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ENGL 215 Midterm Exam

Part I (2):

Harriet Jacobs’ story, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl,* took place in a time period when slavery still existed and therefore vastly influenced how black individuals percieved sexuality. Jacobs wrote about how she was ashamed of having a child out of wedlock with a white man even though she respected him and did it to escape being raped by Dr. Flint. She was anxious about what her grandmother would think about her actions. With this being said, Jacobs kept most of her sexual desires hidden and/or unspoken.

In contrast to this, in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their eyes were watching God,* the main character, Janie, is very open about her sexual desires. She goes into descriptive detail, vividly describing her sexual wishes and encounters. Granted, this novel was written shortly into the post slavery era, when black individuals (particularly women) generally felt more comfortable with their sexuality. However, this was still quite a promiscuous novel for its time.

One key difference between Jacobs and Hurston’s character, Janie, is that Janie had the option to choose her lover. The novel describes how Janie’s grandmother pushed her toward marrying Logan, but then Janie decided to leave Logan for Joe, a man she met on the street, and pursue a new life. After Joe passed, she decided to leave town with Teacake. Almost everything that happened in Janie’s life was a result of her own free will to decide. Meanwhile, Jacobs did not have this luxury. Many of her sexual decisions were based on her longing for herself (and her children) to escape slavery.

Part II (3):

W.E.B Dubois describes double consciousness as the ability to percieve how other races see your race. In other words, it’s the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others. In the text, Dubois describes it as a peculiar sensation. He further explains it as being both a black man and an American, two separate characters, as the black American was not yet recognized by the population.

An example of Dubois’ phenomenon of double consciousness in *A Raisin in the Sun* would be when Mr. Lindner enters into their family’s home and Beneatha immediately can tell how he percieves their family. She is used to looking at herself and her family through the eyes of others (specifically white people) and can typically predict how the interaction will go. The text even says she replies to him dryly and makes a snide remark about the welcoming committee.

Another example of double consciousness from Hurston’s novel, *Their eyes were watching God,* would be the post-hurricane scene when Janie and Teacake stay in a local hotel. Teacake wants to go outside and explore the town and the destruction while Janie wants him to stay inside because she is worried about how the white people from this town will percieve him. In the text, Hurston describes white patrols walking around recruiting black men to bury the dead white men. Teacake doesn’t think they will make him bury anyone because he has money, but Janie sees past this. In this case, Janie is possessing double consciousness while Teacake is lacking it. Later on, after being forced to bury the dead men for hours and then making a break for it back to the hotel, Teacake realizes that there will always be a preconceived notion of black men whether they have money or not.

Part II (4):

There are multiple ways to decipher the religious aspect of Phillis Wheatley’s poem *On Being Brought from Africa to America.* The particular line that can be interpreted many ways is “Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.” The commas are what cause the confusion. One way to interpret this line is that Wheatley is reminding white Christians that negros, black as Cain, can still get into heaven. They can still be saved and have a relationship with your precious savior. Another way to interpret this line is that Wheatley is saying that both white Christians, black as Cain, and negros, black as Cain, can get into heaven. No matter how much you’ve sinned it is still possible to be saved and go to heaven. This applies to everyone: slave owners, black slaves, and everyone in between.

When comparing Phillis Wheatley’s view of religion to David Walker’s view of religion, there are both similarities and differences. While Wheatley believes that every man is capable of repenting and going to heaven, Walker explicitly states that white slave owners are going to hell. Walker speaks of a God of justice, who vengeance belongs to. He claims that (white slave owner) tyrants will wish they were never born. He claims that white Christians do not understand their own language, as the bible teaches one to love thy neighbor as thyself. However, both Wheatley and Walker firmly believe that black individuals can go to heaven.

Part III (6):

Anna Julia Cooper’s idea of achieving a justice for the black race in America involves uniting together and looking toward the future. In her piece entitled, *A Voice from the South,* she speaks of how satisfaction in American institutions springs from the possibilities and promises that are inherent in the system in the future. She also emphasizes the importance of black men and black women uniting together for one common cause. She despised the idea of black men leaving black women out of the conversations of freedom in order to more easily achieve it. It was all or nothing for Cooper, either both black men and women gain freedom, or no one does at all! She also touched on the subject of black women and white women relationships in reference to achieving equality to men. Lastly, she believed that the black individual, one who divinely struggles and aspires and yet is tragically warped and distorted by the winds of circumstance, had not truly been painted/captured yet. She thought this was a key part of the justice for the race.

W.E.B. Dubois took a rather different path in achieving a justice for the race; he believed that black men (and women) should become highly educated and use literature to further write to progress the race. Dubois and Langston Hughes had a famously conflicting viewpoint when it came to art (specifically literature). Hughes openly expressed his indifference to whether black people or white people enjoyed his work, either was fine by him because he wasn’t writing for anyone other than himself. On the other hand, Dubois believed that any work of art that portrayed black people in a negative light or didn’t serve to attain justice for the race was of no use and was therefore unnecessary. Cooper and Dubois didn’t disagree as much as Hughes and Dubois. They both argued that true American literature was produced as a result of slavery. However, Cooper does not place as much of an emphasis on the education part as Dubois does. Rather, Cooper emphasizes unity and harmony between black men and women.

Part III (7):

David Walker delves into the true definition of slavery in his appeal. He refers to the term “chattel slavery.” He defines chattel slavery as an enslaved person who is owned forever and whose children are owned forever. One who is treated as property and bought and sold as their owners please. He says that in the United States, slavery is more than just profit and labor. It’s about making a group of people feel inferior, publicly and privately degrading them to less than a human, blatantly disregarding their life, and having ignorant reasons for your actions. Chattel slavery is the work of Satan. Victims of chattel slavery have no choice but to hate their owners, for they treat them worse than dogs. They keep their foot on their throats at all times, for no reason besides the color of their skin. Their greatest earthly desires are to keep slaves in abject ignorance and wretchedness. Slavery is so much more than simply unpaid labor.

While Harriet Jacobs does not disagree with David Walker’s description of a slave, she paints it in a different picture in her story entitled *Incidents in the life of a slave girl.* Jacobs focuses on the life of a slave girl, which involved a lot of sexual violence and fear. She vividly describes her encounters with Dr. Flint, her male slave owner who was intent on raping her. She also explores/describes the not so rare accounts of black male slaves being raped by their slave owners as well. In addition to the sexual violence, she describes the physical abuse of slavery. She has an entire chapter dedicated to the unusual and cruel punsihments slave owners would come up with, including locking slaves in small quarters while rats slowly ate them alive, burning them with dripping wax/oil, and publicly lynching them. Lastly, Jacobs describes the mental abuse aspect of slavery. She speaks of being forced to hide in a small crawlspace area above her grandmother’s house for nearly seven long years. She couldn’t stand or walk or see the sunlight or see her children or her family. She couldn’t pursue her dreams or her hobbies or love or freedom. She could only sit and wait for an opportunity to get her life back. If that’s not mental abuse, then I don’t know what is.

This exam was completed in collaboration with Tabitha, Kendra, and Makayla.