19th Century American Literature

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Lecture Notes: 19th Century African American Literature.

1. History
   1. Slavery in America: Between 1619, when the first slaves were brought to America, and 1808, when the importation of slaves was outlawed, around 650,000 Africans were forcibly imported into the country.
   2. The Constitution and Slavery: When America was founded there was a great debate about how the problem of slavery should be addressed. Unfortunately, the writers of the constitution could find no solution. From the very beginning, slavery was a big problem for the young country.
   3. Protest and the Press: White northerners called “abolitionists” (from ‘abolish’: to make something illegal) wanted to end slavery. Free, educated blacks and escaped slaves later began to write as well.
   4. Women’s Strong Voices: It was women’s voices that were often the loudest and most angry in the protest against slavery. In many ways the women’s rights movement in America was an outgrowth of the abolitionist movement.
2. The Abolition Movement: Important Voices.
   1. William Lloyd Garrison: A leader in the abolition movement and editor of an important newspaper, Garrison wrote in his essay ‘To the Public’: “Enslave the liberty of but one human being and the liberties of the world are put in peril.”
   2. Angelina E. Grimke: Another important abolitionist speaker and writer, she writes in her essay ‘Appeal to Christian Women of the South’: “The doctrine of blind obedience and unqualified submission to any human power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is the doctrine of despotism, and aught to have no place among Republicans and Christians.”
   3. Sojourner Truth: A former slave known for her energetic speaking style, Truth was one of the first African-American women to address a white audience. In her speech at the Women’s Rights Convention in 1851 she said: “If women want any rights more than they got, why don’t they just be taking them, and not be talking about it.”
   4. Henry David Thoreau wrote “It is not any man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it his thought no longer, not to give it practically his support.”
   5. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” a novel that graphically depicted the horror of slave life. She said: “It’s a matter of taking the side of the weak against the strong, something the best people have always done.”
   6. Phillis Wheatley was a slave who wrote about her experiences in the book “On Being Brought from Africa to America.”
   7. Harriet Jacobs book “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” was written to show northern Christian women the horrible conditions of female slaves, who were often raped by their owners.
   8. William Wells Brown. Some slaves tried to escape to the north and find freedom. W.W. Brown’s book “A Fugitive Slave” is the about his experiences after running away. He wrote: “All I demand for the black man is that the white people shall take their heels off his neck, and let him have a chance to rise by his own efforts.”
   9. The most famous of the black abolitionists, Frederick Douglass wrote an important memoir titled “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself.” In it he wrote: “Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you will have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which will be imposed on them.”
3. Themes in Abolitionist and Early African American Writings
   1. Enslavement: Many African American narratives focus on the journey from Africa to America: their capture and sale as slaves, the terrible journey in the slave ship, and their eventual sale in America.
   2. Bondage: The conditions of slavery were horrible for many reasons.
      1. Families torn apart. Many slave writings talk about slaves being separated from their loved ones.
      2. Physical torture: Slaves were regularly beaten and punished in other ways.
      3. Psychological torture: For many slaves, the inhuman treatment caused them deep psychological trauma. The daily fear of abuse and the constant pressure to produce more labor was also horribly stressful.
      4. Sexual abuse. Many female slaves were forced to have sex with other slaves for reproduction or raped by white men.
   3. Escape: Many slaves attempted to escape from their owners, a crime that was punishable by death. Many were captured, but some were successful and wrote about their experiences later.
   4. Freedom: For slaves who were able to achieve it, freedom was very delicious. Owning shoes, learning to read, and having the dignity of personhood were all wonderful things to former slaves and many wrote beautiful works about the feeling of freedom.
4. Discussion Questions
   1. Imagine that you were in the same situation as Harriet Jacobs, where your owner was trying to pressure you into a physical relationship that you didn’t want. What would you do in that situation? Would you have the courage to leave your children behind?
   2. There are many horrible injustices in the world today. Can you think of a political issue in Korea today that you feel strongly about? What is it and what can you do to help bring about change?