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INSIDE RESEARCH: Q&A with Paige Drew

Paige Drew is a senior English Education major at Murray State University. She is the current president of the Honors Student Council and recently returned from a student teaching experience in Belize. In this interview, Paige discusses her research experience while working on her Honors thesis.

How did you first begin your research process?

I began my undergraduate research in my freshmen year. I worked under the guidance of Dr. Laura Dawkins, studying the neoslave narrative and related historical literature. The neoslave narrative is a narrative set in the slavery era, written by a contemporary author. (As opposed to the slave narrative, which were written by enslaved, or formerly-enslaved, people.) I began by reading two well-known neoslave narratives, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. Then, I read many of the original slave narratives, such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet

Jacobs. Through the slave narratives, I studied, very extensively, plantation society, mythology, gender roles, sexuality, and the diaspora.

What inspired you to pursue the specific topic of slave mythology and plantation society?

I was attending a graduate special topics class on slavery as I was studying these works. The class was co-taught by Dr. Pizzo and Dr. Dawkins, so we read both historical texts and literature (including the nonfiction slave narratives and the fictional neoslave narratives). This class inspired me to delve more deeply into research on plantation mythology. This mythology

included the Mammy and the Jezebel stereotypes (which were juxtaposed with the fiercely-protected purity of the white women.) The stereotypes and mythologies surrounding black women were perpetuated as justification of the plantation society, but even after the abolition of slavery, these erroneous beliefs persisted. Neoslave narrative authors reflect on this persistence of stigma, discussing issues of race, gender, and sexuality, as women seek to surpass the stereotypes that their society has forced upon them.

As I continued this research on race/sexuality, I read narratives from the Harlem Renaissance: *Passing* and *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, along with Zora Neale Hurston's short stories and

Their Eyes Were Watching God. Here, I studied the conflict that arose in the antebellum society as the black intellectuals and the black "folk" masses came to terms with one another. Larsen's novels specifically represent "passing" women – women who have African-American "blood," but appear light-skinned and white. These women may "pass" for white unintentionally or intentionally. I continued to read neoslave narratives from contemporary authors – Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, *Bailey's Café*, and *Linden Hills*.

When it came time for me to choose a topic for my thesis, I decided to use my background in mythologies of slavery and the plantation society to support my argument concerning "Passing" novels of the Harlem Renaissance.

You mention reading a number of different narratives and more abstract literary research. What did you learn about the research process as you worked through these different materials?

I learned that "research" in the Humanities is such a rich field with so many options for one's "personality" to be shown. Of course, there are the basic foundations of any field, but

novels and personal accounts offer routes of creativity and interesting material. For example, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe is based on a real woman, who is considered a "Modern-day Medea" (from Greek mythology). Research is also applicable to real life, and I love that the many authors I studied write in order to better society, or at least to provide an understanding of society.

Your project has obviously been a very long-term one --were any of your initial ideas or opinions redefined by your research?

Absolutely. I knew next to nothing about African-American lit, slave narratives, and the Harlem Renaissance when I began the mentor/mentee relationship. The research has redefined my personal literary "canon," some of my views on social issues, and most of all, my plans for teaching my future students. The first time I read Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the copy of the book was a "200th anniversary edition." I was amazed that I had never heard of the book, after I had received a very thorough high school education and beginning of college education.

As an outgoing senior, do you have any advice for students that want to get involved in undergraduate research?

If you are interested in research, just ask! Professors are very excited to discuss their research with students and potentially begin a mentor/mentee relationship or even hire a student researcher. When I began my research process, I visited the Dean and Department Chair, and they gave me advice on professors to contact •

The full text of Paige's Honors thesis, "Passing: Novels of the Harlem Renaissance," is available on Murray State University's Digital Commons page:

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