

Week 13 Reading Questions: Race/Class Struggle in America

Douglass, “What to the Slave IS the Fourth of July?” (778-782)

Note the date of Douglass’s speech (ten years before the Civil War): How do his concerns at this moment echo later concerns in the 20th Century?

778/779 – Note how Douglass gets going: look at the rhetorical strategies he uses (questions, bringing in national sources, division) to set up his argument. He uses several oratorical tricks to get his audience going.

780/781 – How is his argument on these pages not an argument? In a nation that “never looked blacker to [him] than this Fourth of July,” how does he work out his ideas?

781 – What is the purpose of this speech? What is he trying to get out of people?

781/782 – What do his final comparisons work to achieve?

Faulkner, “Barn Burning” (1852)

Your textbook claims that Faulkner is concerned with “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.” Of all the readings for this week, this story most relates to the last few weeks. What is the conflict of the individual? What happens when the confrontation strikes? How important is family identity?

1852 – Read the first sentence and the first paragraph carefully – how much do we learn about “the boy’s” situation from this paragraph? Much like the last few weeks, we are back in family drama and influence here – how does Faulkner show this? What does “Colonel Sartoris Snopes” look like?

1853 – What is the trial about? What would you fill in for “something unprintable and vile, addressed to no one”?

1854 – What do we learn about Abner Snopes on this page? In the long middle paragraph about the quality of his fires, how much history and perspective is given to us?

1855 – Back to family drama, how important is a person’s “blood” in this story? What evidence does Faulkner give to back up this depressing and creepy claim?

1855-1857 – How do Sartoris and his father’s views conflict on seeing the house? What does his father do? Why? How important are race and class to a poor, white, southern man? Speaking of white, is it significant that the house is full of white things?

1858-1859 – How do things play out with the family? How does Sartoris get himself into trouble?

1860-1861 – What are they doing hanging around all day? Who starts the second trial? What else do we learn about blood and truth in this world?

1862-1863 – What is the situation at the end of the story? What does Sartoris do? Where does he end up?

Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (1971)

This short story will be the most difficult reading this week, though only because it is packed with prose. Nothing in the story seems too difficult, but together this work highlights so many themes and issues. Let’s see where it takes us:

1971 – Read the introduction paragraph twice – note how these few short sentences set the tone for our narrator, for the plot, and for the confusion that individuals will face here

1972 – How does the revelation about his brother (that ice in the guts) blend into an awareness of his surroundings here? What are the two darkneses? How do the children reflect to the narrator his own past (and present)?

1973-1975 – How many emotions does our narrator go through when talking to his brother’s old friend, who looks at him “partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child” (1973)? What feelings, observations, and decisions does he make through the course of their conversation?

1975 – What impression of Sonny do we, as readers, gain through the inclusion of his letter?

1976-1977 – How important is the brothers’ trip down memory lane? What feelings emerge on seeing the environment they grew up in?

1977-1978 – How important is the theme of safety/security in this story? What events or thoughts trigger this theme in these pages? Can the theme of safety ever be removed from the theme of suffering?

1979-1980 – How does his conversation he has with his mother and the revelations she shares with him bring us right back to the family drama of *The Book of Daniel*? How does the treatment of racial tension in this section play out – in other words, how much of racism is about the stupid decisions of one moment and their aftereffects? What other secret about his father does the narrator learn on 1980?

1980-1982 – How does the conversation of the brothers as young men show the problems they will always have? Why are they so at odds? Does the seven year distance between them matter as much as a difference in disposition?

1983-1984 – What side-story about Sonny are we given here? What does it tell us about his character, about his past, and about his passion?

1985 – Why do you think we get the story of our narrator’s daughter who died here? How does this terrible event help connect to two brothers?

1986-1988 – What affect does the singing in the street have on Sonny? Why is it so difficult for him to explain to his brother about his past addiction?

1988-1989 – The conversation between the brothers shifts into a conversation about suffering. Pay special attention to the long paragraph on 1989, which is probably the most complex and important in the story.

1990-1992 – I won’t ask specific questions from this section, but pay attention to how ideas, themes, images, and feelings from the story all come together here, when we enter Sonny’s world. How does the title make sense in the end?

Sanchez, “the final solution/” (2020)

Usually, this experimental poem would be scary, but after the last few weeks, I’m sure you can handle it. Don’t let the strange punctuation throw you off – pay attention to how you see the words (visually) and the sounds that the divided words make.

2020 – What are the connotations of the title? In other words, what was the most famous “final solution” in the 20th Century?

This poem’s message is clear, political, and angry. Who gets mocked? What is the problem with a simple (or horrible) solution? What does it ignore?

Ortiz, “Final Solution: Jobs, Leaving” (2286)

Reading the biographical information helps here, as it explains Ortiz as a Native American writer. As you read this poem, pay attention to shifts in point-of-view, in how he tries to make us feel the distances, and in the simple language he uses throughout the poem.

Much like the confessional poets, we have the family dynamic, but pay attention here to a narrator who goes beyond the position of personal pain to seek group strength.