

# Rochester, Myrna Bell and Natalie Schorr, editors. *Camara Laye, L'enfant noir*.

Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2005. ISBN: 1-58510-153-2.

The objectives and the format of *L'enfant noir* are identical to those of other works published in the Focus Student Edition series, such as Molière's *L'École des femmes*, Guy de Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean*, and Voltaire's *Candide ou l'optimisme*.

These editions are meant to provide students with a smooth transition from the study of language to the study of literature. As a matter of fact, they oftentimes provide a bridge that leads imperceptibly from one to the other (this is particularly true in the case of *L'enfant noir*, the story of a boy's youth told with meticulous contextualization, considerable repetition, and constant rephrasing — characteristic techniques of the oral storytelling tradition). In addition, these editions help prepare students for the AP French literature examination (though they can be incorporated into other courses as well, whether at the high school or the college/university levels).

Every title in the Focus Student Edition series follows the same format, although editors modify it slightly to accommodate a particular author, *genre*, historical period, readership, or aesthetic standards:

- *Introduction*

The introductory essay presents a relevant biography of the author as the *enfant noir* of the novel; it also situates *L'enfant noir* in its literary-sociopolitical context.

- *Notes Stylistiques*

These notes include a brief explanation (with examples from *L'enfant noir*) of the uses of *l'imparfait du subjonctif* and of *le plus-que-parfait du subjonctif*, two modes that students might find difficult as they transition from a conversational to a literary form of expression.

- *La Guinée*

This feature is unique to the Focus Student Edition of *L'enfant noir*. It provides a map of Guinea along with a bullet presentation of the pertinent geographical, political, linguistic, climatic, ethnic, religious, economic, and historical data of this Francophone republic.

The introduction, along with this section, helps make for a very meaningful reading of *L'enfant noir*. Teachers of AP French literature should be cautioned, however, not to encourage students to use this information in answers to AP questions, where students are to demonstrate (and are graded on) their comprehension of the text *qua* text.

- *Chronologie (le texte de l'oeuvre)*

The body of the novel is preceded by Camara Laye's touching and poetic dedication to his mother who embodies both his own mother and every African woman.

Words and expressions in the text deemed to be difficult for students to understand are followed by a ° for which a French synonym or a French periphrasis is given in a grey-shaded box located toward the bottom of the page, just above the footnotes.

The footnotes provide excellent insights and may even at times be considered exemplary and concisely worded *mini-explications de texte*. Passages that are footnoted are supra-numbered in the body of text.

- *Activités*

Each chapter has two sets of questions: multiple-choice and essay. Multiple-choice questions are designed to have students focus on significant details in the text. Essay questions are intended to provide students with the opportunity to discuss their understanding of the text.

Following the *Activités* for the twelfth and final chapter are two concluding *Activités: Essais /Discussions* and *Tremplins*.

Here, as always in using the Focus Student Edition series, AP teachers should distinguish between questions that pertain specifically to the text and questions that encourage students to go beyond the text. The latter, no matter how interesting and challenging, do not appear on AP French literature examinations and should therefore not be a major feature of the AP French literature course.

The section ends with the answers to the multiple choice questions in *Activités*.

- *Bibliographie*

The bibliography lists works by and about Camara Laye, interviews with the author, general works on African literature, and *Tremplins* (including literary, cinematic, and music productions).

- *Vocabulaire utile: pour parler d'un roman*

This section lists words and expressions that would be useful in any course on the novel, but does not provide translations, synonyms, or circumlocutions for the items in the list.

- *Remerciements* (Acknowledgments)
- *About the Authors*

There is so much that is admirable and useful in this edition of *L'enfant noir*. However, the edition would have benefited from a pre-publication field test and/or a wider editorial staff. Any professional who has edited a literary work — and most language teachers have engaged at some point in their career in such activity — knows the difficulty and even the near-impossibility at times of rendering a text comprehensible to a non-native user of a language, especially if the explanation is confined to the target language. Greater input from the profession would have eliminated such flaws as the omission of explanations for cognates (“case” and “vaine” on p. 134, for instance) and the absence of a gloss for French lexical items, like “enfoui,” that are beyond the experience of novice readers of literature (“le doux-amer des choses à jamais enfouies,” p. 152). Professional input would have picked up on the misinterpretation of passages such as the one where Camara Laye’s mother is decrying the departure of her son for France; the mother’s statement “Je me demande à quoi tout cela rime” is rendered by the editors as “de quoi il s’agit,” although the mother states very well in the passage what the departure is really about from her perspective. What she means is: “this is all nonsense — it has neither rhyme nor reason.” Or again, a larger pool of classroom professionals would have recognized that Roman Catholics do not count their prayers on rosary beads (they say the rosary on them) and that the African and South Pacific “chapelet de cauris” has no connection with the Christian “chapelet,” which is appropriately explained in footnote 7 on page 23.

The main suggestion for the improvement of this edition concerns the explicit purpose of the series: to prepare students for the AP French literature examination. This examination requires students to have read a number of literary texts; it also expects them to use the same reading skills they develop while reading required texts to interpret texts that they have not previously read. In short, the AP French examination hopes that students will become “intelligent” readers, that is, readers who can deduce the meaning of words from such clues as the context, their knowledge of other languages (after all, over 45% of English vocabulary is of Latin derivation), and their life experience. There are a number of occasions where the editors of the Focus Student Edition of *L'enfant noir* have allowed student readers to do just that. In one instance, for example, a group of boys is responsible for preventing birds and monkeys from pillaging (not “flying over” as indicated in the grey box on p. 53) a field. The boys fool around, forgetting their duty. They are then “dûment édifîés” by their parents. “Dûment” is not explained, presumably because the editors judged that students at this point in their linguistic development should be able to break down the word into “due” and “ly,” thus arriving at the meaning of “duly.” “Édifîés” likewise is not glossed, although students might think that the word means “edified” and not “reprimanded,” as the context would suggest. So many more passages in *L'enfant noir* lend themselves to this kind of intelligent reading because of the very nature of oral storytelling. In allowing students to guess, hypothesize, deduce the meaning of words and expressions, synonyms and periphrases could be greatly reduced.

Notwithstanding its flaws, the Focus Student Edition of *L'enfant noir* is currently the best available. It has great merit. AP and non-AP teachers of Francophone literature should not hesitate to adopt it

J. Vincent H. Morrissette  
Adjunct Professor of French  
Fairfield University  
Fairfield, CT

### **Publisher's Response**

It would probably be an interesting discussion to quibble with some of the concerns raised in this review (counting beads on the rosary versus saying them; or glossing terms/not glossing terms as with “case”, glossed in fact on page 1, but not on page 134, etc.) However, we deeply appreciate the overall evaluation of the book as the best available and of merit. It was class-tested and widely read. Unfortunately it is no longer on the AP list, but, like all of our French language student editions, it is appropriate for both college and high school, and we hope it serves instructors well.

Ron Pullins  
Focus Publishing