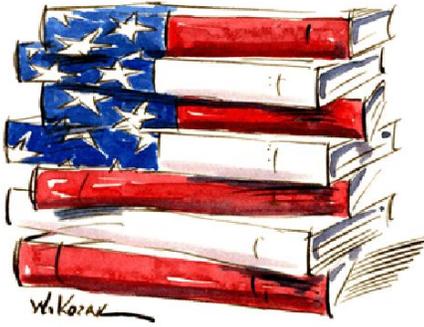


The American Experience



Summer Reading Assignment for US History and American Literature

The American experience is one which is often captured upon the pages of various texts. Whether it is through the eyes of a fictional character or through the life journey of a subject of a biography, because of its uniqueness and hybridity, the American identity is worthy of close analysis and assessment. The texts below provide a glimpse into such experiences.

Left for Dead/Pete Nelson
All Souls: A Family from Southie /Michael Patrick MacDonald
The Help/Kathryn Stockett
A Streetcar Named Desire/Tennessee Williams

For this assignment, you will choose passages which provide insight into the American identity. Because both US History and American Literature courses will examine, from a historical and literary lens, how the American identity was formed and transformed throughout time, you will analyze one of the texts while focusing on the essential question:

How does the character/subject in the text embody the American identity and function in a larger social/political/cultural context?

While reading, choose four (4) passages that describe the character's/subject's American experience. In a double entry journal format, identify passages that reveal TWO (2) personal and TWO (2) social/political/cultural American experiences that the character/subject has. Be sure that the passages you choose span the breadth of the entire text.

Consider the elements below as you approach the passage analysis:

Provide the context of the quote

- What is the quote about?
- What role does the passage play in the text at this point?
- To whom is the passage spoken?
- What circumstances or context compel the speaker of the passage to make that observation/comment?

Analyze the quote

- How does this passage exemplify either a personal or a larger social/political/cultural American experience?
- What does the language of the passage unveil to the reader about the feelings of the speaker of the passage?

Make a personal OR global connection to the quote (you do not have to address all the questions below)

- How does this quote reflect something about you?
- What does the quote reveal about humanity in general?
- How does this quote illuminate something about our society?

EXAMPLE:

Personal American Experience

“I knew that once I put it on I’d look like a movie star [...] I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right in the world” (Angelou 2).

Context: Marguerite is describing the lavender taffeta Easter dress her momma had made for her. She want to look like a white girl because whiteness sets the standard of beauty for the 1930s American culture. This time period is long before the “black is beautiful” era of the 1960s. There is nothing beautiful in Marguerite’s eyes about being black, especially in Stamps, Arkansas. Marguerite’s recognition of her place in the world establishes her understanding of herself, setting the stage for her inner turmoil as well as her eventual triumph.

Analysis: The experience highlights an internal conflict which was common for black Americans considering the the cultural milieu of the 1930s south. Like many black Americans, Marguerite too feels disenfranchised and at the fringes of her society. Her reflection upon herself creates a largely negative view which is why Marguerite feels that with this dress, she will be transformed - like donning another persona, she will don this Easter dress to “look like” someone right out of a “dream.” The dress, thus, becomes a symbol of all that is “right with this world” and all that Marguerite desires to be and feels she can become with this small alteration. Marguerite, contrary to her desires and wishes, finds herself to be bitter as opposed to “sweet,” black as opposed to “white,” and wrong as opposed to “right.”

Global Connection: I do not think accepting ourselves for who we are really happens until we are older. Some people never evolve into loving themselves for who they are, warts and all. Being a young black girl in the south at this time period would provide a double challenge - accepting oneself which is something difficult for a young person to do and then having black skin which is not the color of power in a white 1930s American society. The turmoil Marguerite experiences, is likely common for many black American women during the decade.