

THEMES AND ISSUES

Inequality

During the 19th century in the southern states of America the ownership of slaves was not considered a matter of inequality. The white people believed that blacks and whites were not equal and therefore slaves did not have to be treated kindly, or in some cases as human beings. This attitude of inequality is evident throughout the novel. Some examples have been outlined below.

Whitechapel believed that because he had treated his master with nothing but kindness and respect that he received the same in return. He did benefit in some ways, Mr Whitechapel permitted him to take time off from his work to tend to his dying wife. However, the master would not pay for a doctor and instead convinced Whitechapel that her time had come, which Whitechapel accepted without question. The relationship that Whitechapel perceives as being equal is still in fact one of slave and master.

There is also an inequality amongst the slaves - the house slaves see themselves as above the regular slaves and judge anyone who annoys the master and his family.

Mr Whitechapel believes that he is a fair slave owner. He does not treat his slaves as poorly as many others, however at the end of the day he is still the master and his slaves are his property. Other slave owners are much more violent towards their slaves and as a result they tend to be more rebellious than his slaves. There was a story in *The Virginian* of a plantation owner who tried to shoot an apple off the head of one of his slaves at twenty paces and when the slave ran away he shot him. Even though Mr Whitechapel believes in treating his slaves with kindness, this is not a view shared by his overseer who regularly uses physical punishments against the slaves.

Mr Whitechapel sees Whitechapel as being equal to any white man because of all he has endured.

Slaves were kept illiterate as it was believed they did not require the skill to be able to complete their jobs.

A desire for change

During the 19th century there was a growing movement in the northern states of America for slaves to be freed and paid for the work they were doing instead of being owned by a master. We see this discussed by Lydia and in *The Virginian* throughout the novel. Below are some examples of how characters had a desire for change to occur.

Chapel and Lydia both share a desire for a change to society's view of slaves. They seek a life in the north where there is no slavery. Lydia believes that "a law which says a slave should not read and write is unjust." (Pg. 88).

Whitechapel does not share his son's desire for change to slavery. He believes that it has happened for the last 300 years and it is destined to continue for generations to come. However, at the end of the first chapter, Whitechapel has come to the realisation that because he has been happy with the situation and hasn't fought for things to change or improve he has actually become his own slave master. His thoughts and actions have kept him in a position of slavery, taking away any chance for freedom.

Mr Whitechapel treats his slaves differently to the other plantation owners in Virginia, much to their criticisms. He believes that by treating slaves with kindness and respect they will be hard workers. While he does not wish to see an end to slave ownership he does wish to see it improved.

Remembering

Remembering is a painful experience throughout the novel.

For Whitechapel, remembering the death of his son is extremely painful. It is an event that he would rather forget.

No one had chosen to remember about how Chapel had been conceived and as a result he ended up being whipped to death by his own half-brother.

Sanders Senior finds it painful to remember his wife.

Once you have experienced change you can never go back

For Chapel, everything in his life changed once he knew how to read and write. He had experienced a freedom and there was no way it could be taken away from him. However, this eventually led to his death.

Whitechapel once told Mr Whitechapel that "...a slave who has tasted liberty can never be a proper slave again." (Pg. 28). The idea being that once a slave have tasted freedom he will never work as effectively as a slave again. Had Chapel survived his punishment, Mr Whitechapel had already decided that he would sell him on to someone else, for this reason.

Once Chapel had been taught to read and write he was unable to forget it. While he promised never to open a book or hold a pen again, he composed poetry in his head and spoke it aloud and he would listen to passages Lydia had memorised. He could not go back to a life without prose in it. Chapel ran away, after the death of his mother, because he could not live his life as a slave when he had experienced greater things when he was with Lydia. This eventually led to his death. Mr Whitechapel also agrees with this idea that Chapel cannot return to working as a good slave because he knows how to read when he writes to *The Virginian*, "...it [literacy] filled a slave with discontent when he can read about the world but must live on a plantation as a slave and see nothing of that world. He added it was unethical to instil in a slave such an outlook and he went so far as to claim it was detrimental to the workings of a plantation." (Pg. 117)