Colin Quinn : Professor Levecq : LS 201 : Final Exam Essays

1. In the work called *Convent Thoughts,* by Charles Allston Collins from 1850, the piece depicts a very in-depth image of a nun standing in a garden holding what seems to be a bible and a white flower, surrounded by water and flowers. There is immense attention to detail, most specifically shown in the reflection in the water that matches perfectly to what this scene would actually look like, as well as the time spent on the face of the nun and the elegance of the flowers. Something so slight as the reflection in the water showing the insides of the folds in her gown truly shows that Collins has mastered the recreation of a still scene like this. The detail in the face also allows the viewer to understand the nun’s thoughts, as she seemingly reflects on the beauty of the flower she is holding. This detail shows that people are attempting to recreate reality with their art. With the camera being invented not long before this piece’s creation it is likely that the technology was not yet perfected, resulting in the reliance on the artists’ ability to capture what reality looks like.

In 1917 Marcel Duchamp created *Fountain.* This piece being nothing more than a horizontally laid urinal, is named after something so elegant as a fountain. This shows that artists are now beginning to not just depict reality through paint, but also criticize it in an almost satirical way. To say something that people use in the bathroom is art is balancing on its power to provoke thought and force the question of who actually defines what “art” is. This piece was created to make people wonder about what it means to be an artist in a primarily industrializing world. Almost seemingly poking fun at the priorities of America in its transition into the 1920’s and the culture changes that followed along with that sort of lifestyle. This sort of controversial art is something that has not gone away either and is usually the main outlet of ideas that go against an engrained societal norm.

Gilgamesh:

In *Gilgamesh* the topic of civilization is quite skewed. As Gilgamesh sends Shamhat to seduce Enkidu and bring him to the “civilized” town of Uruk, although Enkidu is civilized in his own world of the forest. The argument being made here is that two people can have different ideas of what being civilized is. In Gilgamesh’s sense of the word it is leaned more towards the physical realm of civilization in the beginning of the story. Gilgamesh focuses on the town, the buildings, and the palace as his idea of civilization and how being a part of those structures means that a person is civilized. Meanwhile Enkidu’s idea of civilization is more of the relational aspect of civilization. Enkidu’s focus before meeting Shamhat and being brought back to Uruk was that he was at peace with himself and with the animals he lived with, keeping good relations with all others and holding high moral values. As Gilgamesh and Enkidu become closer, Enkidu’s moral based definition of being civilized seemingly rubs off onto Gilgamesh as at the end of his journey alone, Gilgamesh has a realization that it is not just about physical world, but the people and relationships that are formed during life. To be civilized is to be able to act accordingly based on a situation, which when looking at it from the definition, it is to be socially developed and organized.

Siduri, the lady who runs the tavern is used as a helping hand during Gilgamesh’s search for immortality. She originally explains that this task is impossible and only Gods are immortal but after realizing how driven Gilgamesh is, she gives him the information needed to continue his journey. Her realization of his determination shows that she is civilized due to her empathy towards Gilgamesh’s struggles. In a time of need, she is willing to help him despite her own thoughts on his mission, because she knows that he needs all the help that he can get.

Boule de Suif:

In the tale of “Boule de Suif” by Maupassant, the topic of morality is portrayed in an interesting way. The tale of a prostitute amongst those who belong to the upper-class, where both parties attempt to take the metaphorical moral high ground, and in the end only one is left suffering. Morality is first shown when Boule de Suif offers her food to those of the classes above her simply because they had forgotten to pack any and are going hungry while she had packed extra. In her mind, this now puts them all at equal footing as she has now provided something that they did not previously have, and they are internally grateful for her sacrifice although they will not admit it due to judgement amongst their peers. The second and main instance of morality is at the German stop. This instance of Boule de Suif sticking up for herself not sleeping with the German general based on principal that not only is he German, but it is her line of work and it would be degrading to “work” for free. Boule de Suif is described as a French nationalist, in fact the only in the party, and to give her body to a German soldier would go against everything that she heavily believes in even though it would benefit the group. Eventually the group convinces her to sleep with the soldier and despite her helping the entire group, yet again they shun her for being “lesser” than them even though they are in debt to her. These upper-class members continue to think that they are better than her based solely on financial standing, even though her morals are far stronger than their finances.

Cornudet sees Boule de Suif’s situation as though it is not his fault that she had to sleep with the German. As she cries over this, he whistles and sometimes hums the Marseillaise to spite her actions, giving himself and the others the metaphorical moral high ground yet again. He is depicted as a man that does not care about others as long as he will be satisfied, which is also shown in the dinner scene as he demands his favorite beer.

Interpreter of Maladies/Other Stories:

Throughout the Lahiri stories, the main focus of the tales are that cross-cultural relationships are not as simple as people may think. These sorts of multicultural relationships take extra efforts that many people do not realize. For example, in the *Interpreter of Maladies* Mrs. Das is used as an example of someone who does not know what it takes to form a multicultural relationship mainly because she thinks that only her lifestyle is “normal”. She is less concerned about learning of the culture of India and is mainly focused on getting back to the hotel room. I feel as though the children are the highlight of this story however, they are intrigued by every little thing that differs from their own culture, varying from the monkeys that roam the area to the suggestion of visiting Udayagiri. Mr. and Mrs. Das simply shrug as though they do not care while the children excitedly chant to continue that way. They put the effort forward to learn more about the culture that they are surrounded by, embracing every minute detail that they notice, and asking questions when they have them. This is the sort of work that a multicultural relationship takes, to be inquisitive and be able to adapt to a style that may feel different. The same overarching topic is shown in *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,* in that Lilia’s family and Mr. Pirzada were slightly different, but were open about those differences in order to allow for a more understanding relationship.

The Mapparium is used to symbolize the differences between Dev and Miranda. Miranda wants to continually learn more about Dev’s culture while Dev is not interested in showing her. When they whisper across the room, Miranda is surprised that she can hear him so clearly and displays interest in learning more, to be essentially denied with a response of “you’re sexy”. Dev sees these adventures as something to do in between affairs, rather than an opportunity to teach her about his culture.

The Piano Lesson:

August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* is used to depict key aspects of black identity. This story does so by going into the content rich history of the family, namely the back story of how they have the grand piano in their family. The family’s struggles in day to day functions paint the importance of staying together throughout the hardships that they face, and although there are numerous disagreements it is critical that the family stays together. Black identity as displayed in this story is a sense of community, all working together toward the goal of true equality, the strive for establishing themselves in the workforce and management positions, and the sense of cultural awareness and understanding of their history. Wilson’s claims on black identity are that it is a very unified position to be in, as they mainly work toward the same goals all working together. Despite their past, they want to keep their culture intact, and move on to positions of more power amongst others in the communities.

Sutter’s ghost represents this menacing idea of racism in this time period. Sutter, the original owner of the piano also owned the family’s ancestors as slaves, and when it was traded for the family’s grandmother, they stole it back because it has family ties. When Sutter died, his ghost has haunted the piano since, depicting this constant awareness of the past, as well as the now legally outlawed but still overpowering theme of racism in the south. Sutter’s ghost is not able to be seen, yet they know that it is there. This is essentially how racism worked in this time was that it was technically illegal, but the law was so loosely enforced that discrimination was a daily occurrence. Sutter is used in this sense to show that although the presence of racism is still prevalent, it is more important to stick together as a family and as a community which will help them overcome these issues, just as they overcame Sutter’s ghost.