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HUM 3306: History of Ideas--The Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Anxiety
Spring 2010

The sample paper below received an "A". Overall, it is very effective, although there are a few prose glitches here and there.

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| <p>Equiano: The Questionable Destiny of High Status</p> <p>If you choose to believe that the first chapter of Equiano's narrative is true, you have to consider the effect that his early religious and cultural beliefs had on him through the course of his life. There is no mistake that Equiano wanted us to see the people of Africa as kindred in their simplicity and dignity to the lost tribe of Jerusalem. This parallel brings to mind a people that are destined to suffer many hardships, but ultimately reap great rewards. Equiano sees himself as practically chosen to succeed in this life. To him there is a hierarchy of status in a community that is one's destiny. Equiano believed himself to be destined from birth to be a man of some note, and no matter what culture he is in at the moment that fact will never change. What does change is how he relates to others as his life is shaped by the culture to which he identifies himself, and the religion he practices is altered. Equiano, however, takes the circumstance of his life and molds it around his "destiny" of superior status from other Africans until he loses connection to them. Ironically, his African tribal identity impels his ultimate rejection of that identity, as becomes in effect a successful, free Englishman.</p> <p>Equiano's belief that he was destined for more comes out early in the narrative as he recalls events with members of his tribe in traditional and everyday events. "[C]hildren whom our wise men foretell will be fortunate are then presented to different people. I remember many used to come to see me, and I was carried about to others for that purpose" (41). Equiano uses the religion and culture of his tribe to show that, from the beginning, he was meant for greatness. To give more credence to the religion of a remote tribe in Africa he compares it at many points with the Jewish faith and practice. Equiano tells us, for example, that they too practiced circumcision and purifications at the same occasions as the Jews. Equiano wants us to know that he is blessed not by some unknown deity but by the God of the white man's religion. Another example is his memory of an encounter with a snake: "Our snakes were poisonous; one of them crossed the road...when I was standing on it, and passed between my feet...and these incidents were accounted by the</p> | <p>--The title is specific enough to give us a sense of the overall focus or argument of the essay.</p> <p>--The introduction, rather than using vast generalities and profundities, gets to the point, so the reader immediately knows what the paper is about. The author also avoids saying "this paper is about..."</p> <p>--The introduction is one paragraph; but it could have been two paragraphs long if, say, the essayist had a more elaborate historical contextualization of Equiano's text. If you have a more-than-one-paragraph introduction, signal the end of the introduction by giving extra line spacing.</p> <p>--The sentences are varied in length and pattern.</p> <p>--A sequence of very short paragraphs is avoided (which make it difficult for the reader to discern the main points of the essay).</p> <p>--The essay avoids the highschool strategy of using three subordinate points beneath an umbrella thesis or using a dictionary definition.</p> <p>--Rather than saying the "author tells the reader" the</p> |
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wise men, and likewise by my other and the rest of the people, as remarkable omens in my favour" (43). The image of a snake is a symbol for the devil in the Old Testament which is widely read and followed by numerous religions. Equiano, without being explicit, defines his childhood as being protected from evil by spiritual forces kindred to Christianity.

Equiano uses these early chapters to emphasize his destiny in spiritual terms. But he also very explicitly conveys that he was part of the African tribal secular elite. In the second paragraph of his narrative Equiano introduces us to his lineage of higher social status. Equiano, saying:

My father was one of those elders or chiefs I have spoken of, and was styled Embrenche; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark grandeur... I had seen it conferred on one of my brothers, and I was destined to receive it by my parents. (32-33)

Even in his early years of innocence in African, Equiano seems to understand the importance of social status. He witnesses the application of a slave system and the power his family had over it. He does not express a sense of thinking that the system is evil. Instead, he sees slavery as a form of punishment, and another respectable way of having property. To Equiano, slavery is a circumstance of life, and thus being a slave was only a *temporary* form of status, if one worked to improve his status. Equiano goes so far as to show us that even in something as slow as slavery there is a hierarchy, with slaves owning other slaves. Though, he also admits that most slaves are acquired by kidnapping. Equiano probably does not want the reader to think that he deserved his "punishment" because of some evil act. He wants the reader to see him as a sort of prince that was stolen away from his people at a tender age.

Not surprisingly, then, during his middle passage to the Americas Equiano already seems separated from the other slaves aboard the ship. Through his passage he is mostly on the deck of the ship. He is permitted to see how the ship worked and even allowed to view a quadrant. He expresses little fear of his upcoming servitude in Europe or the Americas, although he witnesses brutal beating and suicides of other slaves consumed with terror. He concentrates mostly on the seemingly gothic spirits whose magic has him in a content state of awe. Perhaps, even though he gives no direct mention to it, he believes that he will overcome that terrible faith because of a divine destiny. Equiano believes that the white slave traders are "bad spirits" because they do not follow the traditions of his religion, i.e. washing hands, and possesses knowledge he can not understand. They are so evil he does not even think they are human through the voyage. I believe he does this to keep in the back of our minds something simpler to the image of him with the snake. It is Equiano's version of "If God brings me to it, he will bring me through it."

essayist writes "Equiano tells us" (i.e. we/us ARE the reader, so go ahead and say it)

--The quote is inset because it is four lines long or longer.

--The essay is anchored in relevant quotes, indicating that the writer has really read the main text and sorted out significant passages for his/her argument.

--Most (although not all) paragraphs begin with a topic sentence that indicates the main idea of the paragraph; the topic sentences, alone, would suggest the overall trajectory of the essay.

--Ideas here are a bit murky and trajectory of essay becomes unclear

--The conclusion doesn't just "In summary..." rehash previous points. Instead, it feels conclusive--the final, more elevated stage of analysis; or a stage that casts the whole argument in a broader context.

--"hold" should be "old": the student could have caught this and other obvious typos/glitches, if she/he slowly read the paper aloud as a final revising check.

Equiano begins his life as a slave in the hands of a kind master, Mr. Pascal. Aside from the fact that some of the men tease him that he will be eaten, Equiano is treated with kindness by all, and is befriended by Preston, a white child on the ship. Here his conversion to becoming an English man begins. Pascal gives him the English name Equiano, that he will use the rest of his life. He is taught the art of ship sailing, English, and is even introduced into Christianity.

It is in these years that he loses his connection to the place of his birth and begins to eager to be a true Christian Englishman. Equiano states that “I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them...” (Equiano 78) It may be that here is the point in his life that he sees his kidnapping as part of his destiny. The kidnapping has allowed him to be among people of higher intelligence and spiritual awakening than his tribe back in Africa. His religion takes new form; it is not some mystical and unnamed deity that has blessed him above other Africans, but the Christian God.

Equiano even sees the Christian God as his benefactor in his monetary investments, though he never says it explicitly. “[The Captain] continued to press me to buy [turkeys] for once; and, what seemed very surprising to me, the more I was against it, the more he urged my taking them....he had never acted so with me before.” (Equiano 142) Equiano sees the hand of God in the Captain’s urgent last request for him to purchase these turkeys. After the captain dies and they spend a few more rough days on the ship, Equiano says of the bullocks he intended to buy: “The few bullocks that remained were found dead; but the turkeys I had, though on the deck, and exposed to so much wet and bad weather, did well...I could not help looking upon this, otherwise trifling circumstance, as a particular providence of God.” (143). Equiano is so sure that he is favored by the Almighty that he does not see the captain’s advice as an educated one, but as coming directly from the lord to make him money; especially, when it is put in conjunction with the death of usually strong animals, bullocks, and the *miraculous* preservation of his turkeys.

As a young man brought to maturity by Englishmen and woman, he calls on the Christian God for help through his voyages at sea as well. Equiano acknowledges that it is this God’s benevolence and mercy that has always brought him to kind masters to be well used. This Christian God, Equiano soon finds out through his own experience, “giveths and takeths away.” It is not enough to be one of God’s chosen but he must walk the right path or suffer God’s wrath. Equiano, after he has bought his freedom, is on a ship working for his old master. One night on this ship he has a dream, which later he sees as a prophecy, that the ship is wrenched and he is the only means of salvation for everyone on board. Later that same night he crushes the ship, wishing that it would be sink. When the event that he has dreamt and wished for comes to pass

Equiano says, "All my sins stared me in the face; and especially I thought that God had hurled his direful vengeance on my guilty head for cursing the vessel on which my life depends." (Equiano 149) It is at this moment that I believe Equiano realizes that his destiny can but altered for the worst if he is not a good Christian. To him the dream was a warning from God of what was to come for his sin, but God, knowing that his chosen would see the error of his ways, affords him the glimpse that he, Equiano, will be a salvation to the others on the ship. It is not the only dream that Equiano has that is later converted to reality in his narrative. Equiano never says that he dreams are from God but it is not hard to infer that he wants us to see them in this way. Equiano later says, "I could not help thinking, that if any of these people had been lost, God would charge me with their lives..." (Pg 151) It was a direct punishment for Equiano that the ship ran into trouble and that people's lives were at risk. It was God that told him in the dream that he needed to save those people. Equiano feels a direct connection to a God that blesses him with the ability to see misfortune before it occurs, and much like an angry father is ready to punish Equiano for lashing out against him.

As a free man, now also free of his sense of obligation to his hold master, Equiano finalizes his Christian conversion in England. Equiano is at first confused and lost. Equiano leaves the house he has been living because he does not see it as beneficial to him becoming closer to the Christian God. The people in that home repeat continuously the sin that has brought God's wrath down on him; using the Lord's name in vain. Equiano's yearning for a good Christian example leads him to find a people that "filled him with utter consternation... [He] wished to be as happy as then, and was persuaded in [his] mind that they were different from the world 'that lieth in wickedness.'" (Equiano 184) Who does this wicked world include? The very people he loved and admired in the first chapter of the narrative, his family and tribe in Africa. Equiano says that he now "felt a deep concern for [his] mother and friends... [He] viewed the unconverted people of the world in a very awful state, being without God and without hope." (Equiano 191) By the middle years of his life Equiano has completely detached himself from his people. Equiano seems to forget that he was once and "unconverted" person, but felt hope and happiness in that state. Equiano now seems to believe that being taken into slavery was his blessing; it allowed him to be with people who were more advanced than his own, and how knew the way to heaven. It is not his *blessing* that changes but his security in it. Equiano always manages to hold to the idea that he is blessed above the others of his tribe and, maybe, Africa. He begins his life thinking that it is a blessing instilled from birth, and expresses no worry that it can ever be taken from him. As Equiano becomes familiar with Christian, his destiny seems to become more fragile. It is now in the hands of an all powerful God that at any moment can take his blessing from him. He no longer considers himself a kidnapped African, but a Christian man. To Equiano

the white people's technology and religion are a way to set himself above other African.

