Joshua Miller

Prof. Robinson

**Julia Rogers Research Prize Reflection Essay**

I became interested in the African American literature produced from the 1940s to the 80s after completing my Literature of the Harlem Renaissance course with Professor Angelo Robinson. In that class we specifically engaged with a variety of texts by African American writers from 1919 to 1937, which showed the dedication of oppressed Black creators when it concerned creating accurate portrayals of their experiences in America. I wanted to continue looking into Black literature in the twentieth century because I was curious how the protest literary tradition had evolved during the Civil Rights movement. Thus, I proposed a list of texts to Professor Robinson, which included traditional fiction, plays, nonfiction and poetry, and after agreeing on the texts in consultation, we started with Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* and followed with James Baldwin’s essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son*.

Reading these works so closely together gave me the inspiration for my final essay: Baldwin challenged that Wright’s portrayal of the protagonist Bigger Thomas was problematic because Bigger’s actions implied that his toxic behaviors were realities for Black people in his depraved conditions, but I felt that this critique wasn’t complex enough. In my paper, I referred to numerous texts, including Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, and biographical account of Malcolm X’s life as relayed by Alex Haley, to trace the perseverance of Bigger’s actions and show that Wright’s portrayal of him was not an isolated case. Though texts published during the Harlem Renaissance touched upon this reality, none did so to the extent that *Native Son* did. I came to believe that Wright’s novel was not only a critique of Whiteness’s impairment of Black America, but a warning to Black America showing how their devotion to the ideologies of the Harlem Renaissance inadvertently facilitated the creation of the stereotypes they were trying to rise above.

Though I had this major theme formulated at the start of the semester, it was my engagement with the texts that we’d agreed upon that helped me flesh out what the argument would entail. I wouldn’t say that the research changed dramatically but what did change was the evidence that I used to support it. In November, when I’d finished reading the books that were chosen to be the focus of this study, I started writing my final paper and got eight pages in before hitting a wall. I knew that I’d only written a third of the paper at that point, but I wasn’t quite sure how I would go about connecting the materials that were yet to be written on the page. To construct a stronger background argument I consulted Professor Robinson to see which texts could be of use. Up to this point there were several resources provided by the library that I was able to explore to provide a substantial background for my essay. I was able to fill out an interlibrary loan to borrow the book *African American Literary Theory*, which collected essays on artistic philosophies from various reputable Black scholars, and used Kanopy to stream Marlon Riggs’ film *Ethnic Notions* to have specific examples of Black stereotypes. But Professor Robinson’s recommendations pointed me towards texts within the library that I was able to explore as well.

Said texts included, but aren’t limited to, Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Bernard Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, and Ralph Ellison’s essay collection *Shadow and Act*. I actually integrated the latter into my paper to dissect the significance of Wright’s thematic decisions throughout *Native Son*, but, despite scouring through several “Recommended Further Reading” lists, I still didn’t quite feel that I’d found my niche with the materials. It was Professor Robinson’s final recommendation of Robert Bone’s book *The Negro Novel in America* that helped to get me back on track. Rather than focusing on the inspirations for specific Black writers, the book helped me because it focused on the rationale behind literary movements such as the larger Harlem Renaissance and even smaller groups like the Talented Tenth.

Taking this into account, I was able to better articulate what Wright was seeking to touch upon by making Bigger so depraved: the oversight of Harlem Scholars in regard to Black people who could not be as socially mobile as their art portrayed them. I was able to complete the rest of my paper with Bone’s analysis acting as the glue to bridge the different styles of writing. Not only did I receive an “A” for the paper, but I was invited to deliver it at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference this March. I look forward to revising it further with more academic critiques regarding Wright’s motivations such as Charles Mills’ *The Racial Contract* as well as further exploring the literary techniques employed by the plethora of writers that I covered throughout the paper.