

Revisiting Black History in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore and analyze Faulkner's novel that fictionalizes the history of Southern part of the US during the time of Harlem renaissance when blacks were conscious of their own position as blacks as well as the time of Jim Crow laws that legalized racial segregation in the south. The book depicts whites' domination of America and it questions the representation of blacks as violent and irrational and challenges the official history with its emphasis on white supremacy and condemnation of blacks. It puts the issues and experiences of black people at the center of the text and through an engagement with historical realities of American South tries to blur the boundaries between history and fiction. The violent nature of Joe Christmas is not an inborn quality but a result of various socio-political forces that have played a key role in shaping his psychology. The truths about blacks are white 'constructs' and Faulkner brings those constructs under scrutiny in this novel. This paper looks at the novel as a fictionalization of history and a questioning of official history in the light of theoretical insights derived from Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault and Louise Montrose.

Keywords: discourse, fictionalization, margins, official history, revisiting.

Introduction

This paper attempts to analyze the white society and its legal system that unjustly tries to portray and naturalize the black race as inherently violent and irrational in William Faulkner's novel *Light in August*. Faulkner questions the white people's perceptions about the blacks according to which they are racially inferior which leads to their depiction as rapists, thieves and murderers. America always failed to appreciate the role of the blacks in the building of America as a nation. Afro-Americans were the people who developed South America by building houses and working in plantations. They were the creators of new South America but they never had a share in the fruits of their own labor. They were deprived of land and had no claim over the crops they produced. It was the injustice, dehumanization and marginalization by the whites that led the blacks to violence. This reality is missing from the pages of official history and Faulkner's novel is a history in the form of fiction in which he shows the central character Joe Christmas as a victim of whites' misperception of the blacks. This paper analyses the novel from Michel Foucault's idea of discourse and truth, Louis Montrose's idea of 'historicity of text, and textuality of history', Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of 'will to power' as well as the new historicist ideas of Stephen Greenblatt.

Textual Analysis

In *Light in August*, Faulkner's representation of the protagonist Joe Christmas establishes him as a writer with a revolutionary stance. Nobody knows for sure whether or not Joe has Negro blood in him. Lack of clear reference to his true racial roots challenges the idea that a person has a fixed identity. Whites call him nigger but they have no proofs to support their

claim. He is called Negro by social definition not by blood. In this way, Faulkner undercuts the official history and the mythology created by white society which indicates that the nigger is a creation of white men. The main character Joe Christmas is in the house of Mr. McEachern who forcefully changes Joe's name to Joe McEachern, lectures him, starves him and beats him for not learning the catechism. Faulkner states, "McEachern began to strike methodically, with a deliberate force. It would have been hard to say which face were the more rapt, more calm and more convinced. He struck ten times then he stopped. 'Take a book', he said. He handed the boy Catechism" (114).

These lines bring to light the kind of punishment that was meted out to Joe by his foster father McEachern without understanding his interests. The book is associated with Christianity and is biased towards the blacks. But Joe is forced to read the book to conform to white's interpretation of God and the relation between the whites and the blacks. Images of Blacks as inferior and violent are created by whites in order to subjugate and dehumanize the blacks and their culture. Louis Montrose's idea that New Historicism is basically concerned with "the historicity of text and textuality of history" (416) marks a purposeful "shift from history to histories" (411) which is highly relevant to Faulkner's representation of Blacks in questioning the portrayal of Blacks in the pages of official history of America. Official history is only one way of representing the blacks and they can be represented in other ways. Who they are, is an effect of who represents them and how they are represented.

An administrative white figure, Gamm Steven is very negative towards the blacks. The large network which provides the connection among the social and cultural elements of institutionalization of racism in the South is emphasized very strongly through his remark. Although he is the district attorney and Harvard graduate, his interpretation of Joe is very shocking. Steven says:

The Black blood drove him first to the Negro cabin. And then white blood drove him out of there as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which wouldn't let him fire it. And it was the white blood that sent him to the minister . . . It was black blood that swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any men. (349)

These lines make a shocking revelation of the white man's attitude towards the blacks. This kind of portrayal of the blacks is out of the desire to criminalize them. Joe is a mix blood and Steven associates white blood with positive desires and traits and black blood with negative traits. This interpretation done by a professor of Harvard is of great social and political significance. It suggests that race is biological trait rather than social and political one. It shows racist assumptions that guide the white people in their understanding of the black people. It has no truth but is a product of discourse created by the whites. For Foucault, "Truth is being told with no facts to back it up but the teller. In fact, the teller of the story or history also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative; the teller speaks for making these fragments into a discursive whole" (24).

As this quote by Foucault makes clear, there are no factual truths about the blacks but only representations created by the whites through different social and cultural discourses. The whites' position of power allows them to create these discourses. Faulkner's exposure of whites' misrepresentations of blacks is a challenging of those truths about blacks that are no truths as such but only the effects resulting from discourses made about the black people. Joe's representation is only a construct of the white people and it can be dismantled and scrutinized as false and as a result of the prejudices held by the white people.

Joe and Brown are two intimate friends. They are running the alcohol business. Brown is a white and he represents Joe in a very negative light. One day when Joe is sleeping Brown starts singing and Joe asks him to keep quiet. But Brown shows his white superiority and doesn't obey him. Time and again he goes on calling Joe "nigger take your black hand off me, you damn nigger blooded" (79). This shows Brown's disdain towards Christmas. He further says "You are nigger, see? ... But I am white. I am white" (79). This can be understood in Nietzsche's terms as 'will to power' in which, "The only thing that all men want is power, and whatever is wanted is wanted, for the sake of power. If something is wanted more than something else, it most represents power" (511). Joe Brown's dehumanization and stereotypical representation of Christmas is definitely a result of will to power as it manifests itself in the white people's desire to rule and control the black people. This representation doesn't reveal any essential truth about the blacks but highlights the idea that it is a product of the discourse created by the white people. The truth of black people created by official history is exposed here as mere construction. It again echoes Nietzsche's idea that "truth is a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphism" (509).

The fixities of their categories and the binaries of their ideology comes apart in the interaction between the black and the whites. It is the very racial ideology that brought about the death of Joanna. The novel presents these categories of black and white as malleable and vulnerable and thus challenges the racist ideology held by the whites. Joanna tries to persuade Christmas to attend an all-black college and study law so that he can look after her finance. Thinking that it would bring him under her control he refuses to do so. Even in sexual relationship it is white Joanna who is more impulsive than Christmas and it serves to reverse the assumptions that blacks are irrational and whites are rational. It is a challenge to the racist white ideology. It shows that the categories created by the mainstream white society are not stable, they are rather permeable.

Terry Eagleton maintains that hegemonic groups make ideology look natural but social behavior proves it otherwise. He maintains, "Successful ideologies are often thought to render their beliefs natural and self-evident - to identify them with common sense of a society" (58). The friendship between Brown and Christmas is a good evidence that blacks and whites can live together in society. The intimacy in their relation defies white perception that friendship between the people of two races is not possible. Economic desperation brings the people of the margin together. Many such friendships were forged between the members of two communities during the difficult times of depression era. Moreover, Christmas' killing of Joanna makes him as Godden describes him, "a pressure point who establishes that rituals

and beliefs change even in apparently static communities” (234). The community thinks that Joe has challenged them as he managed to hide the reality of his black blood and pass as a white man for many years.

Faulkner sets his novel in the critical and fluid times of Harlem renaissance and the great depression which tends to facilitate in dismantling of the ideological assumptions held by the white society. Gail Hightower’s treatment of his wife and his closeness with his black cook earn him the wrath of his community but he too is a living proof that whites and blacks can mingle and challenge the ideology of racism. Christmas’ grandfather hates him but his grandmother loves him despite her knowledge that her daughter married a non-white and gave birth to a mixed blood Christmas.

Light in August came as a response to the exclusion of African American history and culture from the official version of American history and it helped to pave way for African Americans to struggle for inclusion and equality which is supported by new historicist reading of literary texts. New historicists are interested in establishing the relationship between literature and history. For them, literature reflects, shapes and represents history in an active manner. It doesn’t reflect history as a mirror but it rather shapes and constitutes historical change through literary texts and these texts can have effects on history. Faulkner’s novel may have deeply affected the conception of American history of the whites and the blacks during the period of Harlem renaissance and the great depression of 1930s America. For Greenblatt, “A working distinction between the aesthetic and the real is established and abrogated” (7) as literature comes to serve as a sort of historical document in the guise of fiction.

Conclusion

William Faulkner’s *Light in August* fictionalizes the history of American South during the era of Harlem renaissance and great depression. Despite being a literary text, it represents and shapes certain historical realities of the time. By bringing to the center the experiences and conditions of the blacks, it gives a voice to them and at the same time challenges the biased representations of the blacks by the white people. In this way, the novel is a kind of interrogation of the false representations of both the whites and the blacks in the official version of American history.

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