aged between 13 and 16 and came from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds. The students' vocabulary levels were assessed using Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 2004) at the beginning of the year. Most students were found to have a satisfactory knowledge of the first 1,000 words and were making inroads into the second 1,000 words of English.

During the first term the teacher chose to intensively study the modified *The Cay* (Strange, 1997). I was present at every lesson (13 in total) and audio-recorded and made hand-written notes of what transpired in class. I had access to students' written work and had the opportunity to interview the classroom teacher about the unit of work involving the modified *The Cay*.

During the 13 lessons, which comprised the intensive study of this text, I noticed several significant differences between the original and modified versions. Consequently I compared the original *The Cay* (Taylor, 1994) with the modified *The Cay* (Strange, 1997). For brevity I will only analyse and discuss extracts from the first 27 pages of the original. The comparable section in the modified version covered just over 10 pages. The extract from the original is sufficient to illustrate how the themes of racism and prejudice were approached by Taylor (1994), and the comparable 10 pages from the modified text illustrate how those themes were simplified. That the modified version intended to retain Taylor's themes is evident in Pearson Education's (2000) "Teacher's Notes" for the modified version of *The Cay*:

It is important in the novel that Timothy is black, and Phillip white. . . . Like black people in many parts of the world at that time, [Timothy] would still have felt any white person to be his social superior. . . . This is why at first he calls Phillip 'young boss'. Yet despite this, the friendship that grows between Timothy and Phillip is simply that between an old

man and a young boy, not between ‘master’ and ‘servant’ or even black and white.  
(Background and themes section, ¶ 3)

To obtain a gross picture of the linguistic content of the texts, the extracts were analysed using the RANGE and FREQUENCY programs (Heatley, Nation, & Coxhead, 2002). These programs count the number of running words in a text (i.e., every single word is counted), and the type of words in a text (i.e., a word is only counted at its first occurrence—every additional repetition is not added). Table 1 gives the count results. However, the original version of *The Cay* uses phonetically spelled West Indian vernacular English, and such speech was not included in the word and type analyses. (Note that the modified version uses Standard English spelling.) This results in a slightly lower word and type count for the original text than would be the case if that text had always used Standard English.

Table 1. *Running words and word types in the original and the modified versions of The Cay*

Versions	Running words	Word types
Original	6496	1395
Modified	2048	438

The text extracts were then manually analysed for words, sentences and phrases which could reasonably be interpreted as evidence of the themes of racism and prejudice. Judgement as to what is ‘reasonable’ was based on my experience of working with Year 10 NNS and NS students.

### Comparative Analysis

It should be noted that the selected extracts of the two texts obviously vary greatly in the total number of words. As can be seen in Table 1, the original extract is roughly three times longer, and contains roughly three times more word types than does the modified text. Obviously one would expect to find more description and more detail in the original extract than the modified extract. My goal is not to point out the obvious, but to suggest the effect of the modifications on readers’ ability to adduce evidence of the themes of racism and prejudice. The pedagogical implications of this will be discussed in the final section.

In both the original and the modified *The Cay*, the two key characters are Phillip (an 11-year-old American boy) and Timothy (an aged West Indian sailor). The story is set during World War II in the Caribbean. Phillip’s mother and father live on an island in the Caribbean, which is being attacked. Phillip’s mother decides (against her husband’s advice) to flee the island and return home to America. The boat they flee on is sunk, and Phillip ends up alone on a raft with Timothy. The bulk of the story takes place on a deserted cay and revolves around Timothy and Phillip surviving together in spite of their differences and the difficulty of the situation. One of Taylor’s (1994) aims was to pen a story for young readers which would highlight the issue of racial prejudice (Nettell, 1994). The themes of racism and prejudice then should be a part of any version of the story. In adopting a reader-response stance towards the text (Rosenblatt, 1995), a reader can make of those themes what they will, but the bare fact of racism and prejudice being themes within the text remains, or should.

For the purposes of this article, the extract from the original can be usefully divided into three sections (all page numbers refer to Taylor, 1994): (a) Phillip's life on the island of Curacao before he and his mother flee from there, (b) Phillip's first encounter with Timothy on the raft after their ship sinks, and (c) Phillip's reaction to Timothy's control of the water and food on the raft.

These will be examined for implicit and explicit evidence of thematic racism and prejudice. Comparable sections from the modified version will then be briefly listed, and an example discussed.

### *Phillip on Curacao*

There are three implicit references to the West Indian people of Curacao in this section. Phillip and his friend used to play in the vicinity of West Indian sailors; and although this is described quite positively, there are also thematically racist interpretations to be drawn.

But to us, they [the West Indian sailors] were always pirates, and we'd shout to the noisy black men aboard them. They laugh back and go, 'pow, pow, pow.' (p. 3)

This seems an implicitly happy experience for Phillip, and a reader will likely draw that conclusion and perhaps infer that he has a positive regard for them. However, a close reading of that quote might also expose a thematically racist interpretation, namely that the black men are put into the role of pirates by Phillip and his friends, pirates being stereotypically criminals.

Phillip's positive but limited regard for 'black people' comes through on page 10:

I thought about leaving the island, and it saddened me. I loved the old fort . . . black people shouting. (p. 10)

However, there is an implicit negative inference to be drawn from Phillip's mother's attitude towards black people in general, an attitude which, although we cannot be sure how Phillip views it, is nonetheless an attitude held by a significant person in his life.

I guess my mother was homesick for Virginia, where no one talked Dutch, and there was no smell of petrol or oil, and *there weren't as many black people around* [italics added]. (p. 8)

These quotes form the most obvious yet still implicit references to how Phillip might feel or think about West Indians and the sources of influence in his life for those feelings and thoughts in the first section of the text.

In the next section we start to develop a more complex picture of the themes of racism and prejudice after a key event in the story—the sinking of the ship Phillip and his mother were on. Phillip ends up on a raft alone with Timothy.

*Phillip Alone on the Raft with Timothy*

In this section the author provides both explicit and implicit references about how Phillip views Timothy.

I saw a huge, very old Negro sitting on the raft near me. He was ugly. (p. 20)

Although anyone can be ugly (hence not strictly a racist comment), this description of Timothy by Phillip helps the reader build a picture of how Phillip views Timothy.

There was no one else on the raft. *Just this* [italics added] huge Negro, myself, and a . . . cat. (p. 20)

The use of *just* and *this* to refer to a person may be interpreted as implicitly demeaning, hence perhaps thematically racist.

The description of Timothy continues:

His face couldn't have been blacker, or his teeth whiter. They made an alabaster trench in his mouth, and his pink-purple lips peeled over them like the meat of a conch shell. He had a big welt, like a scar, on his left cheek. I knew he was West Indian. I had seen many of *them* [italics added] in Willemstad. (p. 21)

A reader may get the sense that this is not a description which Phillip thinks is positive. Although not clearly racist, the use of *them* might arguably evoke in a reader the them-versus-us discourse typical of prejudiced thinking.

Then he smiled at me, his face becoming less terrifying. (p. 21)

This comment might help readers to infer Phillip's feelings about his description of Timothy, namely that Timothy's physical features are ugly and frightening. However, contrasting with these three negative references to Timothy are the following descriptions which seem implicitly positive:

His voice was rich calypso, soft and musical, the words rubbing off like velvet. (p. 21)

He was extremely old *yet he seemed powerful*. *Muscles rippled* [italics added] over the ebony of his arms and around his shoulders. His chest was thick and his neck was the size of a small tree trunk. I looked at his hands and feet. The skin was alligatored and cracked, tough from age and walking barefoot on the hot decks of schooners. (p. 22)

In spite of the mix of positive and negative descriptors, Phillip is not happy about the fact his companion is a West Indian, rather than his mother:

That I was here alone with a black man instead of my mother made me break into tears. [Timothy then comforts Phillip and he] . . . felt a little better. (p. 21)

After being comforted by Timothy, Phillip decides that:

It didn't matter, at that moment, that he was black and ugly. (p. 22)

This implies that at another moment it would matter that Timothy is black (and ugly). Overall these descriptive quotes provide a rich source of evidence from the text which can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, it is understandable that Phillip would on one level prefer to be castaway with his mother, but on another level he is much luckier to have an experienced sailor as his raft mate. Taylor continues to provide clues to Phillip's racist and prejudiced thoughts, for example, after Phillip asks about Timothy's name:

My father had always taught me to address anyone I took to be an adult as 'mister', but *Timothy didn't seem to be a mister. Besides, he was black* [italics added]. (p. 24)

Taken together, the fact that Timothy didn't seem like a mister (for reasons that must be purely speculative for the reader), and that in any event because Timothy was black he therefore is not a mister, are explicitly thematically racist.

Taylor (1994) may have intentionally crafted the story this way—first a negative description, then a positive description, and so on—in order to suggest Phillip's process of laying out and then eventually overcoming his unspoken family prejudices. A reader could conclude that although Phillip evidently has some prejudices about West Indians, he at least still has an ability to see positive aspects.

### *Phillip Asks for Water*

After a hot day on the raft, Phillip asks for some water. When Timothy tells Phillip that he cannot have as much water as he likes (since they are adrift on a raft in the middle of the sea and should conserve water), Phillip responds:

I began to learn what a stubborn old man he could be. I began to dislike Timothy. (p. 25)

Like several of the quotes above, this is difficult to classify as thematically racist or not, but a reader may wonder if Phillip would have thought the same had his father said this instead of Timothy.

Perhaps the most explicit reference to the themes of racism and prejudice in these sections comes when Phillip, reflecting on Timothy's control over the water, muses to himself:

Although I hadn't thought so before, I was now beginning to believe that my mother was right. *She didn't like them. . . . 'They are not the same as you, Phillip. They are different and they live differently. That's the way it must be'* [italics added]. (pp. 25–26)

The italicised sentences are explicit evidence of thematically prejudicial and racist beliefs. This is confirmed when Timothy bluntly suggests Phillip needs to eat some raw fish he has just caught

(because that is the only food Timothy is offering in spite of there being biscuits and chocolate on board). Phillip thinks to himself:

Yes, they [the West Indians] were different. They ate raw fish. (p. 27)

The quotes above provide mostly implicit evidence that Phillip holds some prejudiced beliefs about West Indians. However, the author has provided a chain of clues from which a reader can infer that Phillip is open to the possibility that his prejudices can be overcome. In a close or intensive reading of the text, the way Phillip views Timothy can be analysed and both complex character descriptions and the themes of racism and prejudice can be developed using evidence from the text.

How then does the comparable portion of the modified text deal with this? The modified equivalent is given on the right-hand side of Table 2. Where there is no right-hand column entry, there was no comparable text in the modified version.

Table 2. *The original quotes from above and the corresponding modified portions*

Original (Taylor, 1994)	Modified (Strange, 1997)
1. But to us, they [the West Indian sailors] were always pirates, and we'd shout to the noisy black men aboard them. They'd laugh back and go, 'pow, pow, pow.' (p. 3)	The noisy, happy black men on the island boats laughed at our games. (p.1)
2. I guess my mother was homesick for Virginia, where no one talked Dutch, and there was no smell of petrol or oil, and there weren't as many black people around. (p. 8)	She did not like Curacao and wanted to be back in the States, in Virginia, far away from the fighting. (p. 2)
3. I thought about leaving the island, and it saddened me. I loved the old fort . . . black people shouting. (p. 10)	I didn't want to leave Curacao. I loved this place—the old city . . . and laughing black people. (p. 2)
4. I saw a huge, very old Negro sitting on the raft near me. He was ugly. (p. 20)	I . . . saw a very big, old black man next to me. (p. 6)
There was no one else on the raft. Just this huge Negro, myself, and a . . . cat. (p. 20)	We were the only two people in the lifeboat—the big black man and me . . . and a . . . cat. (p. 8)
His voice was rich calypso, soft and musical, the words rubbing off like velvet. (p. 21)	
His face couldn't have been blacker, or his teeth whiter. They made an alabaster trench in his mouth, and his pink-purple lips peeled over them like the meat of a conch shell. He had a big welt, like a scar, on his left cheek. I knew he was West Indian. I had seen many of them in Willemstad. (p. 21)	

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Then he smiled at me, his face becoming less terrifying. (p. 21)

Then he smiled and for the first time his face was nice and friendly. (p. 8)

He was extremely old yet he seemed powerful. Muscles rippled over the ebony of his arms and around his shoulders. His chest was thick and his neck was the size of a small tree trunk. I looked at his hands and feet. The skin was alligatored and cracked, tough from age and walking barefoot on the hot decks of schooners. (p. 22)

5. That I was here alone with a black man instead of my mother made me break into tears. [Timothy then comforts Phillip and he] . . . felt a little better. (p. 21)

I looked all round us. There was nothing but blue sea and some birds above us, no other lifeboats, no ships. . . . I started to cry. (p. 8)

6. It didn't matter, at that moment, that he was black and ugly. (p. 22)

7. My father had always taught me to address anyone I took to be an adult as 'mister', but Timothy didn't seem to be a mister. Besides, he was black. (p. 24)

8. I began to learn what a stubborn old man he could be. I began to dislike Timothy. (p. 25)

I didn't want to hear that; I was angry with him. (p. 9)

9. Although I hadn't thought so before, I was now beginning to believe that my mother was right. She didn't like them. . . . 'They are not the same as you, Phillip. They are different and they live differently. That's the way it must be.' (pp. 25–26)

10. Yes, they [the West Indians] were different. They ate raw fish. (p. 27)

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What is immediately obvious is that in modifying the original text, Strange (1997) has excised the evidence of the themes of prejudice and racism. Often it is entirely missing (e.g., Extracts 9 and 10) or not simplified with the meaning in tact (e.g., Extracts 1, 3, and 4). Let us take Extract 2 for example. In the original story the reader is given several reasons for why Phillip thinks his mother was homesick for Virginia including that “there weren't as many black people around” (Taylor, 1994, p. 8). As stated above, this is an implicitly racist comment and adds to the emerging body of evidence informing Phillip's view of West Indians and where he gets those views from. The modified version excises that comment and substitutes it for a simple statement that his mother does not like Curacao and wants to leave in order to get away from the fighting. The modified version provides no explicit or implicit textual evidence that could be interpreted by a reader as evidence of a theme of racism or prejudice.



From the modified extract in Table 2, the only textually supported interpretations a reader may draw concerning Phillip's view of West Indians are (a) that Phillip had positive interactions with the West Indian sailors when he played near them, (b) that a West Indian sailor is in the raft with him, (c) that the sailor's face was nice and friendly when he smiled (for the first time), (d) that Phillip was upset about being in a raft with nothing around them, and (e) that Phillip was angry with Timothy for not giving him more water on demand.

What is entirely missing from the modified version are the implicit and explicit references to the themes of racism and prejudice and their sources. There is little evidence for Phillip's inner conflicts between parentally received prejudices and his own emerging experiences with, and ideas about, Timothy. The research question I posed in the introduction is answerable by suggesting that the excision of evidence of the themes of racism and prejudice has made the modified text difficult to interpret or understand as a text about racism and prejudice.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

To some extent it is not disastrous that the modified text has had excised virtually all evidence of the themes of racism and prejudice as they stand in the original text. The modified version stands alone as a text and can be interpreted perfectly well as a story about a boy and an old West Indian sailor who are shipwrecked together. However, problems may arise if the modified text is studied intensively in class and taught as though the themes of racism and prejudice exist in it. How can that happen?

The classroom teacher whose class I was researching had taught *The Cay* (Taylor, 1994) in mainstream English. Therefore, the teacher was completely familiar with the theme of racial prejudice in the novel and experienced with guiding NS readers to interpreting and understanding the story in that framework. It is perhaps not surprising then that when the teacher came to read the modified story with the NNS students in the ESL class, the teacher's prior experience and knowledge of the text transferred to the modified version. In short, the teacher did not notice the lack of thematic racism and prejudice in the modified version.

As is typical of studying a text intensively, the teacher asked many questions in class to elicit information from readers about both facts within the text and students' interpretation of what those facts might mean in the wider context of the story. Tellingly, the teacher was forced to supply elements of the thematic racism and prejudice from the original story when the students were unable to provide the interpretations the teacher was looking for in response to the modified text. Here is an excerpt from a classroom interaction concerning the issue of why Timothy refers to Phillip as young boss. The students had read to just beyond the section of the text extracts compared in Table 2.

Teacher: okay so umm now if we go to this 'young boss' what does young boss mean? Well you know young, Phillip is younger. 'Boss' what is the boss?

Student A: ahhh like the principal?

Teacher: yep boss of the school

[off topic behaviour management comments]

Teacher: so but why does Timothy think Phillip is the boss? Because usually the boss is someone older than you okay? someone older or more experienced. So in this case Timothy is older and he's more experienced than Phillip. Phillip is a young boy.

Student B: 'cause he's (a leader?)

Teacher: because he's?

Student B: acts like a leader?

Teacher: acts like a

Student B: leader

Teacher: leader, Phillip acts like a leader? does he?

Student B: mm no

Student A: maybe Phillip's father was [unclear]

Teacher: oh maybe Phillip's father is the boss of Timothy, hmmm yes maybe. There's one big difference between those two, okay? this one [Teacher draws a circle around the words 'white' and 'black' written on the whiteboard] white and black yeah, it's not, it's kind of a bad thing but white people think they are better than black people and black people at that time ...

The teacher has established that students know what *young* and *boss* generally mean, and then asks for reasons why Timothy might refer to Phillip as young boss. The two suggestions from students are that (a) Phillip behaves like a leader; and (b) after having had that suggestion discounted by the teacher, Phillip's father was Timothy's boss. This is also discounted, and the teacher supplies the key reason—Timothy is black and Phillip is white—and at that time white people thought they were better than black people. Had the modified version not excised the thematic racism and prejudice from its text, then readers would have had access to text-based evidence which supported the claim that black people and white people were considered intrinsically different at that time (see Extracts 7, 9, and 10 in Table 2).

For brevity I have included only one example of how the teacher has supplied an interpretation of the text which is not supported by the version of the text read by the NNS students. The excision of evidence of racism and prejudice is a recurring problem in the modified text, and the above classroom dialogue is not an isolated example. The teacher did not notice that the evidence of racism and prejudice was missing from the modified text and I did not discuss my impressions of the text with her. Neither did she notice that in the students' written work about the text the only interpretations students made were those given by the teacher.

That the modified version of *The Cay* (Strange, 1997) seriously diverges from the original in fundamental ways creates at least three pedagogical problems. First, a teacher who is familiar with teaching the original version to native speakers may not notice the differences when

teaching the modified version to non-native speakers (as indeed happened). The teacher may assume the NNS students are enjoying the same opportunities to interpret the text with its themes of racism and prejudice as the NS students when they manifestly are not.

Second, if both the original and modified versions of *The Cay* have been taught at a certain year level in school (as is the case in this instance), it is easily assumed across the school that students who have read it can equally draw on it and discuss it at a later time in other contexts. Thus it may be assumed that a person who has read *The Cay* (regardless of it being the original or modified versions) has read a book concerned with the themes of racism and prejudice, and this experience forms background knowledge for students to draw on in other classes such as English, social studies, psychology, drama, and so on. Given that the modified version is not the same as the original, this is a problematic assumption. An NNS who has read the modified version of *The Cay* (Strange, 1997) cannot draw on that text as a source of thematic racism and prejudice.

Third, if the ESL teacher has not noticed the lack of thematic racism and prejudice in the modified version and teaches the text as though that information were there (as happened), then there is the less easily identified problem of how the NNS students feel about not being able to see what the teacher thinks is so clearly there. I did not interview the NNS students about this but it is reasonable to speculate that NNS students may attribute the fact they missed the themes of racism and prejudice to their own poor reading skills or English language skills in general. This is obviously an undesirable outcome.

### **Pedagogical Suggestions**

Obviously the first suggestion is that a teacher who is familiar with an original text must read the modified with fresh eyes. Modified texts vary in their faithfulness to their originals, and *The Cay* is not the only text that exhibits little resemblance between the original and modified versions in key themes and character development.

Second, a teacher who has not read the original version of the modified text would do well to read the original to see the points of departure. This might help dispel the illusion that an NNS student who has read the modified text has for other academic contexts also effectively read the original.

Third, where there is a linking of the curriculum between an ESL department and mainstream classes, the chosen texts need to be carefully considered. If the reason for reading the modified version of *The Cay* (Strange 1997) is to provide NNS with a text concerned with racism and prejudice, then it will not meet the expectations and another text should be chosen (e.g., *Within High Fences* by Hancock, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

Modified texts vary in their faithfulness to their originals both in terms of the way the story is

written (Simensen, 1987) and what is selected as the content of the story. Whereas the modified version of *The Cay* (Strange, 1997) may be accessible to ESL readers in their first 1,000 words of English, the themes of racism and prejudice were not in this case. It is vital that teachers who use modified texts pay close attention to exactly what is in the text and how it is crafted. Not doing so may lead NNS students to experience a sense of failure to get the right interpretations, dependency on the teacher to get the right interpretation, a lack of enjoyment in the reading process, and inadequate background knowledge for later school use. These may in turn impact on students' personal reading-for-pleasure motivation, attitude, and confidence.

Similarly, editors and writers of modified texts may want to think more carefully about how they simplify a story. Since it was Pearson Education's (2000) intention to retain the themes of racism and prejudice in their modified version of *The Cay* (Strange, 1997), they ought to have assessed whether their modified version contained sufficient evidence of racist and prejudiced actions, beliefs, and attitudes on the part of the characters in the story to afford that interpretation.

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