

1. How do the film’s opening moments capture the essence of slavery’s cruelty?
2. In what ways does Dr. Schultz wage war on American culture and assumptions?
3. Identify a moment of dark comedy. How might using slavery as a backdrop for an action-filled Spaghetti Western raise ethical concerns?
4. What is the ironic symbolism behind the name “Candieland?”
5. What old Hollywood stereotype does the character of Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson) mock and how?
6. Consider the depiction of gender in the movie. Is there any female empowerment or is this merely a “damsel in distress” narrative?
7. Cartoonish violence pervades throughout the film. Should audiences take such delight in the slaying of evil characters?
8. How does Django grow and transform throughout the film?
9. How does the movie “destroy” the “Happy Plantation” myth?
10. The film was both written and directed by a white filmmaker (Quentin Tarantino). Is the film a “white guilt” trip or does it convey a higher message about race relations?


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Accompanying primary source:

Combe’s ***System of Phrenology*** was perhaps the most detailed and authoritative popular phrenology text ever written. Virtually every subject touched by phrenology was treated here- from mesmerism to racism. It was first published in 1853. A portion of this lengthy text is featured here:

“The skull of the NEGRO evidently rises in the scale of development of the moral and intellectual organs: the forehead is higher, and the organs of the sentiments bear a larger proportion to those of the propensities, than in the New Hollander. The organs of Philoprogenitiveness and Concentrativeness are largely developed; the former of which produces the love of children, and the latter that concentration of mind which is favourable to settled and sedentary employments. The organs of Veneration, Wonder, and Hope, also, are considerable in size. The greatest deficiencies lie in Conscientiousness, Cautiousness, Ideality, and Reflection. The dimensions of this skull are given in the table.

Timothy Flint says, " The Negro, easily excitable, in the highest degree susceptible of all the passions, is more especially so of the mild and gentle affections. To the Indian, stern, silent, moody, ruminating, existence seems a burden. To the Negro, remove only pain and hunger, it is naturally a state of enjoyment. As soon as his toils are for a moment suspended, he sings, he seizes his fiddle, he dances."

One feature is very general in descriptions of the African tribes; they are extremely superstitious. They purchase fetiches, or charms, at a high price, and believe them to be sure preservatives against all the evils of life. This character corresponds with the development which we observe in the Negro skulls; for they exhibit much Hope, Veneration, and "Wonder, with comparatively little reflecting power. Their defective Causality incapacitates them for tracing deeply the relation of cause and effect, while their great Veneration, Hope, and Wonder, render them prone to credulity, and to regard with profound admiration and respect any object which is represented as possessing supernatural power.

I have studied the crania and living heads of North American Indians and of Negroes in various parts of the United States, and, after considering their history, I submit the following remarks. The North American Indians have given battle to the Whites, and perished before them, but have never been reduced either to national or to personal servitude. The development of their brains shews large organs of Destructiveness, Secretiveness, Cautiousness, Self-Esteem, and Firmness, with deficient organs of Benevolence, Conscientiousness, and Reflection- This indicates a natural character that is proud, cautious, cunning, cruel, obstinate, vindictive, and little capable of reflection or combination. The brain of the Negro, in general (for there are great varieties among the African race, and individual exceptions are pretty numerous), shews proportionately less Destructiveness, Cautiousness, Self-Esteem, and Firmness, and greater Benevolence, Conscientiousness, and Reflection, than the brain of the native American. In short, in the Negro brain the moral and reflecting organs are of larger size, in proportion to the organs of the animal propensities now enumerated, than in that of the Indian. The Negro is, therefore, naturally more submissive, docile, intelligent, patient, trustworthy, and susceptible of kindly emotions, and less cruel, cunning, and vindictive, than the other race.

These differences in their natural dispositions throw some light on the differences of their fates. The North American Indian has escaped the degradation of slavery, because he is a wild, vindictive, cunning, untameable savage, too dangerous to be trusted by the white men in social intercourse with themselves, and, moreover, too obtuse and intractable to be worth coercing into servitude. The African has been deprived of freedom and rendered " property," because he is by nature a tame man, submissive, affectionate, intelligent, and docile. He is so little cruel, cunning, fierce, and vindictive, that the white men can oppress him far beyond the limits of Indian endurance, and still trust their lives and property within his reach: while he is so intelligent, that his labour is worth acquiring. The native American is free, because he is too dangerous and too worthless a being to be valuable as a slave: the Negro is in bondage, because his native dispositions are essentially amiable. The one is like the wolf or the fox, the other like the dog. In both, the brain is inferior in size, particularly in the moral and intellectual regions, to that of the Anglo-Saxon race, and hence the foundation of the natural superiority of the latter over both ; but my conviction is, that the very qualities which render the Negro in slavery a safe companion to the White, will make him harmless when free. If he were by nature proud, irascible, cunning, and vindictive, he would not be a slave ; and as he is not so, freedom will not generate these qualities in his mind ; the fears, therefore, generally entertained of his commencing, if emancipated, a war of extermination, or for supremacy over the Whites, appear to me to be unfounded ; unless after his emancipation, the Whites should commence a war of extermination against him. The results of emancipation in the British. West India Islands have hitherto borne out these views, and I anticipate that the future will still farther confirm them.”