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Intersectionality in American Literature

A majority of the literature read this semester has revolved around wars. These war stories are not only about the blood-soaked battlefields, but also the internal, external, and metaphorical wars. The theme of war is discouraging, yet is important to analyze for this paper because of its omnipresence throughout literature. American Literature often records conflict, sometimes even through the metaphor of war. This cycle of conflicts affects many sections of society, which we are able to read about. Some characters who fall into more than one section may find themselves fighting more than one war. This paper analyzes the intersectionality of these wars and events that shaped the ideas of America.

The books that will be analyzed throughout this paper are stories of different classifications of wars and battles that have shaped what our country is today. For example, “Battle Royal,” by Ralph Ellison, reflects how individuals who are higher on the totem pole, abuse those who are of lower classes. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, presents the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. *School Days of an Indian Girl*, by Zitkala-Sa, describes the war between the United States government and the Native Americans. This mental war is a look into how one society tries to indoctrinate their ideas on another. These are all wars that were fought and are still being fought today. It is important for pieces of literature like these to be analyzed so so that our society avoids repeating past mistakes.

One past mistake that is still being fought today is the Civil Rights Movement pertaining to racial inequality. The first chapter of Ellison's book *Invisible Man*, "Battle Royal", contains motifs of racial inequality in a white-dominated society. This war of classes is analogous to the events leading to and during the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a pivotal moment in the history of the the United States history, it is a battle still being fought today. This story focuses on an unnamed narrator and his internal and external war to find his place in a white dominated community. A critical moment in the narrator's life is the conversation with his grandfather on his deathbed. The grandfather says "our [black community's] life is a war" and implores his grandson to "Live with your head in the lion's mouth" (197). The grandfather wants the narrator to understand life is always a constant war for power, however there is a way to live and thrive in this white dominated community. This intersects the African American struggle for equality in society.

The narrator is seen as one of the smarter African Americans in his community. Because of this, he is invited to read a speech for some of the most important individuals in the white community. The environment is so much different than what he imagined. Once the narrator arrives, he is given an opportunity to participate in a battle royal. He is blindfolded and put into a ring with other black boys and encouraged to fight like animals for others enjoyment. After being degraded the narrator is bruised, beaten and bleeding. In spite of his condition, the white men implore him to give his speech. This shows how little the men think of the narrator and that the speech is more symbolic to them than actual entertainment. The narrator's speech is about the importance of education in a young black man's life. For this speech, he is awarded a scholarship to attend college. This symbolizes how African Americans endure hardships just to get ahead

life. The “Battle Royal” is ultimately about how the African American community struggles to survive then as it struggles to survive now.

Similarly to the African-American discrimination, women suffered constant discrimination throughout the history. The struggle of women in a patriarchal society is contextualized within Charlotte Perkins Gilman “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The story starts with the narrator, an unnamed woman, writing in her journal and the story is presented through her journal entries. Her husband, John, says she is sick and wishes to help her get better. Despite his wife’s plea against any more isolation, he insisted that it is best for her. This back and forth war between John and the narrator is throughout the story and shows parallels to how women were oppressed before they gain suffrage. John is a generalization of the men who opposed women's suffrage. His intentions are innocent while his actions are slightly hostile pertaining to his prescription of isolation. The narrator feels this hostility starting part way through the story that she is “getting a little afraid of John” (851). Another instance of hostility was John’s quasi-threat if the narrator does not “...pick up faster he shall send [the narrator] to Weir Mitchell in the fall” (848). This implies his frustration with the situation and the desire to just suppress the situation rather than actually fix it much like the opinion of the suffragists who were oppressed.

Oppression is most successful when those being oppressed believe that they need to be directed, similar to how some women thought they needed men to tell them how to think. John’s sister Jenny is a generalization of this and also intersects the internal war of the suffragists and the anti-suffragists among women in the early 20th century. She is subservient to John’s orders. Like John she is unable to relate to the narrator and enforces his prescription of isolation. The

narrator implies this when she expresses that she “...verily believe[s] [Jennie] thinks it is the writing which made me sick” (847). This idea of female independence is an idea that society still struggles to cope with. It still makes newspaper headlines whenever a woman comes into an office of political power or even comes close, for example it was a big part of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign.

In addition to the discrimination Gilman endured, Zitkala-Sa was both discriminated as a woman and as a Native American. *School Days of an Indian Girl* is a collection of stories from Zitkala-Sa’s life while attending a government school for indoctrinating Native Americans into the Euro-American culture. Zitkala-Sa’s stories contextualize the cultural war between the Native Americans and the United States government, which sought to strip the Native Americans of their culture and which they considered inferior and savage. To indoctrinate them into the ideas of The Union. Once Zitkala-Sa arrives at her new home, she is forced to strip herself of her culture. The culmination of this is when the school requires her to cut her hair; she then describes herself as “shingled like a coward’s”. This bespoke how Euro-American culture was forced on Native Americans without understanding. Zitkala-Sa explains “who were captured had their hair shingled” (1135), just like the way the land had been taken away from Native Americans by the U.S. government.

This is still a pressing issue today. Stripping people of their culture continues to be a major concern in the United States. The little girl makes no friendships and misses her mother very much. This parallels the isolation and longing the Native Americans experience when their homes were taken from them, such as the Native Americans that were forced west by the Indian Removal Act of 1830. As Zitkala-Sa grows older, she feels both disparaged from her Native

home that raised her and from the white community that educated her. The story is narrated by Zitkala-Sa herself so that the reader can see this experience through a her eyes. This allows the reader to see the cultures of white individuals as abnormal, letting them get a new perspective and judge their own culture. The collection of short stories gives a diverse of situations and examples that could be used in showing the intersections of Zitkala-Sa's personal experience and the cultural clash between the Native Americans and The United States' government.

The overlap of the three authors stories of oppression and war, whether that those wars be internal, external, or metaphorical is the intersectionality present through society. The intersectionality of these wars and events are what shaped the ideas of America. Individuals who find themselves falling into multiple sections are fighting more than one war. Modern day social wars are being fought. The oppression of women in a patriarchal society is still an issue still seen today. Though it has come a long way from the era of "The Yellow Wallpaper", women are still oppressed when it comes to issues like wages, male power, body image, sexual misconduct. In "Battle Royal" a young black male is trying to get ahead in a white dominated community. Even though the Civil Rights Movement helped many young black men and women get ahead, the black community still faces oppression in this white dominated country. Currently we still see the black community struggling with wealth, education, and criminal justice. Hate crimes are still happening and even on the rise today, as well as white supremacists ideas and opinions. *School Days of an Indian Girl* describes the war between the United States government and the Native Americans. This can still be seen today with the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. The development of these pipelines threaten the Native Americans sacred burial grounds, as well as

their water quality. These topics of social wars are important to surface and discuss so that our society avoids repeating past mistakes and move forward together.