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Comment on Five Novels

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Fine Novels

HONORS SPECIAL STUDIES

SPECIAL STUDIES IN ENGLISH

H-491

Mrs. Martha Black

Instructor

SPRING 1967

by
Rich Terry

Honors Paper # 53

The purpose of this special studies has been to help fill gaps in my reading of outstanding novels. I felt that I needed to read some novels that most students of English are expected to read. Although I'm not an English student, I realize my shortcomings in the reading of some of the Classics.

In this special studies (H-491), I was required to read five novels from a selected reading list and write an analysis of each one. I chose to read the following books for one hour of credit: BLACK LIKE ME by John Griffin, INTRUDER IN THE DUST by William Faulkner, SISTER CARRIE by Theodore Dreiser, LES MISERABLES by Victor Hugo (counted for two books because of its length).

Rich Terry

May 25, 1967

BLACK LIKE ME

The author of BLACK LIKE ME is John Howard Griffin. Griffin is a novelist and lived in Mansfield, Texas with his wife and three children until the situation created by the open criticism^{of} this book. forced him to move his family out of possible danger. BLACK LIKE ME won the 1962 Saturday Review Anisfield-Wolf Award.

The story is of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men for reasons neither really understands. It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and detested.

The main character is the author himself, who undergoes each incident that is mentioned in his book. The people he mentions are important only to the situation in which Griffin places them in. Some names are left out for the obvious reason of protecting these people from possible harm.

Griffin presents his material as facts. He writes much like a diary is written, in that he relates happenings from day to day. From time to time, he interjects his own views on a particular phase of his experiment, but is careful to present the real story as truthfully as he possibly can.

The theme of the book is man's injustice against other men of different races and color. The conflict is man against man in the struggle for existence in a world in which men do not look on their fellow man as equal benefactors in God's world. Griffin strives to present the conflict in such a way that the readers may see their shortcomings in their treatment of their fellow man.

The time is 1959 from November 6 to December 14. John Griffin traveled to the larger cities of the deep South. The story begins in New Orleans and ends in Mansfield. Griffin visited towns in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

John Griffin decided that it was time that someone write the true story of the Southern treatment of the negro. To do this search for the truth, Griffin underwent an experiment of several weeks duration, in which he gained first hand information into the life of a Southern negro. He gained this insight by becoming one of them. He darkened his skin by various medications and slipped from one society into another one by simply changing the color of his skin. He literally put himself into the shoes of a negro and found out what it was like to be looked down on by so called "first class citizens."

He found it hard to believe that he was actually the same man with only different colored skin. Overnight he was cast into a society that is kicked around by virtually everyone.

This story is not new. Mistreatment of the negroes has been here since the late 1600's when the first slaves were brought over to work the land. The white man has brought the problem on himself and now it is up to him to solve it.

This book can be of great value to the open minded person who is willing to think and not take everything he has been taught as factual truth. Sometimes it takes the courage of one man, such as Griffin, to wake one up to reality.

INTRUDER IN THE DUST

William Faulkner is one of America's most distinguished authors-- a Nobel Prize winner, Pulitzer Prize winner, and National Book Award winner. He was born in New Albany, Mississippi and spent most of his life around Oxford, Mississippi.

Characters:

Lucas Beauchamp was the old negro man accused of the murder of Vinson Gowrie, a white man. The people hated Lucas because he refused to act like a common negro. He had some white blood in him and wouldn't let go of this fact. He had much pride and more durability.

Chick Morrison was the young boy who had come to know Lucas four years earlier, when he fell into a frozen creek and was fished out by the old negro man. This event led to a binding friendship, although Chick never could resolve himself to the fact that Lucas had gotten the better of him. Chick was responsible for uncovering the grave which led to the proving of Lucas' innocence.

Hope Hampton was the town sheriff and was influential in seeing that Lucas got a fair trial and was subjected to no harm by the lynch-hungry mob.

Miss Habersham was a spinster of seventy who joined in with Chick and Alex Sander to help uncover the grave and eventually help Lucas to go free.

Alex Sander was a young colored boy and Chick's friend. He overcame his inherited fear of graveyards and helped Chick dig up the grave of the murdered man.

Gavin Stevens was Chick's uncle and a lawyer who attempted to help Lucas. He was determined to see justice done and saw to it that no harm came to Lucas while he was in jail.

Crawford Gowrie was the murderer who threw the blame on old Lucas.

Faulkner uses his own little Southern town and produces a situation in which he can get his point across to his readers.

An old negro man, Lucas Beauchamp, was accused of murdering a white man, Vinson Gowrie. The evidence was all against him. He was found standing over the dead body with a gun in his back pocket that had been fired once. The town was immediately aroused to the point of mob violence. No one thought to check the body to see what calibre bullet had killed Vinson. Lucas knew he hadn't murdered him, so he asked a young boy, Chick, to go and dig up Vinson's grave and show the law that Lucas' pistol hadn't done the shooting.

Chick received help from his colored friend, Aleck Sander, and an old spinster, Miss Habersham, and dug up the grave, only to find someone else (Jake Montgomery, who knew that Crawford had killed his brother Vinson. He had dug up Vinson, only to be killed by Crawford while digging the grave);

Vinson and Crawford had been partners in a lumber enterprise and Crawford had been stealing from him in secrecy. Lucas discovered the wrong and Crawford tried to get him out of the picture by making it look as if the old negro killed Vinson. Crawford was later brought to justice and committed suicide rather than face his family.

Faulkner weaves, in and out of the story, the problem of race relations in the South. Lucas had white blood in his veins and wasn't about to act like a "nigger." The people hated him for this fact and wanted his neck when they found out that he had killed a white man.

Faulkner says that the fundamental tragedy in the relations between the whites and the negroes is the difference in values. Neither group well understands the values of the other and conflicts sometimes vaulting into grim tragedy are inevitable.

Faulkner indicates in Lucas that patience, kindness, and durability of the negro are the qualities that the whites have lost and now badly need.

Faulkner believed wholeheartedly in the South and felt very warmly toward it. He knew there was a problem of race relations and recognized the problem for one that could be solved, but solved by the Southern people themselves. His desire was to help the people of the South to see their situation and strive to better it. Faulkner wanted this betterment to come from the South and not from the Northern "carpet baggers." He felt that the Southerners could, if given a chance, work their problem out to the satisfaction of everybody.

INTRUDER IN THE DUST is a masterpiece which should cause each person, not just Southerners, to search his heart and seek to rid it of any prejudice which might be there.

SISTER CARRIE

Theodore Dreiser, born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1871, received his early education in the public schools of the state. He attended Indiana University briefly before embarking on the journalistic career which would also provide the springboard for his fiction. Dreiser was born and brought up in an atmosphere of poverty, rootlessness and religious dogmatism. He knew what it meant to live on the "wrong side of the tracks," to hunger for material success and pleasure, and to resent the idealistic religiosity of a father who was an economic failure. Much of Dreiser's fiction is peopled with figures from his family as well as filled with remembered past happenings.

CHARACTERS:

Sister Carrie (Caroline Meeber) is, first of all, "sister", a term which suggests both her ignorance and her innocence. She was a girl of eighteen who left home to go to the big city and seek her fortune. She learns early in her stay in Chicago that pleasure comes from money. She constantly strives for material gains and seeks to find happiness in her striving. She learns much about being a woman from her relationships with both Drouet and Hurstwood.

Drouet, a representative of a class which was arising in this period because of the giant expansion of industry, is a "drummer" or, to us, a traveling salesman. Also, he is a "masher." He is seen as somewhat vain and superficial and it is this egotism which prevents him from being sensitive enough to the changing Carrie, for he believes that her early brooding and depression spring from her loneliness for him.

He is ready with a genuine offer of help to Carrie or with a dime for a bum on the streets, which shows him as a good-hearted, spontaneous person.

Hurstwood , when we first meet him in Chicago, is very much a part of his state of physical comfort, solid respectability, professional success, and social interchange with the great and near-great. The early Hurstwood is secure, shrewd, and cautious. But when chance begins to take over his fate, the downward slope begins. Faced with his cold and selfish wife, her disinterest, and their grasping children, he meets Carrie and falls into the "tragedy of affection" --especially the tragedy rekindled in middle age. Hurstwood's life from then on was a series of downfalls which eventually led to his suicide.

Mr. Ames is the intellectual in the novel and is outside the propelling forces of materialism in the novel. Apparently Dreiser was working out through Ames his own ideas on art and beauty.

Mrs. Hurstwood was the type of woman who wanted to climb socially, no matter what it cost. She let her selfishness turn to hate for her husband and literally drove him out of the house.

The Hansons are at the lower levels in their climb upward. Carrie's brother-in-law's way up is obviously to save. His ambition was to some day build a house on two lots he was buying on the west side of town. His way will be one of drudgery and self-denial, without pleasure or much happiness.

Environment is the all-determining factor in the story. The deficiencies of Carrie's environment, stage by stage, caused her to wish for and to seek what she had not. Her childhood home was drab and unpromising; she then found her married sister's plodding resigned existence grim; her dream of success in the Chicago job was soon shattered by the realities of crude, debilitating working conditions. Hurstwood was likewise preconditioned for his fate by his glamorous but materially limited managerial position, and by the home atmosphere perpetuated by his selfish wife and two spoiled children. Environment is at the back of each character, pushing him compulsively toward more money, more pleasure, more success. Dreiser's belief was that men are divided into the strong and the weak instead of the good and the bad, and that it is far more common for men to drift in the wind of determinism than to exercise their free will.

Money and what it can buy motivates every character in the novel, with the exception of Mr. Ames. For Carrie, as for all the others, money becomes a magnet, drawing her into the paths which promise pleasure, success, and happiness. Although gold had always been a god to Hurstwood, symbolizing comfort and luxury to which he had become accustomed, he found after his Chicago fiasco (in which he stole ten thousand dollars from his partners and took Carrie to Montreal with him) that he is too old, too tired, and too scared to begin the struggle for it again.

Dreiser is skillful in his use of descriptive detail in order to depict social conditions of the 1900's. He can sigh

over and deplore humanity but he cannot take it upon himself to convict and punish. His philosophy is that man is a wisp in the wind, a waif of nature, and that the world is without sufficient reason or meaning to us. Man is in a stage of development where he is buffeted between the two forces, never wholly governed by one or the other--either instinct or reason.

Dreiser writes about the 1900's in his novel Sister Carrie. Most of the action takes place in the two metropolises of Chicago and New York. This novel tended to disturb its readers because it left with them the fact that true happiness is not found in material success. It is full of misfortune and misery which came to one of the characters because he centered his life around material possessions. Dreiser, both skeptically and humanistically, predicts the inexplicability of Carrie's reaching the top, materialistically speaking, only to find herself bereft of real contentment, left at the end to rock and wonder about her own humanity.

LES MISÉRABLES

VICTOR-MARIE HUGO was born in 1802, and at the age of thirty had already a recognized mastery of the arts of poetry, drama and fiction. A political figure as well, he was banished to the Channel Island of Guernsey for opposing Louis Napoleon's coup of 1851. During his twenty-year exile he wrote a number of novels, the most notable being *Les Misérables*, published in 1862. After his death in Paris in 1885 he lay in state beneath the Arc de Triomphe and was buried in the Pantheon among France's greatest men.

Characters:

The Bishop was the first decent man that Jean Valjean came into contact with after his release from the galleys. When no one would have anything to do with him, the Bishop let him see that there was some good in the world.

Jean Valjean was the main character of the story. Everything centers around his fight to recover his dignity after serving nineteen years in the galleys. Jean learns that only by giving himself to others can real peace and satisfaction come into a man's life.

Javert was the police inspector who hounded Jean wherever he went. Jean Valjean was overly good to him and rather than face defeat at the hands of a convict, Javert killed himself.

Cosette was the beautiful young daughter of Fantine (a young mother who Jean Valjean in his role as M. Madeleine had promised to look after her young daughter--Cosette). Cosette was probably the big reason why Jean Valjean was able to keep love in his life when some people were trying to imprison him.

Marius was the lawyer son of Baron Pontmercy, a hero of Waterloo. Marius fell madly in love with Cosette and eventually married her. Without the help of Jean Valjean, Marius wouldn't have lived to see his bride.

Thenardier was an old war hero who had saved Baron Pontmercy's life. He and his wife had kept Cosette while she was young. Knowing Urbain Fabre to be Jean Valjean, Thenardier tried to blackmail Marius and was sent to the Americas with some money, in order for him to be quiet.

Les Miserables, Hugo's best and most famous novel, is essentially the story of Jean Valjean and those who profoundly influenced him. The novel opens on Jean just after he has been released from the galleys, to which he had been sent nineteen years before for trying to steal a loaf of bread to feed his sister and her starving children. His yellow passport, signifying him as an ex-convict, closes all doors to him except that of the Bishop of D_____ who, by his Christian charity and faith in Jean's best nature, starts him on a new career as a good man. As M. Madeleine, Jean becomes a thriving manufacturer and mayor of M____sur M____, though he is under the suspicion of a tenacious police inspector, Javert. Jean's public career ends suddenly when he is forced by conscience to expose himself to prevent the conviction of an innocent man for a crime which Jean had committed.

After escaping from the galleys, Jean goes to Paris. In a succession of houses and under a number of assumed names, Jean brings up a little girl, Cosette, in fulfilment of his promise to her dying mother, Fantine. In Paris Jean is again

hounded by Javert, whom he once eludes after a thrilling man-hunt, another time after an ambush. Meanwhile, Cosette becomes a beautiful young lady wooed secretly by the youthful idealist, Marius. Faced with the loss of the one person he loves, Jean nevertheless rescues the gravely-wounded Marius from a revolutionary barricade, carries him to safety through the terrifying sewers of Paris, and insures his marriage to Cosette. Not until he is on his deathbed does Jean Valjean feel the unrestrained love of Cosette and Marius and release from his painful past.

This novel is much more than a sensational adventure story about a man who triumphs over the evil in himself and in others. It is a great humanitarian novel which shows how a man can be redeemed by accepting suffering, by doing the duty his conscience directs him to, by sacrificing himself lovingly.

It is a novel about a real, recognizable world, the France of the post-Napoleonic age. It accurately reflects the inhumane treatment of convicts and ex-convicts, the violent political upheavals of the times, the character of Paris. A century after its triumphant publication *Les Misérables* may not take us by storm, but it can hardly fail to move us with its convincing characterizations, its vivid presentation of nineteenth-century problems, beliefs and events, its animating human sympathy, its moving treatment of the struggle for existence and the supernatural power of love. It is a beautiful story in which there emerges the moving, heroic life of a simple and good man.

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