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Literature of Black America

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Midterm Essay

Part A, prompt 1

In *Home,* Morrison does an excellent job of making her characters realistic and relatable. Neither Frank nor Cee are perfect people on a perfect Hero’s Journey. Frank especially is a deeply flawed individual, neither hero nor villain. The novel begins with Frank escaping from a mental institution, unaware of how he got there. He embarks on his version of a Hero’s Journey to rescue Cee, who is dying, and travels across the country back to Georgia to find her. He dreads the journey, dreads returning to Lotus, the hometown that he hates, but he goes anyway because of his love for Cee. His devotion and ingrained urge to protect Cee are perhaps the most compelling and redeeming qualities Frank possesses. His journey to save his sister ultimately helps him to find sustainable purpose and meaning on which he can base his identity (with help from Cee, who ultimately saves herself).

Frank’s friends were killed in the Korean War. With his friends, he lost a part of his identity. Before they died, he simply followed orders and was nervous about killing, which he later described as cowardice. After they were killed, Frank became bloodthirsty: “there were not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him.” Veterans and other people who experienced similar trauma may relate to this aspect of Frank’s life. Becoming thirsty for violence and bloodshed certainly seems easier, and even safer, than letting grief cripple a soldier on the battlefield. Without this outlet for his grief, however, Frank regresses into crippling apathy, of which he doesn’t come out of until he finally returns to Lotus with Cee. His PTSD and depression after he returned from the war were more of Frank’s traits that people may be able to identify with. If not that they can identify with his mental health condition, Frank could arouse a sense of sympathy in readers, even despite the violence he displays several times through the story.

There is one aspect of Frank’s actions that is unforgivable. In Korea, Frank killed a little girl, who, probably reflecting her treatment from other soldiers, offered Frank oral sex in exchange for food. Frank spent a significant portion of the story lying to himself, believing that it was not him that killed the girl, that it was not him that was aroused by her. His deniable of his role in killing the Korean girl is understandable, especially because he eventually is able to admit the truth to himself and begin to stand up and live despite his actions and experiences. The action itself was unforgivable and utterly selfish and abhorrent. Frank admits that he thought it was better for her to have died when he was confronted by his arousal, supposedly to save her from what he would have otherwise done next. But the reader may find it incredibly off-putting and horrible that he only saw those two selfish choices: kill her or abuse her. What happened to his self-control and morality at that moment? It is up to the reader to decide, then, whether Morrison made Frank a character that is worthy of his peace and purpose he eventually finds in Lotus.

In Lotus, Frank is able to stand as a man since he left for Korea. He buries the body of the murdered man under the sign “here stands a man,” and acknowledges his mistakes and all that he lost. This change, from idolizing the power of the horses who “stood like men” to standing as himself, flawed but self-possessing at once, represents a common theme between both Frank and Cee: owning oneself and one’s fate.

Cee, whose journey was very different but no less difficult for her to overcome, learned a similar lesson. There is more to Cee that endears her to the reader than there was to endear the reader to Frank, if simply because her crimes were not so horrifying as Frank’s were. Her crime was her naivety and blind surrender of her body to two men who ended up hurting her the most. Because she was branded as a virtue-less “gutter child” by her grandmother, she embarked on a self-fulfilling prophecy. She escaped the cruelty of her grandmother and Lotus by marrying Prince, who ended up using her them abandoning her in Atlanta. Her pride and shame kept her from returning to her hometown, the birthplace of her humiliation. Instead, she got a job helping a white doctor. She saw, but didn’t understand, that the doctor believed in the practice of eugenics, and proceeded to let him experiment on her body. Even had she not seen the Eugenics books and showed her lack of education, her willingness to surrender her body and trust that the doctor would have her best interest at heart was, though in a different way than Frank, difficult to justify. Her actions, at least, did not cause damage to anyone but herself, and it was easy to see why she’d acted that way. Cee was deeply influenced by the prejudice of her grandmother. She didn’t have a sense of ownership of her own body until Miss Ethel gave her the tools to acknowledge her newfound loss and discover other parts of her identity that could give her meaning and purpose after she lost the ability to have children. While her naivety served to distance Cee from readers a bit, her actions were not so unusual as to be off-putting, like Frank’s were (with the Korean girl). A great many women have found themselves in relationships that left them feeling used. So while that trait may distance some readers from Cee, it also endears others to her, who have felt pain similar to Cee’s. It is the similar for women who have lost a child or have discovered the inability to have children; Cee embodies loss that many women have faced and is recognizable to even those who have not personally experienced such loss.

Part B, prompt 2

My definition of “political” (when in the context of literature) is this: any deeper commentary beneath the surface of the narrative or, when the reader is made aware, a lack of meaning beneath the surface. An idea is objectively political if the author and reader both agree that it is; an idea is subjectively political whenever either side believes that it is.

Whether or not a text is political is a matter of perspective. Sometimes, like in the texts we have discussed in class (*Invisible Man, March*), the author writes the stories with a specific political message or works to illustrate a perspective in a society that relates closely with political topics. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison wrote a powerful narrative illustrating the complicated power and social dynamic between white and black people. In *March*, the story about the beginning of the Civil rights movement was framed by a scene in the future time period, on the inauguration day for President Obama, suggesting that the march had not yet ended (even as the first black person became president).

But what if someone read these works as a story, and nothing deeper? For that reader, the story isn’t political. Every book we have studied so far this semester has some sort of social commentary in the least—some sort of tie to politics or social commentary. The authors intended to put most, if not all, of that commentary into their stories. Does this make the books political? In my perspective, as a student, the works are undoubtedly political in nature, even if they aren’t necessarily telling people to *do* anything. But if someone read the book and didn’t think any deeper into the narrative, they might not see the relation to anything political. In this way, a work can be political to the author, but not a reader, and vice versa. A work that fit that description would be subjectively political—a matter of perspective. This perspective would only happen if the reader heard nothing about the work before reading it, though, because preconceptions about books will always shape a person’s understanding.

A work is political when the reader and the author both believe that it is. It doesn’t matter if the author and reader both have the same belief about what is being said in the work. If they understand something deeper than going “oh, what a nice story,” and apply it to something that has happened, is happening, or could happen, it’s political. If a work is labeled as political or is said to contain something political in it, and I hear about it before I read the work, I read the work under that presumption. A work is always going to be political if I *hear* that it is. If I were to disagree about it having a political message, I am then arguing against the people who believe that it does, and my position is political.

Being told that a work is political in some way before I read it drastically changes the way that I read it, often negatively. When I read for enjoyment, I don’t like reading to search for social commentary; social commentary stresses me out. But when I read for class, I find it fascinating to look at other perspectives and dissect the characters lives and experiences for a message or meaning—the stress is irrelevant when reading for class. The more “political” a book is, though, it seems to narrow the amount of “acceptable” interpretations of the narratives, which I don’t enjoy. Everyone has their unique perspectives, and a “political” label sometimes serves to narrow the ones that are heard.