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Final Paper

Reflection on Cultural Relevance of American literature

**Prompt:**

A number of the works we've read reflect certain cultural codes about the time they were written. Think, in other words, about how our stories/poems reveal their context through the work itself (what does "The Yellow Wallpaper," for instance, have to say about how women were treated?). In an essay, show how one or more stories illuminate aspects of culture. Make sure you make a claim in your thesis that draws the stories together if you chose to use more than one.

**Response:**

The truest form of any culture is language and literature. Literature allows us to view ourselves, and our society, through the perspective lens of many different cultures. In America culture is extremely complex. Our American culture isn't just defined by the pilgrims that founded our colonies. It has evolved through the contributions of the many immigrant migrations that developed the very foundations on which we exist. This existence cannot be defined by any individual experience and the cannon of American literature hardly shows us the complexity of the sociological condition of American

cultures. Class, Gender, and Race would create social constructs that would dictate the conditions of the quality of life and opportunity for every individual experience that contributed to American society.

The cultural differences between classes in society have caused oppression and racism that lead to divisions in our society. Toni Morrison illustrates this point through the perspective of a lower class white woman, Twyla, in his story *Recitatif*. The problem with class is that it is often overlooked in the scope of oppression. When matters of race, gender, and equality are brought into question the difference in class is left out of the conversation. In the case of Twyla and Roberta in *Recitatif*, the issue of racial discrimination trumps the class discrimination. The idea of racial differences doesn't exist when you live in poverty because everyone is equally deprived. "But I didn't know. I thought it was just the opposite. Busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson's together. They roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protestors" (Morrison, 618). Race and culture clash less in lower class than they do in upper class. Roberta was from the upper class. Roberta and see's the glass ceiling and so she fights for those rights, however, she fails to sympathize with Twyla, whom for all intents and purposes, probably feels more like a black person than upper class Roberta. This is one of the major obstacles that divide us in our society. The inability to relate the similarities in our struggles leads us to oppress and belittle each other which further divides the many cultures in America.

Throughout *Racitatif* there is this idea that is referred to in memory by our two characters. The two girls, Twyla and Roberta, reminisce about a childhood friend they had named Maggie. "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (Morrison, 623). Maggie often

got picked on as a child and the two girls had different feelings about the situation, however, neither girl could remember her race. Both girls only remembered the girls struggle. Both girls associated the race of the girl with their own race. Twyla saw her as White and Roberta saw her as black. They have become so concerned with their own plight that they have changed the stories of their lives in order to better suit the views and opinions of their social groups. These girls suffered similar oppressions, Roberta suffered the oppressions of being black, Twyla suffered the oppressions of poverty, but because the difference in class was so overlooked by society neither of them could see past their race to realize that their struggle was very similar. This reflects the attitudes of society in the 1960's and these differences still prevail today.

Class can also dictate the standards by which we employ gender binaries. In *The Awakening*, by Kate Chopin, she illustrates the cultural and social constructs of the 1900's involving expected gender roles. *The Awakening* follows the story of Mrs. Pontellier as she deals with the strain of gender expectations of Mississippi in the 1900's. The middle and upper class ideal of what was considered womanly or gentlemen-like was prevalent and acting in an appropriated manor was expected in society.

The expectations of a woman were defined by the upper class society by which they lived in. For women of Mrs. Pontellier's class and era the ideal woman was a good homemaker and a stay at home wife. "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-woman seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as

individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin, 567). This social construct that was created for women of this era did not work for Mrs. Pontellier. Even with wealth and financial security Mrs. Pontellier found herself oppressed intellectually and emotionally. The social construct of the upper class housewife was dictating how she should act. It was telling her how to think.

In the end these expectations didn't work for her and they ended up breaking her down mentally and emotionally, but through this struggle she realizes her true self. Mrs. Pontellier realizes that wealth and status could not make her happy if she could not also live the life she wanted. "I would give up the unessential, I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing it self to me" (Chopin, 598). This is what Kate Chopin might call the awakening of Mrs. Pontellier and this also reflects the "awakening" of the women of her era. Mrs. Pontellier realizes that the expectations of society were restricting her ability to live the life she wanted to live. Once again class casts a fog over the true problem that is eating away at the women of this society. It can often be hard to realize that someone might want something more than wealth and money. Because Mrs. Pontellier was a member of the upper class it is hard for some to sympathize with her. Wealth and status is the "American Dream" and Mrs. Pontellier and her family had achieved that dream but they never achieved their own dreams. Mrs. Pontellier found herself a shell of the person she wished she could be. Society often forces us into standards that can be either unrealistic to our situation or unnatural to our character. For upper-class women of the 1900's their lives were highly controlled and highly scrutinized.

One prolific writer from the American canon that allows us to see the hypocrisies of class and the impact of different cultures in our society is Mark Twain. Mark Twain cast light on the political and sociological atmosphere of the 1900's. Just prior to the civil war America would be highly divided by race and class. The developing cultures of society would clash over political belief systems and social constructs. The difference between the ideals of Tom Sawyer and the Ideals of Huckleberry Finn illustrates the difference in the mindset of the upper and lower classes. "Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on,--s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad--I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and aint no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that" (Twain, 186). This shows the cultural attitude of the southern states of America during the 1900's. To the white land owners and farmers black people were just tools and were not people. For Huckleberry Finn to not give up Jim would be breaking the law but to give him up would be against his morals. Society would dictate that Jim was property that was owned and should be returned to its owner. To deprive Mrs. Watson of her valuable property was a great offense in society; however, Huckleberry Finn sympathized with Jim as a human being. In the end their shared experience was similar. Jim's experience as a slave was far worse for sure, however, Huckleberry being from poverty, and being told everything about him was worthless, could easily relate to the plight of a slave. This would lead him to realize the hypocrisies of his era.

At first it wouldn't seem like the 2 classes of society held these different views as

our representation of the upper class, Tom Sawyer, seems to be holding the same value on Jim's life as Huckleberry Finn does. We eventually get to see that this is not true and that the character and expectations of Tom Sawyer never really changed. His values remained the same throughout this story and it is only because society allowed him to value Jim that he did. "Tom Sawyer had gone and took all that trouble and bother to set a free nigger free! and I couldn't ever understand, before, until that minute and that talk, how he could help a body set a nigger free, with his bringing-up" (Twain, 308).

Huckleberry realizes that aside from the difference in race a drastic difference in class existed in society. The core of their beliefs and views were drastically different and all of this based on the situations in which they were socialized. Tom Sawyer would never set a slave free. Tom Sawyer was a representation of the upper class standards and would never act outside of what the law dictated. It is only because Jim is free that he chooses to help Huck. This tells us a lot about the social climate and cultural beliefs of the time. Aside from the obvious difference in beliefs and culture of the different races in America Twain shows us that the beliefs and culture of the classes was drastically different.

The essence of this literature illuminates the evolution of society, and culture, as we know it today. The struggle to claim one's culture and to overcome oppression is woven into the intricate fabric that is the American culture. From slavery to classism and gender binaries the suffrage of the many different cultures of the American society has in every way shaped the foundation of the cultural beliefs we have today. These stories individually give us insight into the cultural and sociological atmosphere of their eras and also allow us to better understand the foundations in which our beliefs and culture were created.

Works Cited

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