

**“SHINE”**  
A FOLK NARRATIVE



**With A Commentary Of Its Allegory**  
**by**  
**Leon Dixon**

Dusk of Dawn Press  
Kansas City, Missouri

Leon Dixon is a co-founder and the chairman of the board of the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center and is a charter member of the Kansas City Chapter of the National Black United Front.

The Dusk of Dawn Press  
5501 Cleveland Avenue  
Kansas City, Missouri 64130  
(816) 523-7333  
or  
(816) 523-3339

Copyright © 1992 by Leon Dixon

All Rights Reserved  
Published 1996

Cover Art: Remmell L. Walker  
Typesetting: Affordable Publications, Kansas City, Missouri  
Printing: DuBois Graphic Arts, Kansas City, Missouri

ISBN: 0-9632951-0-1

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank all those who took the time to review this manuscript and offered their comments and encouragement. In particular I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Jeremiah Cameron, professor emeritus and former chairman of the English department at Penn Valley Community College, Kansas City, Missouri, for his editorial comments and insights. However, I personally take full responsibility for any shortcomings herein.

L. D.

## DEDICATION

Since the folktale *Shine* is essentially about survival, I dedicate this work to the survival of the “Great Fieldhouse Fire” of the athletic dormitory at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas, which occurred in the wee hours of the morning on January 11, 1959.

On the evening prior to the fire, the TSU basketball team had miraculously “snatched victory from the jaws of defeat” by overcoming a five point deficit to Arkansas AM&N University of Pine Bluff with about fourteen seconds left on the clock. The spectacular heroics were performed by one Wilbert Mosby from St. Louis, Missouri, who within that brief time span scored five points and made an assist to account for the seven points that gave TSU the victory.

There were eighty-seven athletes (if memory serves me correctly) who lived in that dormitory and had stayed up late that night discussing Mosby’s performance. Most had fallen asleep, however, when the fire occurred. The Houston fire department reported, as I recall, that when they arrived at the scene, approximately fifteen minutes after they received the alarm, that the dormitory (which was an old wooden army barrack, dubbed the “onion” due to the aroma that resulted from the practice paraphernalia reposed there) had burned completely to the ground. All they had left to do was to douse the burning embers.

When the athletic director, Alexander Durley, and the other coaches assembled the athletes present in order to call the roll to determine the outcome, their somber faces slowly began to glow with relief and astonishment when they realized that ALL of their charges were accounted for; with only two or three cases of cuts and bruises sustained. One of the athletes had leapt from his bunk straight through a second story window without even touching the floor. This one received the cuts. Some others did not break their falls from the second story “properly.” Amazingly, there none that had to be treated for burns or even smoke inhalation.

**When a story flourishes in the heart of a folklore, it is because in one way or another it expresses an aspect of “the spirit of the group.”**

Frantz Fanon  
*Black Skin, White*

*Mask*, p. 64

## Contents

<b>PRELUDE</b>	i-ii
<b>SHINE</b>	1-7
<b>COMMENTARY</b>	
The Set-Up	8-9
The Assessment	9-10
The Self-Reliance	10-12
The Temptation Tests	12-15
The Adversary Tests	15-19
The Celebration?	19-21
The Final Resolution	21-22
<b>EPILOGUE</b>	23

## PRELUDE

The epic folktale/fable *Shine* graphically illustrates the belief of us African-American people in our own survivability, even under seemingly the most impossible of circumstances. Many of us received our first exposure to this rhythmic folktale/fable around the beginning of our pubescent years, when we began venturing out on our own experiencing the various rhythmic vibrations of our respective communities.

There is no definitive version. In the book *Get Your Ass The Water And Swim Like Me* by Bruce Jackson, which is a principle reference for this work, there are ten different versions. The tellers of this tale, and others like them (*The Signifying Monkey* and *Stagger Lee* are, like *Shine*, among the most famous), “perform” them in the tradition of the African Griot, and never do so the same way twice. Relying solely on memory, they fashion the fable in such a manner as to evoke responses from their audiences. These responses from the audience are an integral part of the performance. They provide the fuel for the performer’s fire. The more involved and responsive the audience becomes, the more animated the performer gets. This interplay oftentimes intensifies, depending on the skill of the performer, to the point where some of the audience may be laughing so uncontrollably hard that their stomachs sometimes ache. They often beg the performer to stop so that they can collect themselves. But of course that only “eggs” him on. (I have only seen brothers perform these tales, even in later years when they are done by adults in house parties, where most of the sisters told me they were first exposed to them.)

These tales, specifically *Shine*, contain fabled truths and offer insights into our African-American psyche of the conscious, subconscious, and some would say, unconscious levels that reveal themselves upon a little analysis. One has only to muse upon them for a few moments.

It is often satirically said that, “if you’re going to tell a lie, tell a whopper.” That way, everybody knows you’re lying and nobody gets hurt. This folktale employs highly imaginative hyperbole, although grounded in psychological beliefs, fantasies and truths that we shall explore.

Unfortunately, this narrative is not one to be simply read. To get the full effect one must experience a performance of it in its “proper” setting. It has evolved in such a manner as to require a showman (Shaman?). When done right, the performer goes through somewhat of a transformation and literally loses himself in its rendering. That is why once he (the performer) begins and gets into character (of a griot), it is difficult for him to stop. When those who have witnessed such a rendering read a narrative of it, they invariably imagine such a performer doing it. Others will simply have to rely more so on their imagination.

I personally approached this undertaking with some trepidation because of the explicit and graphic language involved. But this folktale is both classic and legendary in our culture. It was born, bred, nurtured, and kept alive among certain segments of the Black masses. It has become a staple. And to ignore it would be skirting a phrase of our reality in such a way as to be dishonest. Additionally, there are these tremendous symbols employed that are illustrative of the Black masses’ imaginative use of fable and metaphor such that intellectual fairness and honesty demand that they be explored. And since there are such great lessons embedded in the poem (which is prosodically and structurally remarkable poetry), I have decided to proceed with this project under this cautionary note.

Also, as *Shine* is essentially a Black male phenomenon, there hopefully resides in this work the potential to generate more dialogue between curious younger Black males seeking more insight into their culture and folkways, and wiser older Black males desirous of passing on some of their wisdom (especially between *Boyz In The Hood* and men *from* the “hood”).

Finally, another gentle warning. It is too often counter-productive to intellectualize or analyze humor. For in so doing it causes the humor to cease

to be funny. With that having been said, let me now turn to a written version of a narrative of the epic folktale and fable, *Shine*, and return to a discussion of it afterwards.

## SHINE

I don't know, but old folks say  
that the twelfth of May was one hell of a day.

It was in nineteen-twelve and was sad to tell  
that out in the ocean it wasn't going so well.

The news had reached every seaport town  
that the great *Titanic* was sinking down.

The first mate and the captain were having some words  
when the *Titanic* hit the first iceberg.

They tell me there was a cat on board everybody called Shine,  
that was so black he could change anybody's mind.

Well, up come Shine from down below  
yelling, "Captain, Captain don't you know  
there's forty feet of water on the boiler room floor."

Captain said, "Shine, Shine, that can't be fact,  
I got too many pumps to hold the water back.  
Go on back down there and start stacking sacks."

The Captain and his mate were still having words  
when the *Titanic* hit a second iceberg.

Shine came up from below the deck  
with a lifesaver wrapped around his neck.

He said, "Captain, Captain I can't work no more,  
there's water pouring all in the firebox door."  
Said, "Captain, oh Captain don't you know  
I believe to my soul it's gonna overflow."

Captain said, "Shine, Shine have no doubt.  
I got forty-eight pumps to keep the water out.  
Just calm yourself down and take a blow  
and go on back down below."

Shine came back with a bucket of water in his hand.  
Said, "Look here Captain, I'm a scared man." 25

"Go on back down," said the captain with a scornful frown.  
"I told you I got more than enough pumps to hold the water down."

Shine said, "Captain, Captain can't you see,  
this ain't no time to bullshit me.  
You gave me your word, and you say it's true," 30

35  
but this is one goddamn day your word won't do.  
I'd rather out there on that iceberg going 'round and 'round.  
than to be on the raggedy ass muthafucka steady sinkin' down."

Shine jumped in the ocean and started to swim  
with four thousand millionaires looking at him. 40

A big man from Wall Street was on the second deck.  
In his hand he was waving a check.  
He said, "Shine, Shine if you save poor me," 20

I'll make you as rich as a Black man can be.”

Shine said, “You don't like my color and you don't like my race.  
Get you ass overboard and give these sharks a chase.” 45

Shine kept stroking!

The captain said, “Shine, Shine save poor me,  
I'll make you as rich as old John D.”

Shine turned around and then took another notion  
and said, “Captain, your money is counterfeit in this big ass ocean.  
There's sharks in this water and whales in this sea,  
get your ass in the water and swim like me.” 50

Shine kept stroking!

A woman on the deck said, “Shine, Shine save me please!!  
And I'll give you the best white pussy in the seven seas.” 55

Shine said, “You claim to have good pussy, and that might be true,  
but there's pussy on land that can make an ass out of you.”

Shine kept Stroking!

Now there was another cat on board by the name of Jim.  
Who, just like Shine, jumped overboard and started to swim. 60

When up came this whore from below the deck  
with her drawers around her knees and her dress around her neck.

Like a noonday clock,  
Jim stopped and his eyes fell dead on that cock. 65

She had long black hair flowing from the crown of her head to the

nape of her belly,  
and a twenty pound pussy that shook like jelly.

She said, “Shine, oh Shine save poor me.  
I'll give you the best white pussy you ever will see.” 70

And before another word could fall from her lip,  
Jim climbed his black ass back on that ship.

But Shine said, “When I was on board, you kept your pussy hid.  
You better get your ass in this water like Shine did.”

Shine kept stroking! 75

A rich man's daughter  
who was afraid of water  
said, “Shine, oh Shine please save my life,  
and I'll make you a lawfully wedded wife.”

Shine said, “Your shittin' is good and your shittin' is fine,  
but first I gotta save this ass of mine.” 80

Shine kept stroking!

The captain's daughter was watching Shine swim  
and started calling out to him.  
“Shine, oh Shine if you save poor me,  
I'll make you the best white wife you will ever see.” 85

Shine said, “I'm sorry miss, but you 'bout to have a kid,  
you better jump and split this water like Shine did.”

Then Shine made an overhead stroke  
that took him five miles from that sinking boat.  
Shine swam on around Elbow Bend. 90

There he met the devil and all his friends.

Shine was a swimming, a screaming and yelling.  
His feet were kicking like a motorboat propelling.

Up jumped a whale in the middle of the sea,  
said, "Somebody done sent a Special Delivery, just for me."

Shine said, "You swallowed ol' Jonah and spit him up on dry land,  
but you'll never swallow me 'cause I'm one hell of a man."

The whale said to Shine, "Slow down, I just want a little taste."  
Shine said to the whale, "From here to shore gonna be a  
muthafuckin' race."

Shine kept stroking!

Then up came a shark from the bottom of the sea,  
saying, "Look what God-Almighty done sent to me."

Shine said, "You might be the swimmingest muthafucka in the  
Ocean and the swimmingest muthafucka in the sea.  
But you'll be a swimming muthafucka if you ever catch me."

Then Shine made two monster strokes.  
And water shot through his ass like a motorboat.

The shark said, "Shine, Shine you're stroking fine,  
but miss one stroke and your ass is mine."

Then Shine slipped. The sharked dipped  
and opened his jaws to take a bite.  
Shine croaked, then made a power stroke  
that shot his ass clean out of sight.  
Saying, "Your eyes may shine and your teeth may grit

but none of this black ass you gonna git."

When the shark saw Shine had him beat,  
he said, "Swim on muthafucka 'cause I don't like black meat."

95 Shine kept stroking! 120

Then a big motherfucker from Wall Street told the shark:  
"I'm a big motherfucker from Wall Street so let me be."  
The shark said, "Here in this ocean your ass belongs to me."

A baby shark saw Shine coming and said, "Mama, Mama you  
better look out!" 125  
The mama shark said, "It swims like a fish, but I bet it tastes like trout."

The papa shark said, "Shine, Shine you better swim fast.  
I got thirty-two teeth ready to sink in your ass."

Shine said, "I out swam the white man, and I out swam the Jew,  
I know goddamn well I can out swim you." 130

Shine kept Stroking!

It was late in the evening and the water was cool,  
Shine said, "If I can just get to New York Harbor I'll be a  
swimming fool." 135

And if the goddamned sharks give me any kind of break,  
I'm gonna quit this cold-ass ocean and the five great lakes."

Shine didn't know he was raisin' no hell,  
'till he left that cold-ass ocean and hit the Panama Canal.

He passed up six cruisers, four destroyers and a sea-goin' plane. 140  
He passed ten steamboats and the battleship *Maine*.

While folks were on land singing, "Nearer my God to thee,"  
Shine was passing sharks singing, "Bring your black ass to me."

He swam pass Russia and the Bering Strait, 145  
and held on course past the Golden Gate.

Shine cut through the water like a man insane.  
The way he hit New York Harbor was a goddamn shame.

He started spreading the news around the town  
that the *Titanic* was slowly sinking down. 150

He stopped in a bar to get him a drink,  
and it came across the news that the *Titanic* was 'bout to sink.

The newsman was saying how the last minutes were spent,  
when Shine shouted out, "That ain't how it went!"

A man in the bar said, "Shine, Shine how in the hell do  
YOU know?" 155

Shine said, "'cause I just left that muthafucka fifteen minutes ago."

A woman in the bar said, "Shine, Shine why didn't you drown?"  
Shine said, "I had a cork in my ass and I couldn't go down."

People in Manhattan were all in a panic, 160  
talking about the great *Titanic*.

When the news hit Harlem that the *Titanic* had sunk,  
Shine was in a whorehouse damn near drunk.

Shine spent all his money lining one-hundred whores up  
against the wall. 165

And did his damnedest to fuck them all.

He fucked ninety-eight and his dick turned blue.  
He bet one-hundred dollars he could fuck the other two.

Shine went to the doctor. Said, "I don't feel too cool."  
The doctor took one look and said, "Shine, you're a 170  
goddamn fool."

He said, "Shine, oh Shine you're mighty sick.  
It looks like I'm gonna have to cut off your dick."

Shine said, "If you do, you better cut it off to the bone.  
'cause if you leave any meat I'm gonna fuck right on. 175

But if I die, I have one last call.  
Soak my balls in alcohol.  
Lay my rod upon my chest,  
and tell all the good time women, Shine done gone to rest."

The operation didn't go so well. 180  
Shine died and went straight to hell.

The devil said, "All you bitches better climb the wall.  
Shine done come down here to fuck us all."

## COMMENTARY

There are seven stages to this narrative: the set-up, the assessment, the self-reliance, the temptation tests, the adversary test, the celebration, and the final resolution.

### The Set-up (lines 1 -10)

This stage simply explains what *Shine* is essentially about. It primes the audience for the remaining six stages, which get to the heart of the matter of recounting how Shine handles his challenges and how he winds up.

In such tales as these, historical details are of minor consequences and are easily altered to accommodate fantasies and rhythms. The *Titanic* actually sank on April 14, 1912, but many versions use some time in May, presumably because it rhymes with day. The larger stretch of the imagination results from the fact that there were no Blacks registered as being on board the *Titanic*, either as passengers or as crew members. But what does mere detail like that make to the “street” Black folklorists? For them, poetic licenses are liberally stretched. The truth is never in what “facts” say, but in what gives meaning to happenings, real or imagined.

When incidences, such as the *Titanic* sinking, occur involving mostly, or even solely white folks, we often fantasize about what would have happened if one of our own had been present. We often not only fantasize about how we would have done things differently, but how we would have done them inherently or instinctively better, even exercising better judgment, will, and determination in the process.

The set-up portends a great tragic event: “I don’t know but old folks say, the twelfth of May was one h\_ll of a day.” The poem goes on to tell how the news that the *Titanic*—a ship that was designed and built so as to be unsinkable—

was in trouble after hitting an iceberg. The narrator performs this phase in such a way as to poke fun at white folks’ arrogance and their superiority complex in their belief in their “god-like infallibility.”

The choice of the name “Shine” for the hero of this folktale is a stroke of folk-literary genius. It is at once ironic, oxymoronic (He is so black that he shines, but it is a light that emanates from darkness.) and satirical.

The name, Shine, conjures up minstrel images of someone “in the dark,” not quit bright, and not to be taken seriously; and certainly of someone not deserving of any great respect, especially for what he thinks. Yet it is Shine who is ultimately the most logical (the brightest) and who offers sound advice when the others turn to him for help; “Get your \_ss in the water and swim like me.” We find shine assigned to the bowels of the ship, exactly the place in society where the people who gave rise to, and keep alive, this folktale fine themselves. This is why he is such a powerful symbol and metaphor. He thinks the way they think. His experiences mirror theirs. And he is a projection of their fantasies. Also, Shine is of the darkest of hues, “so black he could change anybody’s mind.” Shine’s skin color, thus, symbolizes even further his diametric opposition at every level—physical, mental, psychological, sociological, etc.—to white folks, especially those of influence and power, the ones he encounters in this narrative.

### The Assessment (lines: 11 - 32)

Blacks who belong to the same economic strata in society as Shine are acculturated to routinely do their jobs (those that have one), and if anything unusual occurs to inform their superiors, who, especially doing those times, were apt to be white. This is exactly what Shine does. “Captain, Captain don’t you know, there’s forty feet of water on the boiler room floor.” Even at this point Shine knows that the *Titanic* is in serious trouble, and like most employees he alerts his supervisor. But the captain in his arrogance and blind faith in technology (in this narrative, faulty “white” technology), dismisses Shine’s warnings as though his opinion or judgment is unworthy of consideration. Shine knows better but he instinctively, as most of us Blacks

have been trained to do, cannot yet bring himself to go against white opinion and authority. He goes right back down into the bowels of the ship. He clearly sees the oncoming disaster looming on the horizon. Shine surfaces a second time, pleading for and seeking the captain's direction on what to do. Clearly Shine knows the ship is sinking as he turns to the captain for advice, even though the captain does not know what to do in this situation himself. In all of the captain's and other white-folks-on-the-boat's wisdom, they could not even fathom any mishaps occurring, as the "superior intellect" of their technological gods had taken into account any and all such possibilities. Or so they thought!

The symbolism here is quite profound. Most of us Blacks seek the approval of white opinion before we dare take any kind of action that breaks from the accepted and traditional, and I should say, acculturated norms—even when it is in our manifested best interest to do so; even when we know what is to be done; what should, nay must, be done. It is as though all of our self-confidence has been driven from us; our capacity to self-affirm has been all but eradicated. This then creates a paralyzing state of dependency as long as it persists. Shine cannot yet bring himself to do what he knows he has to do, just as many of us Blacks cannot do so today either. This is one "tie that binds" that is not "blessed." If a people do not have enough self-confidence and are not able to affirm their own thoughts and actions in order to move in their own perceived self-interest, then they will not ever develop even any semblance of self-determination. None whatsoever!

The *Titanic* is a "party ship." And Shine is not even invited to the party. His position in life is to work so that others can enjoy themselves, just as other Blacks who share Shine's station in life feel they have been relegated to do with very little opportunity for advancement. So then the ship is a metaphor for a world (at drift in the mysterious and dangerous sea of the universe—an often used symbol in music and literature: the spiritual, "Tis the Old Ship Of Zion" and Herman Melville's masterpiece, *Moby Dick*) where Blacks are relegated to support the pleasures of whites. It offers these Blacks apparent relative safety and comfort in comparison to the cold universe wherein they would have to "go for themselves"—symbolized by the iceberg inhabited ocean. But in this

fable, this pleasure ride is doomed to sink, just as pleasure rides in life eventually and inevitably do. Shine's first impulse is to warn the captain, hoping perhaps, that maybe he could do something to allow "this world" to continue. (Isn't that just what many Negroes today try to do?) Eventually, Shine comes to a "crossroad." Should he continue to believe in the captain's word; to have faith in his world and to continue trying to live in it—even though the indications are that it is irreparably damaged. Or should he follow his instincts, his "inner voice," indeed, his own better judgment, and strike out on his own and go for himself, facing the cold universe, with all of the uncertainties, dangers, challenges, and those vast unknowns he would most assuredly encounter. Sound familiar? This strikingly mirrors the situation that Shine's real world counterparts face.

### **The Self-Reliance** (lines: 33 - 40)

Shine makes the decision to go for himself after having approached the captain for the third time. From this point on, he no longer seeks permission. This means he has to break completely from the captain and his world. Once this decision is made, notice how Shine's language changes. Shine is supplicant before that, deferring to the captain's authority. Afterwards, Shine is defiant and he no longer cares what the captain thinks. (Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman, and Malcolm X took similar positions.) "Captain, Captain this ain't no time to b\_\_s\_\_ me ... This is one g\_\_d\_\_ day your word won't do. I'd rather be on that iceberg ... than on this raggedy \_\_ss m\_\_f\_\_ ..."

What is colder than an iceberg? This is symbolic of the coldest and harshest conditions that the universe contains. But Shine knows that he will be better off taking his chances in the dangerous iceberg inhabited ocean than to continue casting his lot in a world where the handwriting is on the wall. Notice that Shine does not actually go on the iceberg, but allegorically he tells the captain it is safer there than on that boat. "Shine jumped in the ocean and started to swim ..." He cuts his umbilical cord from the doomed "pleasure world" to sink or swim on his own.

A significant point to make here is that many, far too many, of Shine's real life counterparts cannot bring themselves to actually make that move either. It is often done in fantasy, but not in reality. There are also those who do not even choose to "make the jump." (More "saves" stay on the "plantation" than leave. Notice: one, the use of the present tense here; and two, that "plant," a place where many of Shine's real life counterparts work, is short for plantation, a place where most American slaves worked.) There are those who would even follow the captain's instructions to "go back down below" with unquestioning faith.

The salient concept that is symbolized here is that self-reliance, self-determination, and self-anything will forever remain an illusive dream until one awakens to a new consciousness and acquires enough courage to follow one's own enlightened, realized, and perceived self-interest. The epic clearly illustrates that Shine saves himself as a result of this kind of decision making and action taking, even though the waters he had to negotiate were wrought with dangers. Nobody ever said life would be easy or fair; and there certainly are no guarantees. Moreover, the greater the risks, the greater the possible rewards. We say "possible" because there is no guarantee of any reward either. However, in Shine's case, the risks are certainly great and his reward was his life. Now how's that for a metaphor? In reality, great rewards and achievements (things like knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and meritorious accomplishment over material acquisitions, that may be inherited or won in prizes) result from great effort. And what could be greater the saving one's life. Further, the ability to control one's destiny is an even loftier position to attain while living life. But again, these things only flow to individuals and groups following great effort on their part. History graphically illustrates this. All one need do is study the lives of people, societies, and civilizations. And Shine definitely undergoes great effort at great risks in order to save his life.

### **The Temptation Tests** (lines: 41 - 89)

Whenever you try to make something out of yourself, accomplish something or venture out into something new, there will predictably be the naysayers. But more foreboding "enemies" are the tempters and temptresses, for they appeal

to the inner weaknesses, one's vulnerabilities, the soft spots that one constantly has to fight to control and gain mastery over, or else all can be lost. This is graphically illustrated in our epic.

Money, the love of which is said to be the root of all evil, is the first lure offered to Shine. Almost everybody strives for it and certainly the Black masses long for it as a means to end their woes. This is what, many of them believe, will allow them to live like others (translated: well-to-do white folks). People have died for it and killed for it. In this narrative as in many tales and mythologies it, as is any material possession, is characterized as fool's gold, that is, a false prize, or not the real prize in life, whereby those who pursue and attain it often find themselves the worse for it. Shine, to his credit and salvation, avoids this temptation, which has caused the downfall of many potential heroes and heroines, by remaining focused and by not allowing himself to get side-tracked into any unwise and foolish pursuit.

The first offer is to make him "as rich as a Black man can be." This expression zeroes in on the limitations that the Black masses see that his society has placed on them. Shine picks up this temptation of limited money immediately and scoffs at the offer from the man from Wall Street whom he detects as prejudiced: "You don't like my color and you don't like my race." Shine does not express bitterness, just reality. But he is not about to be lured into helping someone whom he views a prejudiced towards him because of his race. However, he does a human thing and offers the man some sound life saving advice: "Get your \_ss in the water and give these sharks a chase."

The second offer is much more universal and form a familiar voice at that. "The captain said,... 'I'll make you as rich as old John D'." John D. Rockefeller is viewed as the quintessence of wealth and the very well-to-do. And he most assuredly is considered as such among the Blacks of Shine's social status. Now this is indeed quite as offer; one most definitely worthy of consideration! This Shine does, but only for a moment. As in real life, one must weigh things out, consider the cost and make a decision. And in certain situations, be quick about it. Our hero is not distracted: "Captain, your money is counterfeit in this big \_ss ocean." Shine is coldly practical. He is neither

resentful nor bitter towards the captain for his inconsideration of him while he was aboard the ship. He does not have the time nor the energy to waste on that. Again, he simply offers cold practical advice to his former captain: “Get your \_ass in the water and swim like me.” As, “Shine kept stroking!”

There are myths in abundance as to the Black male/white female “thing.” Most of us are familiar with the essence of them and we will not elaborate on them here. But this fable speaks to the myth that, “all that Black men want is a white woman.” Myths usually persist, however, because of some basis in fact. In a society such as this one, “white everything” is set forth as the standard of excellence. Clearly those who buy into that measure themselves according to that standard. And many Blacks in this society have been acculturated to do just that. Even the most “conscious” of Blacks have to constantly guard against it. This results in a subconscious, and sometimes conscious, desire to be accepted by whites, and to seek approval and permission from whites to the point of actually adjusting one’s behavior to do so. Some psychologists assert that this results, at least on the subconscious level, in a pathological desire to actually be white. Given this, one can readily see why psychiatrist Franz Fanon wrote in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*, p. 14, that in “the Negro who wants to go to bed with a white woman ... there is clearly a wish to be white. A lust for revenge, in any case.”

It is one thing to be involved with a woman who *happens* to be white, and another thing to be involved with one *because* she is white. And the very fact that the white woman, especially in Shine’s times, is “forbidden fruit” for Black males, has spawned unhealthy desires in many of them. “You always want what you can’t have.” Thus, the basis for so many myths and fantasies that find their way into folktales, jokes, and stories, as well as straight out lies. This fable not only plays on this mindset of such Black males, but also on the exaggerated belief that whites have about the desirability of white women by Black males.

Clearly our hero, Shine, is not about to be diverted from his objective of saving his life for some woman just because she is white. Consequently, Shine rejects out of hand all such sexual offers by these women.

However, there is another Black male that many of the versions include, that was aboard the *Titanic* and takes the same action as Shine. Notice that his name connotes respect—Jim; no inferential or insinuating nickname is used in the narrative for him. This subtly implies that he is more acceptable to white folks and subtly indicates more affinity to their culture. When the whore offers her pleasures to Shine (not to Jim, mind you!), Jim climbs back on board the ship in pursuit of her offer. This verse puts down and ridicules those Blacks whom have psychotic lusts for white women; while simultaneously alluding to the folly of such mentalities. Obviously, Shine, as his name implies, is not captivated by white culture and white folks to the extent that Jim is. This makes it easier for him to make the necessary psychological break with it and them in order for him to proceed on his own, with little or no concern for the pleading whites on the ship, their offers, or their welfare, especially since it is their choice not to heed his advice or follow his lead.

It is noteworthy that in all of the various versions with this episode in it, the whore described has black hair and is not a blond. This points to a residual desire for Black women in the subconscious of Black males. The black haired white woman resembles more closely than any other white woman the light skinned Black woman. So in the psyche of Black males, she is just on the other side of the “border” of Black people. In other words, there is an inner desire not to “backslide” all the way.

Finally, Shine rejects “the ultimate offer” a white woman can make—marriage. His rejection of the white world and its “pleasure trip” is completed with the final parting remark wherein he lets the captain’s daughter know, that she is not even worthy of his consideration, and offers her the same cold practical advice he offers all the others: “... jump and split the water like Shine did.”

Also, notice the irony here of how the “rich” whites, seeking Shine’s help, humbly refer to themselves as poor: “Shine, Shine save poor me.”

The “temptations” Shine receives are of no trivial nature, for they are additionally pleas for help. They also appeal to the noble human impulse to aid

others in time of need. There are two things here. First, Shine realizes that to help them puts himself at tremendous, perhaps fatal risk, since the odds of being successful at saving both them and himself are all but nil. Secondly, the advice he offers them is sufficient, and probably all he is able to give. But they will have to heed it and be willing to take the same risks that he takes. Shine is not in a position to help anybody. In the universe he now finds himself, he is all alone. He has to commit himself first and foremost to the singular pursuit of saving himself. “I got to save this \_ss of mine.”

The message here rings out loud and clear. If we Blacks are to be about the business of getting our act together, we are going to have to focus on those actions and endeavors designed to accomplish that end. We do not have the luxury of time or energy to waste in pursuit of “fool’s gold.” We have to abandon the “party ship” and “get on with it.” We need to focus much more of our time and energy in self-improvement and self-development, and avoid the excessive amounts of time and energy spent on self-indulgence.

### **The Adversary Tests** (lines: 89 - 147)

The next phase Shine faces is when he is alone in the ocean to face all of its hazards on his own. This is allegorically the way of life. Ultimately, individuals or groups, have to rely on their own dogged strength, will, resources, and ingenuity to make it—just as Shine has to do. The narrative says: “Shine swam on around Elbow Bend. There he met the devil and all his friends.” “Elbow Bend” indicates that Shine’s travails are about to take a different turn. “The Devil” foreshadows what lies ahead, an omen that Shine is about to be severely tested (he is getting ready to go through “hell”) in this open sea—which is symbolic of the vast unknown and frightening universe he now finds himself in. The whales and sharks are metaphors for the demonic forces—the friends of the devil—that Shine will have to contend with. Shine was able to overcome the temptation tests by the sheer force of his will. But when Shine faces “the devil and all his friends,” sheer force of will alone will not do. These will be “do or die” tests. He will have to have an inordinate mastery of both will and skill, of both strength and stamina, of both courage and confidence in order to successfully contest his looming encounters.

The first “demon” that Shine encounters following the mention of “the Devil,” a Biblical metaphor for evil, is a whale, another Biblical “demon” that engages a Biblical hero—also in the sea. But unlike Jonah, Shine relies on employing his *divine endowment* (his will and skill) before the fact (capture), rather the imploring *divine intervention* after the fact. This reflects what Shine’s counterparts subconsciously know and instinctively feel that they too will have to do.

In this life one will come face to face with “the devil.” Indeed, one will have to race with “the devils” as reflected in the line: “From here to shore will be a m\_\_\_\_f\_\_\_\_\_ race.” In the narrative “the shore” is a metaphor for one’s goals in life. Recall that Shine says, “If I can just get to New York Harbor (the shore) I’ll be a swimming fool.”

It is ironic that the “great white shark” is perceived by many as being the ocean’s most menacing threat to humans found in the sharks domain. And the “great white power structure” is perceived by many Blacks as the most onerous threat to Black advancement within what is regarded as the white man’s domain. In our narrative, the shark observes: “Shine, Shine you’re stroking fine.” Meaning, of course, that Shine is progressing quite nicely through “this universe” all on his own. But he adds, “Miss one stroke and your \_ss is mine.” This is indicative of just how precarious life can be, especially in an adversarial environment, where one mistake, one miscalculation, or one mis-anything can be devastating. This particular metaphor is significantly poignant, for it symbolizes the stressful environment that Shine’s real life counterparts must negotiate and the treacherous seas they must navigate.

For Blacks, especially those who have kept the “Shine” epic alive, it is rough swimming in their waters. Many have seen fellow swimmers fall victim to sharks after “missing a stroke or two.” Many of their historical heroes and heroines have “missed strokes” and fallen prey to “sharks.” The “sharks” got Marcus, Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin. Even now their young are devoured by “sharks” in their own communities.

Like most Black folks in this life, Shine does slip, i.e. he “misses a stroke.” And true to his nature the shark attempts to take advantage of the situation. But Shine digs deep within himself, as a survivor must do, to find enough inner strength to “overcome.”

The reality is, that the world most Blacks find themselves in is cold, cruel, and predatory just as the waters Shine finds himself swimming in. And in this cold, cruel, predatory world one can hardly afford to “miss one stroke” lest one becomes “sharks meat.” The thing is, that the sharks make no secret of the fact that they are lying in wait for you to “miss one stroke.” As in this fable, they will tell you: “miss one stroke and your \_ss is mine.” Shine is fully aware of this reality and takes on the challenges of his adversaries forthwith: “I’m one h\_ll of a man” and “you’ll be a swimming m\_\_\_f\_\_\_ if you ever catch me.” He is unintimidated and resolute, and knows what he has to do to be victorious in the end. Shine keeps his head, and remains focused and determined. He harnesses and directs all of his emotional, mental, and physical energies towards the singular pursuit of achieving his objective. His concerted efforts are pointedly emphasized intermittently throughout this narrative by the statement, “Shine kept stroking!”

Embedded in this fable, also, is a satirical verse on the views that the Black masses have regarding the superiority complex and self-importance attitude that “the white man” has of himself. It has a Wall Street “big shot” who is obviously so filled with a false sense of his power and significance that he has the gall to tell the sharks to “let me be” because “I’m a big m\_\_\_f\_\_\_ from Wall Street.” The point being made in this verse is that, in the face of certain harsh realities, the advantages that one may have acquired no longer apply; that people ought to have enough sense to realize when they are no longer ones of privilege. The shark drives home the point saying: “Here in this ocean your \_ss belongs to me.”

There is an adversarial trilogy that Shine encounters in this narrative: the baby, mother, and father sharks. It is the young shark that first notices the intruder in its domain and not knowing quite what to make of it, yells out a warning: “Mama, Mama you better look out!” The mother (female) shark observes

Shine and anticipates a source of pleasurable consumption: “... I bet it taste like trout.” However, the satisfying of her “pleasurable consumption” will engender Shine’s demise. The father (male) shark, who is more territorial, issues Shine an ominous threat (a “do or die” challenge/test): “Shine, Shine you better swim fast. I got thirty-two teeth ready to sink in your \_ss.” The use of “thirty-two,” the number of human teeth, for the number of the shark’s teeth, indicates the symbolic connection between Shine’s “adversarial trilogy” in this folktale and the human dimensions of the adversities in the universe of the purveyors of this fable.

The young shark simply observes Shine’s arrival with bewilderment, fright and awe, and poses no immediate danger to Shine. The young’s warning is even given to the mother. With the adults it is a different matter. In the temptation tests the female *offers* “pleasurable consumption” (sex) *to* Shine. In this adversary test the female *seeks* “pleasurable consumption” (the taste of trout) *from* Shine. The end result for Shine is the same in both cases—death. The masculine tests, however, are rooted in materialism. In the case of the temptation tests, money is *offered*. In this adversary test, sustenance (food) is *sought*. The consequences of the masculine tests are identical to those of the feminine tests should Shine succumb.

There is an essential distinction between these temptation and adversary tests. The tempters *seek to lure*—like fishers, and all one has to do is avoid the bait. While the adversaries *actively engage*—like hunters, and simple avoidance will not do. In these adversary tests Shine’s adversaries become hunters and he becomes the game. Hunting is usually characterized as a masculine trait. Thus it is the adult male shark that is Shine’s most imminent threat. But Shine is in tune with himself and knows his capabilities, and confidently dismisses the “papa shark’s” arrogant braggadocio: “I out swam the white man and I out swam the Jew. I know g\_\_d\_\_\_ well I can out swim you.”

Shine’s “parting shot” to the adult male shark indicates the significance that “the white man” and “the Jew” have within the psyche of many Blacks. Although there are differences between the experiences that Blacks have had with Jewish and other “white” people, both are perceived by Blacks as possessors

of power—real and imagined. There are those times when this power is exercised in an adversarial manner against Blacks, and when Blacks outmaneuver the brokers of this power. Occasionally when this happens, a sour grapes posture can be detected similar to that of the shark in this narrative that says, “Swim on m\_\_\_\_f\_\_\_\_ ’cause I don’t like black meat.”

Given the obstacles in one’s way, just trying to stay afloat, to stay atop of one’s problems is enough to burn out the best of us. Constant struggle wears one down. Nobody enjoys having to struggle all the time. And to seek some kind of a respite is only natural. “... if these g\_\_d\_\_\_\_\_ sharks give me any kind of break, I’m gonna quit this cold \_ss ocean and the five Great Lakes.” The “cold \_ss ocean” symbolizes a menacing environment that anyone would desire to escape from.

Shine does, however, hit his stride after gaining his second wind. “Shine didn’t know he was raising no hell, ’til he left the cold \_ss ocean and hit the Panama Canal.” Because Shine managed to keep focused and determined, the worst is now behind him. Shine reaches what is called a “runner’s high” (in our case a swimmer’s high). This is that state when the runner is able to run effortlessly along, feeling at ease with his efforts, and seemingly at peace or at one with the universe. Hence, Shine goes on to pass up ships, cruisers, sharks, a sea-going plane, etc. The salient point to be emphasized here is that Shine never gives up. He has to be able to go the distance. Any less effort means his demise. This reflects a realization among the Black masses of the kind of effort that they too must expend (and have expended) to survive.

When Shine passes the “Golden Gate,” symbolic of entering the “home stretch,” he picks up steam as he realizes that his ordeal is almost over. He proceeds relentlessly in this vain and concludes his adventure with an explosive finish—the kind that Blacks take delight in (like a “Dr. J” slam dunk at the end of a fastbreak). This is colorfully illustrated in the narrative by the verse: “Shine cut through the water like a man insane. The way he hit New York Harbor was a g\_\_d\_\_\_ shame.”

### **The Celebration?** (lines: 148 - 166)

The question mark is after “Celebration” because it is questionable as to whether or not it is time to celebrate and more importantly, in the manner in which Shine chooses to celebrate. Shine has achieved his immediate goal—saving his life. And one would think that is an appropriate enough reason to celebrate. But Shine has no further goals, no plans nor outlook for the future. He lives only for the moment. Here a vision is necessary; a vision grand enough to expand one’s horizons; a vision that will engender the commitment to plan; a vision that will evoke the courage and will to act on it with the determination to see the plan reach fruition.

This has been the bane of many of Blacks, as individuals and as a group—no major plans, no vision beyond the immediate. It would seem that a celebration should occur following the accomplishment of one objective as a prelude for the pursuit of another. When we finish high school or college, our plans usually consist of getting a “good” job so that we can “live the good life.” We do not have any long term plans or goals for our self-determination or self-development. What will we do with our skills and talent after we develop them? For what purpose will we use our acquired resources and knowledge? Oh for the want of a vision! Upon completion our plans seem to be simply to get on board the “party ship” and sail on into whatever the future happens to hold for us.

So how does Shine celebrate? First he goes to a bar to drink: i.e. he seeks relaxation (refuge?) in a “bottle” (drug), just as many Blacks in real life, whom he symbolizes, do. While there he takes issue with the incoming news report on the sinking of the *Titanic*. “That ain’t how it went!” This line is reflective of the skepticism (some would say distrust), derived from years of experience, that many of the Black masses have toward much of the news media. For many Blacks, the slant of much of the reporting, as well as the selection of what is chosen to cover (and not cover), is disconcerting, to say the least. In many instances, Blacks know from first hand experience of distorted and/or slanted reports. “Shine, Shine how in the h\_\_\_ do YOU know?” (A demand for proof.) “ ’Cause I just left that m\_\_\_\_f\_\_\_\_ fifteen minutes ago.” (Time passes fast when you are taking care of business.) This alludes to those

instances when Blacks have more confidence in their own “reporters” and “analysts” (the “bush telegraph,” passed along by folk in the community) than those of the media.

Eventually Shine winds up in a house of pleasure. Shine had struggled hard—very hard!—to escape one party ship only to “surrender” himself to another one. And the one he voluntarily chooses to go to would ultimately sink him! Once there, Shine spends all of his money, time, and energy in foolish self-indulgence: “Shine spent all of his money lining one-hundred whores up against the wall. And did his d\_\_\_\_dest to f\_\_\_\_ the all.” This kind of thing happens when there is no vision, no plan for the future.

### **Final Resolution** (lines: 167 - 183)

Many of the Blacks in Shine’s socio-economic class go through life in much the same way as Shine does. An acculturation has set in of dashed hopes and deferred dreams. They have this clear love of life and an apparent reservoir of boundless energy. But due to lack of purpose and direction it is too often used to fuel counterproductive activity. It is as though many, far too many, Blacks have nothing to do but engage in ruinous behavior, just as Shine does. Their behavior, just as Shine’s, often results in having to visit the doctor only to be given a dire warning, or perhaps a bleaker diagnosis, prior to an engagement with the “grim reaper.” The sad fact is, that many Blacks remain unrepentant of the behavior that put them in that shape: “If you leave any meat I’m gonna f\_\_\_\_ right on.” That is the extent of their vision. Here the “doctor visit” is also a metaphor for that time in life when one is “visited” by the consequences of the decisions, choices and actions that one has made.

Ultimately, Shine dies and goes “straight to hell” where the devil himself forewarns the occupants of Shine’s coming, and that Shine plans to continue his “partying” ways when he gets there.

Hell is a metaphor for many things. One’s life can be a living hell if one has to spend it under unpleasant circumstances. There are both sins of omission and commission that can lead to this situation. Shine’s are both. His sins of

omission were in not preparing himself to be able to make a better future for himself. His sins of commission were in his destructive behavior. In our narrative Shine plans to make a “party” out of hell by doing the exact same things that got him there. In both life and death, Shine seems to have a magnetic attraction (fatal attraction?) to one “party ship” or another.

In mythology, an arduous journey is often employed as a metaphor of an ordeal wherein knowledge is gained, spiritual growth takes place, and one becomes intuned with one’s inner self. Often great and daring feats have to be performed whereby one’s inner resolve is strenuously tested. Usually, as a result of these accomplishments, a great boon is acquired that makes a better life possible for oneself, one’s family, or one’s people—a type of heaven. This does not happen with Shine. In this epic, Shine has to expend all of his energy in mere survival. He has no respite intervals of time to collect his thoughts to gain knowledge, grow spiritually, or become intune with himself. Consequently, when he reaches his journey’s end, his only boon is life itself. And having been unable to expand and develop his dreams and visions beyond those he started out with, when Shine finally makes his return home (as most mythological heroes do), being essentially none the wiser as a result of his experiences, he chooses to enter essentially the same kind of world that he escaped from and thus seals his fate: a descent into hell rather than an ascent into heaven.

This closely parallels the life experience of many Blacks in America, especially those who gave rise to this epic; many of whom also heard tales of similar experiences of their forebearers. By the time they too reach their journey’s end (whether the end of a hard week’s work, a return home from prison, or a difficult life lived) they know of little else to do but to lose themselves in some form of relaxation or escapism. With little or no sense of their own history, culture, and acculturation, and being ungrounded to project a worthwhile vision, far too many are, like Shine, bound to repeat their same mistakes.

Moreover, many Blacks, because they do not even try to prepare themselves to fulfill their potential, are similarly doomed to a living hell. Many others have achieved laudable goals, but because they do not have a sense of purpose,

undergirded by consciousness while doing so, have also ended up in a living hell. And many too, like Shine, try to make the best of things by “partying,” even in their respective hells.

## Epilogue

Some morals drawn from this epic, simply put, are that:

- (1) There comes a time when one's survival ultimately depends on one's own actions. And he will often find that the capacity for his survival is within himself.
- (2) One has to be steadfast against the luring temptations that will divert him from his objectives. And he must be aware of the menacing adversaries and obstacles he will inevitably and invariably encounter.
- (3) After all is said and done, one must take every precaution to see to it that the essence of the "new world" he finds necessary to escape to (or create) does not contain the essence of the "old world" he finds necessary to escape from (or destroy). For if that turns out to be the case, then the very same things one struggled so hard to overcome can very easily be his undoing.

The remarkable thing about Shine is that in spite of all that he had to go through, his spirit was never defeated and his love of life was never crushed. For if it had been he would have not survived; as is the case of the Black masses whose sojourn in America is reflective of this narrative.

The great tragedy of Shine is that the relentless nature of the battles (struggles) he had to wage was such that it did not afford him the opportunity (as most mythologies do) to acquire the life enhancing attributes necessary for a life of thriving over merely surviving. Thus, his mindset remained in a state that led him to make decisions and to act in ways that caused him to eventually lose the war (his life). This too is reflective, as are the other symbols and metaphors in this narrative, of the experiences and lives of the Black masses whose bards gave rise to this remarkable folk epic.

“I first heard *Shine* when I was in high school from a man named Clarence ‘Cubby’ Clayton. He was a World War II navy veteran who was very funny and used to tell *Shine* after baseball games in the park. ... I learned it, along with *The Signifying Monkey* and *Stagger Lee*, when I was in Korea sitting around in foxholes and army barracks. ... I started doing them myself when I was in Langston University (Oklahoma).”

– **Wilbert “Dilly” Dillahunty**, *sexagenarian* machine operator

“When we were kids (adolescents), we would be in the park and this man named Damon Bush, who was a World War II veteran, used to hold us spellbound telling us about *Shine* after ball games. ... Later on, this dude named Maurice Walker, who learned it from him, got it down pat and became straight out fascinating with the way he would do it.”

– **Ralph Brown**, *quincuagenarian* barber

“I remember hearing *Shine* on the ‘blocks’ when I was a teenager and we would be sitting around telling each other jokes. ... When I was in ‘the Nam’ (Vietnam) sitting in the ‘hooch’ (barracks) with the brothers talking about home and stuff, one of the brothers would start up with *Shine* and stuff and some of the other brothers would kick in with how they heard it.”

– **Thomas Flowers**, *quadragenarian* assembly worker

Dusk of Dawn Press  
Kansas City, Missouri

ISBN:0-9632951-0-1  
\$5.00