

## Close-reading practice for AFRAM midterm

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*Quicksand* by: Nella Larsen

Larsen's use of the word "sensation" in this excerpt (page 1126) sets up for the reader one of the text's main ideas. Helga Crane may have the sensation of possession, but she is denied true ownership—one may argue that this is because she herself is at the receiving end, as an object herself. Revealed along her quest for belonging, one can see that, as she jumps from location to location, belonging and possession are two ideals that torment Helga throughout *Quicksand*. Throughout the text, the reader can see that because of her mixed race (she is referred to as having skin like "yellow satin") and gender, Helga is displaced from society, objectified but apart from conformity and belonging. She makes it clear that conformity is not a priority of hers when she is living in Naxos, and one can further identify her torn identity when she is in the cabaret, listening to African music; here, Helga is unable to allow herself any belonging to a category, as she enjoys the music and appreciates it in a manner befitting her African roots, but she rejects it because of its supposed barbarism—a thrust towards whiteness, one could say. Helga's passion for the sense of "lavish contentment" that she feels after waking from her nap stems from this moment of belonging, not with the upper class, but with their possessions. From the start, Helga is objectified, and found only to be at ease when surrounded by objects—she does not answer her bedroom door when other teachers seek her company or intellect, and the room and its materials form her private paradise. In fact, when her room is described at the start of the story, Helga Crane was said to have been seated in her own personal oasis when surrounded by her objects. She is only able to gain lavish contentment when she is 'one of the crowd,' or one of the objects, so to speak. In essence, this makes the broader claim that African American women during the Harlem Renaissance period were subject not only to the struggles of formulating a racial identity, but to the struggles of creating a gender identity outside of sexual objectification—they belonged only when they accepted the sad realities of a woman's role as an object. Helga is a negative example of a woman's fate during this period; the text ends with her suffering as an object, producing children against her wellbeing. This "realization of a dream" that occurs to Helga in this excerpt alludes to her final consumption of her "place" in society as just another one of those "Things. Things. Things." **Points to Hit:**

- That she can't belong because she, herself, is an object
- Instances where she didn't belong: Naxos (refusal to conform), Denmark (she is more of a "show pony" than a human)
- That she is an object because of her a) mixed race, b) gender, and c) sexuality
- Mixed race example: skin like yellow satin, cabaret scene
- Gender: women were supposed to work in the home, and Helga was an educated woman who traveled
- Sexuality example: she is thought to be a prostitute simply b/c she was a black woman walking alone
- Helga is the adverse example of what women should be striving for during this period; they should be moving away from objectification rather than towards it

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*David Walker's Appeal* by: David Walker (234)

David Walker's appeal is built upon a rhetoric that fuels this jeremiad's power. It is modeled after the constitution, the starting words of which are "We the People." The significance behind this relationship is the power that the constitution has over the United States of America, and the subsequent power that Walker's appeal is attempting to gain as the voice of African Americans in the United States. The constitution established the core of the United States and motivated a movement towards freedom and democracy, just as Walker's appeal is working to establish the very same rights for African Americans. In a sense, Walker is the human form of the African American's theoretical constitution; a "truth-sayer" for his people, Walker is speaking on behalf of rising black ideologies. Later readers of this appeal are influenced with further rhetoric based upon this "truth," as a retrospective look to the text shows its prophetic nature. Walker admits to the enemies that this appeal will bring him, noting that it will lead to his death—in fact, it did. Walker was poisoned by one of the enemies to his words, and this unintentional rhetorical addition further solidifies his position as the voice of truth, no matter how unwanted by whites. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of this passage is its reference to the natural rights of humankind. This text, written during the enlightenment period, is based on John Locke's theory of natural rights. Locke believed that humans had certain rights that superseded those rights established by the laws of a political system. Not only is Walker supporting this enlightenment-era belief in the favor of the natural rights of African Americans, but he is also employing this reference as a rhetorical device. Enlightenment thinking had established that the ability to read and write was what set humans apart from animals; Walker, in demonstrating his ability to read and write (with skill, might I add), is declaring the humanity of African Americans. Referred to and treated by whites as barbarians and animals, African Americans were not given the decency of humane treatment; with the inclusion of natural rights in his text, Walker is revealing the hypocrisy of white America, as the very ideas that brought them to dominance was that which could be found in those who they had dominion over, asserting the equality of African Americans. In doing so, he hands yet another weapon over to the African American "side" in this racial battle. And, given the tone of Walker's text, one may clearly see Walker's words as a call to his African American brethren for battle—his words are commanding, empowering, and do well to slaughter the tyranny of white over black. As a matter of fact, one may see his footnotes as nothing less than a threat to whites, as Walker remarks that African Americans will not wait "until [their] enemies shall make preparations" but, rather, will rise to action before and against them.

**Points to Hit:**

- This appeal is a jeremiad: a long lamentation of the wrongs against blacks
- Its power is built upon its rhetorical qualities: similarity to the constitution, inclusion of natural rights, unintentionally rhetorical "prophetic" aspects
- Similarity to the constitution: in the same way that the constitution won freedom and democracy for *white* Americans, the appeal aims to do so for black Americans

**Points to hit:**

- Sentimentality is employed by Jacobs in order to cater to her female audience, i.e.: emotions involved with the suffering of a mother on behalf of her children, a mother forced apart from her children for many years
- Aspects of "the cult of true womanhood" are included so as to emphasize the African American woman's struggle as well as to reveal her helplessness in preventing acts of sexual violence against her
- Through "cult of true womanhood," white women see that black women aren't the enemy: the system of slavery is

*The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* by: Langston Hughes (1925)

The Harlem Renaissance was a period in which many black artists were separated into two sides: those who chose to capture the "core" of the African American with their art, and those who chose to use this period of development as an opportunity to alter the black image, moving towards the creation of, as Hughes puts it, a "smug Negro middle class." It's safe to say that Hughes fell into the former of these two categories and, looking to the language of this passage, one can see his stance on this monumental argument borne from the Harlem Renaissance. During this time, classes were shifting, new thinking was emerging, and black populations were merging together into closer quarters, giving life to music and art that was alive with the excitement of this era. And while some African Americans like Alain Locke believed that art should adapt to these changes, representing the newly emerging classes of blacks, it is clear that Hughes disagrees. His tone of praise and exaltation supports the common man, particularly where the passage opens with "there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised!" In noting that this group is the majority, Hughes makes it clear to his readers that he believes art should represent the majority. Furthermore, Hughes adopts a tone of derision and disgust when mentioning the "smug Negro middle class" that is unfolding in the United States. Where he notes what the common man is *not*, he is simultaneously drawing attention to what this new middle class *is*. Such qualities are far from positive; Hughes is calling this group self-righteous, spoiled, contrived, and unappreciative where he praises the other class, the group of common people, for being "not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round." He praises this group for being the ideal subject matter for black art, salutes them for their lack of fear when it comes to judgment, critics, and skeptics. Hughes is revealing the complications of the black aesthetic, how it is one that is not meant to mimic the beauty found in white culture. On the contrary, Hughes boasts on behalf of the common man for his acceptance of this unique beauty—in contrast, he is openly disgusted with the upper class, who he claims would "tell the artist what to do" rather than allow him or her to express the black aesthetic without question.

**Points to hit:**

- Hughes' tone when referring to the "common man," how it contrasts with his references to the middle class.

**-Natural rights: written during the enlightenment & using enlightenment ideas, Walker establishes the humanity of blacks and exposes the hypocrisy of white superiority; blacks can read & write and are therefore human, too, etc.**  
**-Unintentional prophecy: further rhetoric ensues after we label Walker as the "truth sayer" of his people. Retrospectively, later readers can use this as propaganda even further because of the prophetic nature of the text. Walker predicts his own death—empowers the persuasion of his argument.**

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by: Harriet Jacobs

The complications of sexuality and gender are revealed to readers by Harriet Jacobs in this exposé. In this particular passage, a close reading reveals the sentimentality employed by Jacobs in order to cater to her audience; during this time period, women were the sought-after audience for the sentimental novel, and Jacobs takes full advantage of her captivation of her female readers. Many of these readers would have been mothers themselves, and this selection is a prime example of "preaching to the choir," so to speak. Noting that "her heart was heavier than it had ever been before" refers to Jacobs' feelings of suffering on behalf of the suffering that she knows her daughter will face. No mother wants their child to suffer, and Jacobs plays with the heartstrings of her readers in order to both strengthen her argument and gain support from the affluent white women within her audience. Furthermore, Jacobs' inclusion of the ideals of the "cult of true womanhood" additionally emphasizes the struggle of African American women. Not only does Jacobs include sufferings felt by womankind as a whole, as a result of the system of slavery, but she also draws attentions to the particularly horrific life of an African American woman within this system. Within the cult of true womanhood, a woman is said to have domain over the house and its domestic details. Jacobs shows how this confinement prevents white women from stopping the immoral conduct between their husbands and slave women, and also allows these readers insight to the other end of the spectrum; because of this confinement, slave women were unable to escape their masters' unwanted sexual advances. Where slave women may have once been the enemies of white women (and their hopes for a healthy relationship with their slave-owning husbands), Jacobs reveals the inescapability of the African American woman's situation. This is exemplified outside the passage where Flint built a home for Jacobs on his property. In this home, he sexually molested and assaulted her, and because Jacobs' role was within the home, she was unable to escape his unwelcomed advances. And though this role within the home is a meager one, Jacobs was denied even this with her lover of choice, Mr. Sands. Prevented from having any form of dominion whatsoever, Jacobs once again succeeds in highlighting the helplessness of the African American woman's situation through the sentimentality of her writing. She reveals that additional struggles of sexuality underlie struggles of race, and the engagement of her audience's emotions was an effective method in conveying so. Through this, she was able to reach into the hearts of her readers for the support of the even larger problems of racism: the explicitly sexual labeling of African American women that causes such exploitive practices against them.

the wife of his youth — Chesnut

→ a criticism of the emerging black middle class, ~~noting~~ showing how you cannot abandon your past, that devotion to one's core is what is right for the fate of Blacks in America

the city of refuge — Fisher

→ a warning to black readers who ~~are~~ are in the great migration → racism isn't over. Also a social commentary on interracial ~~as~~ relationships in Harlem. Again, referring to racism

- The historical context behind his dislike for the newly emerging "smug Negro middle class"—misrepresents black culture in America, as it is only a small group**
- The compare/contrast of the emerging middle class and the common man, how it shows that the common man is a better subject for art**
- The common man defines the black aesthetic—beautiful in the way that history formed them, not like the middle class rejecting their beauty in the direction of whiteness**
- How art should revolve around the majority and cultivate this black aesthetic in the direction of the common man, so it is both attainable and true**