

Final Project II:

What can we learn from literature? We know history recites the story of people who occupied the world before us. At the same time, literature can help us comprehend the worldviews and minds of those who lived long ago. New Historicism encourages readers to consider the historical components within the story, when it was written, and the history of the writer. New Historicism “deals with the ‘textuality of history and the historicity of texts,’”(Mambrol).

In "The Good Lord Bird," James McBride wrote a story that retold events from a fictional perspective that ignited the Civil War. With McBride being born in 1957, he was not born in the era that his book took place. However, James McBride was born and raised in a poor African American household during a pivotal moment in American history known as the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, McBride has witnessed firsthand the effect of racism on a society.

There was an innocence to that period. And the reason why I use that word was because when white people talk about the '60s and the Beatles, they always talk about the innocence as if innocence didn't exist in black America. But you could walk down the street in Brooklyn and go
see Sonny Stitt for free (NPR).

Even though his life's experiences didn't take place during the Civil War, things that happened long after the war led to the circumstances that made way for the experiences McBride would have in his life. It was all this that led to him wanting to learn more about the history of black Americans.

The events leading up to and during the Civil War were like stumbling blocks that split families and pit brother against brother for the sake of ruling over people who were seen as beings with a lower status than dogs. As the war loomed closer on the horizon, people betrayed friends and family because they were more concerned with advancing their cause than with how others perceived them. The price was high for people who wanted to see slaves free as well as people who didn't want to accept change. History reminds us of the tension that lingered far after the war took off. In fact, history describes the terrible things that happened to slaves who were caught either fleeing to a slave-free territory or aiding in the Civil War.

If they were caught, any number of terrible things could happen to them. Many captured fugitive slaves were flogged, branded, jailed, sold back into slavery, or even killed. Not only did fugitive slaves have the fear of starvation and capture, but there were also threats presented by their surroundings (Thorton).

Because of the intense fear that slaves possessed, this often led to slaves ratting out others to protect themselves from the assumption of being part of a plan to revolt. At the same time, slaves who were too scared to speak up for themselves risked social rejection by other slaves if they did not join the movement to free them. Abolitionists off all backgrounds often struggled getting black people, both enslaved and free, to commit to helping America see an end to slavery. Petrified former slaves often fled, didn't keep to their word, or just flat out changed their mind on plans of protests by abolitionists. The Good Lord Bird provides example after example of the "every man for himself" mentality.

In The Good Lord Bird, McBride's depiction of Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman is like night and day. However, the story's events can only make sense when it is observed in its historical context. Harriet Tubman was depicted as a stoic and strong woman that left a lasting

impression on every other character she came across. History tells us that Tubman was an abolitionist that guided dozens of slaves on the road to freedom. She did a lot more than most people who wanted to free the thousands of slaves stuck in bondage. Harriet Tubman also served as “a scout, spy, guerrilla soldier, and nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War. She is also considered the first African American woman to serve in the military,” (History). However, we see a contrast in character with Frederick Douglas. History tells us that Frederick Douglas was incredibly smart, talented, and had a desire to free slaves. However, McBride depicts him in the book as a pest that has extreme confidence because of his status as a “passing” black man. In the book, he was an abolitionist, but ended up turning his back on the main character because he had doubts about the war.

During the Civil Rights movement, there were many activists who were willing to go the extra mile to free slaves. Things like livelihoods and homes were at risk for people who stood up for what they believed in. People outed as activists or rebels could have been killed by opposing parties. As a result, many Americans of all backgrounds were politically silent and refused to participate in or support protests for civil rights. This hesitation in standing up for oppressed individuals during the Civil War carried over years later. Hardly anyone trusted each other and were too scared to let their true beliefs show in public.

McBride also depicts the privilege that “passing” black Americans have in his work. This symbolizes the disconnect that some black Americans have about seeing the injustices of their people because they pretend they don’t apply to them. As cruel as it sounds, the color of their skin allowed certain privileges with white Americans. To “pass” is to have a lighter complexion that could pass for white. This made them highly favored amongst society. Passing black people

were often treated better and granted more freedoms. This made it easy for some to forget their heritage and the struggle of others who could only dream of the pleasures of being light skinned.

New Historicism wants readers to understand how important it is to consider the historical factors of both the period and the author in question. Though the lens can't be applied to all genres, it does encourage the reader to understand that analyzing literature can't be done without the consideration of the history behind it.

Moving on, Gender Studies is the ideology that sex may be determined by biology, but gender is influenced by cultural attributes. This way of studying gender was borrowed from Feminist Theory and reconstructed in the 1970s. Gender Studies is a concept that "illuminates the structures that naturalize, normalize, and discipline gender across historical and cultural context," (JSTOR). In literature, questioning a character's identity is not a brand-new element used in the progression of the story. In fact, many authors have their own approach when it comes to addressing the subject in their work.

The Good Lord Bird combines gender and race studies to show how they provide a reason behind the intention of characters in the novel. Henry makes it well known to the readers that he is in fact a black male and has always been one.

"I was born a colored man, and don't you forget it. But I lived as a colored woman for seventeen years." (McBride)

In the beginning of the story, Henry is mistaken for a girl because of his feminine appearance, despite him being only twelve years old. His father unexpectedly dies after abolitionist John Brown attempts to liberate them from their owner. John Brown mishears Henry's father introduce him as the female counterpart, Henrietta, just before his death.

Therefore, John Brown goes along with it because he and the others were certain that Henry was a girl. Newly orphaned, Henry never corrected John Brown and the others about his identity because he feared being abandoned smack dab in the middle of slave territory. For the duration of the novel, Henry lives alongside John Brown as his adopted 'daughter' and gets to witness firsthand his heroic acts of freeing slaves.

As Henry narrates the story, he makes it well known that he is aware of how foolish it was of him to deceive John Brown and many others for dressing the way that he did. When McBride wrote *The Good Lord Bird*, he expressed the blatant gender and racial disparities that people of color faced during the Antebellum period just before the Civil War. For starters, Henry is described as having lighter skin alongside his feminine qualities. McBride uses Henry to explain the major distinctions and advantages that passing people had. It was not uncommon for some lighter black Americans to pass for white. Many people who were passing depended on this physical feature to help them and sometimes others escape slavery.

The opportunity for passing during the colonial and pre-Civil War eras most often resulted from the mating of slaveowner and slave followed by additional whitening and inbreeding of mulatto offspring who were then able to slip virtually unnoticed into the dominant society. (Blackpast)

McBride emphasized Henry's societal advantage of having a lighter complexion over someone like Bob, a character described as a tall, dark-skinned black man. Henry admitted several times throughout the story that he had gotten rather comfortable living life as a little girl instead of a little boy because he didn't have to help the others carry heavy loads and perform other strenuous activities.

I had thoroughly been a girl so long by then that I'd grown to like it, got used to it, got used to not having to lift things, and have folks make excuses for me on account of me not being strong enough, or fast enough, or powerful enough like a boy, on account of my size. But that's the

thing. You can play one part in life, but you can't be that thing. You just playing it. You're not real. (McBride)

Using the Gender Studies lens, McBride's depiction of cultural influence pertaining to gender tie in well when we observe Henry's growing feelings of guilt as he grows older but still not quite comfortable for parading around like a girl for so long. He falls in love twice but can't ever act out his true feelings because he is too afraid to blow his own cover. Henry even expresses feelings of self-loathing because of men he witnesses die on the front lines of skirmishes leading to the Civil War. He knows he should have been fighting with the others, but Henry opted to wear a dress instead because he felt more secure that way.

Henry often felt confused in his own identity. He felt a lingering guilt on his conscience because he was living like a coward. Other slaves fleeing for freedom shamed him more than once. Throughout the book, it became apparent that only black people could see past Henry's disguise. While most were indifferent, Henry expressed shame in living the way that he was, but he also knew how close he was to his own freedom so he dealt with it until he couldn't anymore.

When Henry finally found a way to join the last fight before John Brown's downfall, he finally felt like he had a purpose. There is a universal culture that portrays men pursuing goals with significant consequences if they fail to achieve them. In this same collection of values, there are expectations that involve men taking care of women with their strength and love. In comparison, Henry only feels confident in himself when he finally starts dressing like a boy and being his true self.

Scholarly research has found that the expectations we have of men are as narrow as they are clear. Men are expected to be leaders, tough, physically strong, dominant, unemotional and assertive, to name a few. This is a limited set of expectations that allow for little deviation. Boys learn from an early age that non-masculine or "feminine" qualities are undesirable in them. These expectations are taught not only from their parents, but also through socialization in

schools and media. To be sure, women are also held to restrictive standards of femininity, but men are penalized more than women for violating gender expectations. (Standford)

To conclude, McBride's emphasis on the Gender Studies lens with Henry's lack of confidence in himself only intensifies the longer he pretended to be a girl instead of a boy. As a passing young girl, Henry was given privileges he could only ever dream of as a young black boy during that era. Still, he knew he couldn't go on living his lie for both his freedom and his dignity as a man. The story wouldn't quite be the same if Henry were a woman pretending to be a man, or if Henry didn't feel emasculated watching other men act out their "natural duty" while wearing a dress. Henry eventually grew out of wanting to do nothing as a woman so he could do everything he could as a man to help the people he cared about. Overall, *The Good Lord Bird* sheds light on the concern and suspense that surrounded the relationship between slaves, abolitionists, and settlers as well as gender norms before the country went to war to fight for the idea that all men and women are created equal and deserve the same rights.

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