

Hostos Community College  
English 111  
Professor Michael Cisco

# The White People

by Arthur Machen

## QUESTIONNAIRE

We will read this story in four parts: the Prologue, The Green Book Part One, The Green Book Part Two, and the Epilogue.

Vocabulary words encountered in each part are defined in the questionnaire, listed in the order in which they occur in each passage.

There are thirteen study questions for each part of the story; students will select and answer one question per part briefly, in writing, and present their answers in class.

By the end of this unit, each student will have answered four questions about "The White People."

These answers may then be used as the foundation for a paper, analyzing the themes and imagery of Machen's tale.

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## PROLOGUE

### Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

prologue -- a prologue introduces a story, often detailing who tells that story, to whom, when, where, how and why.  
sorcery -- the art of performing magic rituals  
sanctity -- holiness, the sacred  
ecstasy -- going beyond the self  
mouldering -- getting old, aging (applied to things, not people)  
epicure -- someone who knows all about food, especially fancy food  
carnal -- obsessed with sex  
ascetic -- someone who keep himself under control by refusing to do pleasurable things  
teetotal -- someone who drinks no alcohol; the "teetotal sect" is a group of social reformers who discourage others from drinking alcohol.  
paradoxes -- a paradox is a logical problem that cannot possibly be solved  
Romanee Conti -- a type of very fancy wine  
four ale -- cheap beer ... Ambrose is saying, you don't need to know bad beer to know good wine  
truism -- a statement that is obviously true, like "pain is unpleasant"  
connexion -- old fashioned spelling of "connection"  
spectacles -- can mean either eyeglasses, or a grand thing to see; Machen uses this word in the first sense here, and in the second sense at the Prologue's end.  
qua -- as; "murderer, qua murderer" here means "a murderer, considered only as a murderer without taking any other particular details into account"  
judicious -- thoughtful, careful about labeling things  
sage -- a wise man  
infractions -- crimes  
bye-laws -- a secondary law, based on another, higher law  
prevalence -- what is prevalent is frequently encountered, successful  
Highland caterans -- traditional Scottish peasant warriors  
moss-troopers -- traditional Scottish bandits  
company promoters -- people who aggressively seek out investors for a new company  
placid -- calm  
amply -- fully  
the Fall -- refers to the story of Adam and Eve; the Fall is the fall of mankind from a state of grace into sin  
pertain -- have to do with  
Gilles de Rais -- a French nobleman executed for Satan worship and the murder of hundreds of children  
endeavours -- activities, things one tries to do  
persecuted Anglican Church -- some English Catholics, like Ambrose, claimed that there was really no difference between the official Anglican Church, which was Protestant, and the Catholic church; they wanted the two to be reconciled.  
dereliction -- failure to do your duty, failure to do the right thing  
key-note -- the main idea  
material -- made of matter, physical rather than spiritual  
incidental -- coming along with  
materialism -- this refers to the weakening of religious faith in modern times, explaining all of reality in terms of matter only  
the 'Blackwood' review of Keats -- John Keats was an English poet of the early 19th century; his poetry received a very negative, some would call it 'unfair,' review in *Blackwood's* magazine. Keats is now recognized as one of the greatest poets in world history. Ambrose is suggesting that the bad review was motivated by hatred of Keats' goodness.  
Hierarchs of Tophet -- lords of hell  
rapture -- being mentally or spiritually overwhelmed by something  
transcendent -- reaching for something above the level of ordinary life  
surpass -- go beyond  
faculty -- mental ability  
generically -- by category  
analogy -- a comparison of two structures or processes

miner ... puddler ... 'tiger man' -- here Ambrose is talking about a category of human beings, men who are not what he would call cultivated, who act purely on feeling and instinct, a little like animals

quart or two -- of beer. Ambrose is imagining a rough working man who gets drunk one night and murders his wife

gulf -- here means a very great distance or separation

flagrant 'Hobson Jobson' -- obvious nonsense, meaningless talk

Juggernaut and Argonaut etymologically related -- etymology is the study of where words come from and how they develop. "Juggernaut" and "argonaut" both have "naut" in them, which might make someone think these two words are related to each other, but, in this case it's just a coincidence. Ambrose is saying that we should be careful not to assume that things are connected just because they look alike.

theologian -- someone who tries to come up with logical systems to explain and justify religious beliefs

pieties -- simple religious lessons

disputant -- a debater

hobnails of the murderous puddler -- Ambrose is comparing two irrelevances; the particular characteristics of the shoes (hobnails) of the crude working man who kicks his wife to death are irrelevant to any consideration of his evil, and the dates and other historical details in the Bible, are just as irrelevant to the higher truths Ambrose is interested in.

esoteric -- something is esoteric if it has two meanings, one for outsiders and others for insiders, people who have been taught how to interpret deliberately hidden meanings

occult -- secret

infernal -- from hell, the inferno

supernal -- from above, heaven

pedal pipes of the organ -- church organs have foot pedals as well as keys, and the pedals play the very deep bass notes; these notes were sometimes hard to hear because they were so low in pitch, but you could still feel the vibrations caused by the organ.

Apostle -- one of the original followers of Jesus

deduce -- figure out from logically from a few ideas, rather than by gathering evidence

premisses -- plural of "premise" ... logic deduces conclusions from given ideas called premisses

personage -- a person

St. Paul -- one of the Apostles

Sir Galahad -- one of the Knights of the Round Table, with a special reputation for faith

capital company -- very pleasant to have around

de Maupassant's tale -- refers to a story called "Who Knows?" by French author Guy de Maupassant, in which the narrator sees his furniture come to life and walk out of his house one night

inanimate -- not alive, something that never had life

ascents -- upward movements

descents -- downward movements

Tophet -- hell

antiquarian -- someone who studies old things, especially the fading traces of past generations in his or her own society

palaeontologist -- someone who studies very ancient things, before mankind

pterodactyl -- a winged dinosaur

dabbled -- dabbling in something is like adopting it as a hobby or pastime, nothing serious

venerable -- very old

sash -- the part of the window that you raise to open it

maimed -- badly injured, disfigured

purulent sloughing -- infected and oozing pus

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## Questions

Answer each of the following questions in 1-3 sentences:

- 1.) What does Ambrose mean by "common life"?

2.) Ambrose says the saints and sinners eat dry crusts (of bread) and drink water with great joy. Dry, plain bread and water are not delicious; they are very plain. Why would saints and sinners take great joy in eating and drinking such plain fare? Why is Ambrose talking about bread and water?

3.) Ambrose is against the "teetotal sect" and gives his visitors whiskey. In this paragraph, Machen is showing us something about Ambrose by what he says -- that he doesn't agree with the "teetotal sect" -- and also by what Ambrose does. What do you notice about what Ambrose does in this paragraph, and what does that tell you about him?

4.) Ambrose draws a distinction between sin and the kinds of actions that are called sin. He says: sinful acts are to sin what the alphabet is to great literature. What is the relationship of the alphabet to great literature? Put sinful acts and sin into that same relationship.

5.) Ambrose describes sin, or evil, from two points of view. From one point of view, evil/sin is considered one thing, from the other point of view, evil/sin is considered in another way. What are those two points of view, and how are the two ideas of sin/evil different?

6.) Ambrose says the murderer lacks something a non-murderer has. What is the murderer missing?

7.) Ambrose associates sin with horror. When Cotgrave asks Ambrose what sin really is, Ambrose answers by asking him how he would feel if he witnessed certain strange things. What strange things does Ambrose mention here, by way of example? Ambrose says that Cotgrave, and probably anybody else too, would feel horror if he witnessed these things happening. Why would these strange events cause horror?

8.) Horror and fear don't mean the same thing. What is the difference between horror and fear?

9.) Ambrose defines sin as "taking heaven by storm." What does he mean? Explain in your own words what Ambrose thinks sin is.

10.) What is the difference, according to Ambrose, between a sinner and a saint?

11.) Ambrose says that we would recognize evil if we were "more natural." What does he mean? What is the connection between "being natural" and recognizing evil? What stops people from "being natural," according to Ambrose?

12.) Why does Ambrose tell the story of Dr. Coryn?

13.) Describe Ambrose's personality.

-- end of PROLOGUE section --

## THE GREEN BOOK: Part One

### Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

morocco -- a kind of leather; the book is a notebook, filled with handwriting, not a printed book.  
minute -- here means "small"  
Aklo letters -- an imaginary alphabet  
Chian language -- Machen made this up, too, although it may refer to Chios, one of the Greek islands  
Mao Games -- Machen made this up  
Nymphs -- female nature spirits from Greek myths, often associated with trees and springs  
Dôls -- made up word  
Jeelo -- made up word  
voola -- made up word  
Alala -- made up word  
queer -- weird  
Xu language -- made up word  
corn -- this refers to grain in general, not just what we call "corn"  
nurse -- not a medical nurse, but a caretaker or nanny  
brook -- a small stream  
dismal -- something that lowers your spirits  
thicket -- plants growing densely together  
smarting -- hurting, stinging  
stunted -- twisted, inadequately developed  
voor -- made up word  
voorish -- made up adjective based on voor  
Deep Dendo -- made up  
basin -- a large bowl or a broad bucket  
Tales of the Genie ... The Arabian Nights -- collections of fairy tales  
spires -- tall thin pointed towers or spikes  
peculiar -- strange, unique  
giddy -- dizzy  
extraordinary -- unusual  
nettle -- a stinging plant  
for ever and ever, world without end, Amen -- the end of a commonly repeated prayer  
well -- here, she means a place where water naturally bubbles out of the ground  
looking in a glass -- she means a mirror  
earth-children -- Machen invented this term  
solemn -- serious, impressive  
wailed -- crying  
heathen -- pagan, pre-Christian, like the gods of the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts  
tale -- a story, particularly a folk story or legend  
the Court -- the public hearings held by the King and Queen  
black man -- not an African, but a figure of darkness  
venture not upon your life -- don't try it, or you will die  
a fit -- a seizure  
charm -- a spell, especially a protective spell  
indistinct -- meaning the air wasn't clear

in his study -- like an office, a room filled with books, papers, a desk, etc.  
dusky -- gloomy, like twilight, darkening  
gulfs -- dark spaces that open wide  
fairies -- European nature spirits, dating from before Christianity  
brake -- a dense growth of trees; this word is not used much anymore  
stag -- a deer with great antlers; stags are almost never white, so this one is very unusual  
dead light -- sometimes rotting plant matter can give off a dim glow, mainly from bioluminous fungus growing on it  
will-o'-the-wisps -- these are mysterious lights, about as bright as candle flames, that seem to float in the air around swamps and marshes; they were once thought to be ghosts, now there are various different scientific explanations for them; if you see one, don't follow it!  
vault -- a stone cellar or basement; underground tombs can also be called vaults  
gibbet-posts -- a gibbet is a wooden structure from which criminals are hung  
like death -- meaning, as if it were deadly sick  
blasted oak -- blasted by lightning  
Tole Deol -- invented by Machen  
pies -- here she means mud pies  
elder and meadowsweet -- flowering plants used in traditional folk medicine  
perspiration -- sweat

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### Questions

Answer each of the following questions in 1-3 sentences:

1.) Machen fills the girl's story with made-up words and phrases (Aklo, Xu, voolas), and terminology (Scarlet Ceremonies, the Comedy) that are never defined or explained. What does he want the reader to think?

2.) The girl remembers a story about a woman who disappears on her wedding night. How is the girl like the woman in the story?

3.) The girl finds something in the woods, but she doesn't say what it is. Machen doesn't tell you what she found until the end of the story -- why not?

4.) The girl also remembers a story about a man who hunted a stag. How is the girl like the man in that story?

5.) When the nurse tells the girl about the meetings her great-grandmother attended on the hill, what do you think she's talking about -- what do you think that meeting was?

6.) The nurse shows the girl how to make a clay doll, but she does a great deal more than simply forming a figure out of clay. She walks around, sings, hides the doll, takes it back out again, and so on. Why?

7.) Describe the girl. How old is she at the time she's writing? What sort of place does she live in? What do you know about her family? What is unusual about her?

8.) Describe the girl's nurse.

9.) What does the wilderness symbolize in the story?

10.) The girl will often see something first one way, then another way. Find three examples of this.

11.) The girl is frightened several times, but overcomes her fear in different ways. What are some of these ways?

12.) How would you describe the girl's overall attitude toward what she's describing [ie, her "tone"]?

13.) What feelings do you think Machen wants the reader to experience?

-- end of THE GREEN BOOK: PART ONE section --

## **THE GREEN BOOK: Part Two**

### Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

gentry -- the prominent families, nobles

shib-show -- term invented by Machen

glame stone -- glame is an invented word, but it may relate to the word "glamour," which used to mean magic power or enchantment, especially a pleasing illusion that hides a trap

for all the world -- a phrase that means something like "I swear this is true!"

begat -- was the father to

aumbry -- a wall cabinet of a kind often used in churches

Dickon -- a nickname for Richard

wan -- pale

ford -- a shallow place in a river, where it's possible to wade across

span -- length of time

Noll -- nickname for Oliver

fancied -- imagined

halsy cumsy helen musty -- this appears to be a phrase of garbled Latin and Greek combined

dinner -- lunch, the last meal of the day was called supper

turfy -- covered in thick grass

wind -- not what blows, but the verb "to wind" which means to turn

rubbish -- trash, nonsense

scolded -- accused, reprimanded

walls have ears -- an expression meaning that you're less like to be overheard outside than when you have walls around you

copse -- a grove of trees

rapping -- knocking  
stratagems -- schemes, plots  
prophet -- someone who knows the future  
Alanna -- made up name

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### Questions

Answer each of the following questions in 1-3 sentences:

- 1.) How does Lady Avelin use dolls?
- 2.) The word "glame" is related to the word "glamour," which originally meant a pleasing illusion, often hiding a trap. Identify some illusions in the girl's stories.
- 3.) At the end of the story of Lady Avelin, the girl wonders if she minded being burned and if it hurt very much. Why would she wonder that?
- 4.) "Troy Town" and the other games the girl learns from her nurse are obviously magic spells, but the girl doesn't think of them as spells. Why do you think Machen chose to make her so naive?
- 5.) What is the significance of the girl's saying that she feels full of fire?
- 6.) Why is the girl so disturbed and anxious about what she found in the wilderness?
- 7.) The nurse keeps insisting that the special things she tells the girl must be kept secret. Why are these things secret?
- 8.) At one point, the daughter tells her father one of the nurse's stories, and he scolds her. What do you think the girl's father represents in this story?
- 9.) The nurse shows the girl how to turn the house upside down, and the girl plays this trick on the cook. What is the girl describing in this scene?
- 10.) We don't know the significance of the girl's discovery, but we can get a sense of its importance to her from her behavior. Speculate about what she has found, what she hopes for.
- 11.) Adam and Eve and only those who know the story can understand what they mean -- the story has a hidden meaning. What is the surface meaning, the ordinary meaning, of the story of Adam and Eve, and what do you think the hidden meaning might be?
- 12.) Looking into the pool for the last time, she thinks she knows who the white lady was. What does she mean?
- 13.) The girl lives in two worlds. What are those two worlds?

-- end of THE GREEN BOOK: PART TWO section --



## EPILOGUE

### Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

epilogue -- the conclusion, a wrap-up piece that follows the end of the action and summarizes what happened next

recluse -- someone who lives alone by choice

drift -- general idea

purview -- what you can see

alchemy -- the old medieval version of chemistry, which involved trying to transform one element, usually some kind of worthless metal, into gold; alchemists also tried to come up with a medicine that would give eternal life.

veritable -- real, genuine

suggestion -- refers to the idea that a person might see what they want to see

"a schoolboy 'suggesting' the existence of Aeschylus to himself, while he plods mechanically through the declensions" -- English schoolboys had to learn ancient Greek, which involved

memorizing many different forms of words, called "declensions;" Aeschylus was an ancient Greek poet. So Ambrose is saying that, just as a schoolboy learning the nuts and bolts of ancient Greek would not therefore suddenly imagine the poetry of a writer like Aeschylus, so it would be just as impossible for someone studying physics to come up with the idea of a nymph, or other "processes" such as are described in this story.

obscurity -- secretiveness

dictated -- ordered, demanded

sovereign -- the best

virulent -- very deadly

phials -- medicine bottles

elixirs -- medicines, especially magical medicines, like the alchemist's elixir of immortality

erroneous -- wrong

image -- in this case, a statue

desolate -- empty, barren

luminous -- glowing

Sabbath -- pagan or Satanic rituals

vouchsafed -- given, entrusted

persistence -- tendency to last, to keep going

parish -- a rural neighborhood

unabated -- undiminished, still strong

vigour -- life, power

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### Questions

Answer each of the following questions in 1-3 sentences:

1.) What does Ambrose mean when says the nymphs are processes?

2.) Alchemy is the medieval ancestor of modern chemistry and physics. Ambrose only says there's some connection between alchemy and the girl's story, but he doesn't say what it is. Looking at the definition of alchemy above,

speculate about the possible connection.

- 3.) Ambrose says he knows that these processes are real. What does that suggest about Ambrose?
- 4.) What does Ambrose mean when he talks about making a key for yourself?
- 5.) When the girl goes missing, the servants assume that she has done something bad, but Ambrose says they are mistaken. Later, Ambrose says she could not be criticized for having done anything that people would normally call "bad." What "bad" behavior do you think he and the servants mean?
- 6.) Why do you think Machen introduces the topic of that "bad" behavior?
- 7.) Why did the girl poison herself?
- 8.) What do you think Ambrose means when he says she poisoned herself "in time"?
- 9.) The girl is found dead a year after the events she describes in the notebook. What does the interval of a year suggest?
- 10.) Why do you think Ambrose mentions Dr. Coryn's story about the woman who sees her child's fingers crushed by a window?
- 11.) Machen waits until the end of the story to tell what the girl found in the wilderness. What effect do you think he was looking to create in the reader by waiting until the end?
- 12.) What do you think the statue represents? Don't describe the way you think it might look, but what you think it means, what its power is.
- 13.) Machen deliberately doesn't explain many things in the story. What effect do you think he wanted to create for the reader by leaving out so much information?

-- end of EPILOGUE section --  
-- end of QUESTIONNAIRE --