

Reading History in Faulkner, Reading Faulkner in History

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Abstract

*Faulkner's insistence on the past in his works demands a nuanced understanding of Southern history within its regional context. A traditional and primarily patriarchal society, the US South is entangled in myths and codes that define its way of life. Faulkner's usage of history is loaded with racial, social and gender issues. The representation of such issues in Faulkner's works can only be understood if there's a thorough understanding of the history of the US South. As is the case, his works often replicate the traditional Old South stuck in its glorious past with the condition of its people being pitiable, especially that of blacks. This paper attempts to study the relationship of people with the past and how it has been utilized in Faulkner's *Light in August* by analyzing the socio-historical context of the novel.*

Keywords: the US South, Yoknapatawpha, the Civil War, the Lost Cause, white supremacy, segregation.

The 1988 American movie *Mississippi Burning* based on the FBI investigation into the murders of three civil rights workers offers an unbiased view into the savagery and darkness that has grappled much of the American South since time immemorial. The movie not only surveys the geographical racism, white supremacy and general hatred toward African Americans but delineates the boundaries drawn between the two groups in such a way that it becomes impossible not to question the history and cultural authenticity of the South. The following conversation in the movie reaffirms this doubt:

Mayor Tilman: Simple fact is, Anderson, we got two cultures down here. White culture, and a colored culture. Now that's the way it always has been, that's the way it always will be.

Agent Anderson: The rest of America don't see it that way, Mr. Mayor.

Sheriff Ray Stuckey: Rest of America don't mean jack shit. You in Mississippi now.¹

This is the starting point of my discussion of the South. If argued further this notion boils down to two things: Firstly, Mississippians clearly consider themselves different from the rest of America and secondly they are still hanging on to a past that has certainly evolved into something new. Does that mean Mississippi is different because of its entity (when compared to the rest of America) or different even amongst other Southern states? Although the trajectory to unravel this Southern question is filled with many uncertainties yet a way to confront it is by reimagining certain historical notions and challenge public and private dilemmas associated with them.

To some extent, it seems that William Faulkner has confronted the same question and sought to answer it or, at least, understand it in a similar manner. In writing about the people of Yoknapatawpha County, Faulkner analyzes, interprets and acknowledges various social problems—employing narratives that are complex and authentic. Faulkner's fictional universe allows an insight into the heart of the South—actuating the understanding of reader about the conflicts in the lives of people who populate the works of author. Beyond using his fiction to probe the South's glorious past and raise questions about its relevance, Faulkner challenges the fundamental premises on which Southern identities have been constructed. At its core, questions of class, race, and gender form the primordial matter of Faulkner's works.

The South is unique and embedded in a cultural diversity, and what constitutes it is a balance between tradition, history and regional attributes. The basic view of the South before the Civil War is that it was aristocracy that controlled the plantation and slavery which constituted of blacks who worked in these plantations. The Southern economy at the time was underdeveloped and relied heavily on the plantation system for its basic needs. Dominated by agriculture due to its geographical location, the South provided favorable conditions for most crops. The plantation system in the South thrived mainly due to this geographical benefit and labor that came in the form of slaves. In order to understand the societal and cultural norms of the South, it becomes essential to interrogate the role of the plantation system that is directly related to the issue of slavery and how it formed the Southern codes of identity.² It is safe to say that the question of national identity and, more importantly, Southern identity revolves around the plantation system but it is significant to note here that the South was not always traditional, at least not at its inception. While the North advanced due to its adoption of new mechanical techniques, the South still remained in a nostalgic dubiousness—rejecting any advancement in the farming. It is noteworthy to understand that a traditional aristocratic Southern family was highly paternal and any shift from traditional to modern practice would

¹ *Mississippi Burning*. Dir. Alan Parker. Perf. Gene Hackman, Willem Dafoe. 1988.

² See King, *A Southern Renaissance*, especially chapter 2, for an insightful analysis of this aspect.

have meant lesser control over the slaves and family. Nevertheless, the industrialization did come but could not offer much progress as it was already too late.³

The postwar South with the abolition of slavery registered a change in the attitude of society toward women. During the war, responsible for the household chores and slaves, the white Southern woman has already gone through a change. In the aftermath, it became increasingly difficult for women to maintain their independence as once again men began to dominate but in a more authoritative manner. Due to the increased fear of free blacks, the white men acting as custodians demanded strict laws to save the honor of their women. This gave way to the Jim Crow laws that severely suppressed the newfound freedom of blacks. It is in this air of paranoia and unwarranted fear that Faulkner probes the milieu by bringing white, black, multi-racial, poor, and rich characters face to face where they have to act or allow the social structure to deconstruct their identities. The South that appears in the fiction of Faulkner is haunted by the ghosts of the past. More often than not, his characters are troubled by a nostalgic sense of disbelief and acute perplexity about their position in Southern society. Faulkner who himself comes from a traditional Southern family is familiar with the feeling of dubiousness about the existence of old aristocratic families in the South that has undergone a significant change in the aftermath of the Civil War. The main driving force behind his fiction, at least it seems, is to arrest time—prevent it from becoming present and live forever in it by creating a space where only past could exist with the Southern myth and history intact. Such an attempt, of course, sounds too obtuse—almost irrelevant, but that's what gives Faulkner's fiction an added depth and subtlety. The narrative structure of Faulkner's works is such that it attempts to depict the conflict in the South with its past by provoking the memory of an era that has ended in its entirety yet lingers on in the inability of characters to comprehend the meaning of life. This clash between the past and present comes to a realization through the use of memory. Faulkner consciously allows his characters to pick threads of the past either through nostalgia or remembrance in a chain of events that trigger their memory and in the final act are overcome by the burden of Southern history that would eventually shape their identities and choices.

The idea behind memory in the Southern context assumes great significance since the South as a region holds together many strands such as race, class, violence and culture—forming a regional identity against the backdrop of national—making the South an entity in itself. History is usually based on how we remember it, commemorate it, but more importantly what we specifically choose to remember and forget. The historicity of the South becomes problematic as it suffers from an intricate web of myths, legends and a vast body of

³ See Nicholls, *Southern Tradition and Regional Progress* (27).

fiction dedicated to the Southern way of life woven around it.⁴ Faulkner, in his fiction, has chosen a period of time in the past and allowed certain memories to further develop in the course of action. The key event in the history of the South is the Civil War, and it is around this event Faulkner probes major issues of the South—providing his characters with memories that directly allow them to intervene in the past, but at the same time forcibly pushing them to choose between the real and the imagined. The re-imagining of the South further distinguishes the real South and the imagined one but in the process, the South becomes a monumental memory—a site to visit and revisit a specific period of time in the past to overcome the uncertainty of present which is ambiguously entwined with national identity. It is in the act of remembrance that Faulkner shapes his version of the past by separating history and memory. A counterpoint, not in its assumption but rendition, this sifting of two integral aspects stylistically sanitizes Faulkner's version, which he then uses to reconcile memory and history—and in doing so not only evokes a bygone era to demystify the South's relation with the rest of America but rather provides an added layer of depth to solidify the Southern identity.

Throughout the history of the US South, one is perplexed by an immediacy to confront the racial divide that has long played a significant role in determining Southern identities yet any rendition of the South demands a much more developed understanding than to simply analyze the social relations among blacks and whites. Faulkner has painstakingly projected a version of the South that is true to its roots, values—making the South nothing less than an enigma. By confirming to the Southern standards, and the usual stand of the South regarding social and racial issues, Faulkner has not allowed any romanticized notion to enter his fiction. The history that shaped the South is fused together by how it has tackled the questions of race, gender and ownership. Interestingly, the consciousness of the South has always been stronger when it comes to its identity, especially in contrast to the rest of the country. In part, this is true since the South's consciousness has come under scrutiny because of its Lost Cause ideology and the way it clashes with the nationalist discourse. The obscurity that pertains to the history of the US South is, in fact, a part of the South's struggle against the vehemently successful Northern history. Politically, the tone shifted from mourning to triumph, and a feeling of pride overwhelmed the already zealot Southerners who now wanted to use the opportunity to get rid of the shame that was attached with defeat. This newfound emotion fuelled a sense of radical populism that further bound every white Southerner.⁵ The

⁴ Conscious of the meaning of term 'historicity,' I am using it to interrogate Faulkner's understanding of Southern history, but more than that, my interest lies in a reflective meaning of the past that has shaped much of his writings.

⁵ David W. Blight argues that "For most white Southerners, the Lost Cause evolved into a language of vindication and renewal . . . through which they could solidify both their Southern pride and their Americanness. In the 1890s, Confederate memories no longer dwelled as much on mourning or

Lost Cause ideology thus becomes a way to glorify the South despite its defeat in the Civil War by strengthening the Southern myth and ideology. Faulkner in his works has not sought to separate myth and reality but rather presented it as a whole. The burden of Southern history can easily be felt in the works of Faulkner who is conscious of the South's relations with its past and the questions that have arisen as a result.⁶

The notion that the South is embedded deeply in history and that its identity has been threatened due to this very reason is only half true. Since there is no single accountable history but rather histories and that too leading in different directions only makes it more difficult to reach at one proportionality accurate version that could verify any claims regarding its Southernness. Another problem associated with Southern history is the exclusion of blacks for the fear that any recognition to them would itself resist the white narrative. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage in *The Southern Past* explains, "For a century after the Civil War, whites ensured that public spaces conspicuously excluded any recognition of the recalled past of blacks. African Americans created their own understanding of the past, but whereas white memory filled public spaces and made universal claims, the black countermemory was either ignored by whites or was largely invisible to them" (10). The history of the South as Faulkner saw can be labeled as tragic if not flawed, but there must exist a fine line between authenticity and bias as the writer in question is a native of the South and, that too, a white. Although it would be unfair to say that the impression one acquires after reading Faulkner is that of prejudice. Nonetheless, there perpetuates an unwarranted continuation of myth that becomes strengthened as Faulkner goes on to create his fiction. The Southern myth provides a foundation upon which the Southern identities are constructed and utilized by writers who are even minutely interested in the South. Faulkner probes the South with a similar approach. Most of his works exploit the myth inciting specters from the past that is tarnished by violence, segregation and racism.

Faulkner started his career at the time when the US South was struggling to maintain its identity against the North's industrialization that threatened the very core of a society that placed much emphasis on traditions and old values. The South that Faulkner witnessed as an adult was rapidly strengthening the divide between whites and blacks by implementing laws that were made specifically to suit the needs and perspectives of whites. Prior to Faulkner's birth, the South was already entrenched in racial segregation. In 1896, the US Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld a Louisiana state law requiring negroes to travel in separate

explaining defeat; they offered a set of conservative traditions by which the entire country could gird itself against racial, political, and industrial disorder" (262).

⁶ Biljana Oklopčić suggests that "Faulkner's descriptions of the Civil War are a response to both the Southern military defeat and the destruction of principles that formed the very being of antebellum Southern society. Faulkner was also aware that the war caused the instability of labor market, cut off financial and food resources, and destroyed the economy and traffic system" (6).

train cars. Much of the same paranoia about the racial segregation was present in the twentieth century when Faulkner began his career as a writer. His 1932 novel, *Light in August* depicts the racial tension by providing a heart-wrenching and authentic account of Southern obsession with the issue of race. There is a distinct pattern of racism in the novel that allows us to call the Southern past in question. What Faulkner has created in *Light in August* is a society that assigns one's position in its hierarchy on the basis of race. Jim Crow began an era in which the identity of blacks was marginalized by attempting to make them subordinate not only physically but psychologically too. The condition of African Americans living in the South was deplorable. An agrarian society primarily, the South followed the same racial codes of discrimination in farming as well. Forced to live in poverty due to continuing contract that bound them to work off their debt to the landowner, the African American farmers could not come on par with the white farmers.⁷ Jim Crow in addition to severing the ties between the two communities by excluding blacks from any opportunity to better their lives created a feeling of mistrust. If any black farmer in order to escape sharecropping system tried to move from one farm to another, there were several repercussions. Because of such deplorable conditions and discrimination, many African Americans sought better employment opportunities in the New South where the industrial economy was flourishing. Although the only jobs that were offered to blacks were either considered menial or dangerous since the whites wanted to protect their privileged status.⁸

It is worth mentioning that Joe Christmas comes to Jefferson and starts working at the local planing mill, an instance Faulkner might have included in the novel to complement the fact that a significant number of black population migrated within and outside the South during the interwar period in search of employment.⁹ *Light in August* is a novel where the characters are constantly trying to find their place in the society, but since the societal schema

⁷ R Douglas Hurt points out that blacks held 13.5 million acres in the South as compared to whites, who owned more than 100 million acres in 1900. Additionally, about 75 percent of these black farmers were tenants, usually sharecroppers meaning that the "goal of "forty acres and a mule" remained beyond their reach" (1).

⁸ To restrict mobility of black farmers from one farm to another, new laws were enacted that made it a criminal offence for laborers not to fulfill their terms of contract. Those who managed to migrate to the New South faced a different set of problems. Black men were forced to work as "wage labourers in the iron and steel mills of Alabama, and in the tobacco factories of North Carolina and Virginia. They mined for phosphate in South Carolina and Florida, and for coal in Alabama. The railroad, turpentine and lumber industries across the region also recruited thousands of African Americans" mainly because "the largest industrial employers in the region, textile manufacturers, denied black men jobs on the basis that they would threaten the white women and girls already working on the factory floors" (Webb and Brown 183).

⁹ For a more detailed study of black migration in the South, see Kyriakoudes (10-26).

of things is such they are unable to do so. Christmas who remains an outsider throughout the novel is a victim of a society that has failed to accept him because of his blackness, although he is able to pass off as white on numerous occasions due to his mixed race. Faulkner informs the reader that Christmas is the bastard son of Milly Hines and a Mexican man. Milly's father who is a racist, as a punishment kills the man and lets Milly die in childbirth. The baby is abandoned by his grandfather outside an orphanage on Christmas eve. Throughout the novel, Christmas is unable to belong to any place or person as always he is torn between the color lines drawn in the society. Before he could absorb the racial etiquette of a white purist society, Christmas is adopted by Mr. McEachern who further instigates in him a state of confusion regarding his position in society. In this sense, it becomes clear that as an individual, Christmas can never escape from his past since it is this very past that he is trying to escape responsible for the kind of man he has become now. The tragedy of Christmas is not what kind of man he is or was but how others perceive him. Very little is actually divulged from his point of view, and it is only through other characters that the reader becomes aware of Christmas's life.

To situate Joe Christmas's *blackness* in the context of Southern society is not only complex but elusive too. The uncertainty regarding Christmas's race is confounding throughout the novel. It is only toward the end of the novel that we learn Doc Hines is Christmas's grandfather and murdered Christmas's father because he believed the man to be a nigger. But despite Doc Hines claims there is no solid proof that the man he killed was a black. Evidently, it is told that Doc Hines was acquitted of the murder charge because "the circus owner come back and said how the man really was a part nigger instead of Mexican . . . it was just that circus man that said he was a nigger and maybe he never knew for certain" (*Light* 377-78). At any given point, it can be argued that a man is killed since he might be a nigger and the murderer is acquitted because it is believed to be so. In a similar manner, Christmas becomes the victim of a racial perplexity in a society where the color of skin matters more than a human being. Martyn Bone writes that "Because Joe's father allegedly has "nigger blood," Joe too is defined by the one-drop rule and, as a "black" person, cannot possibly remain part of the Hines family. Denied any relationship with his white mother, and (as yet) having and feeling no "racial" connection to African Americans, Joe necessarily becomes an orphan" (148). Joe Christmas, in this sense, becomes orphaned twice. With no biological parents and connection with society, Christmas enters into manhood in a perturbed state of mind—answering everything with an excessive violence that he himself has faced and understood since childhood.

The discrimination that blacks faced in the South arose from an unwarranted insecurity felt by white Southerners especially in the aftermath of the Civil War. The overtone of negro question is indeed political with its roots deep in American history—constituting the Southern mindset—its white supremacist policy and general apathy when it

comes to blacks.¹⁰ The case of Joe Christmas is therefore of much significance, at least in the context of Southern history. The driving force behind the novel is to make Christmas suffer, not for the sake of plot or narrative but suffering alone. Since it is Christmas's actions and their repercussions that Faulkner seems to be interested in. But what does this suffering signify? Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman suggests that "Joe Christmas became the central character of the novel when it became evident to Faulkner that another element, an embodied racial signifier, was necessary to get at the heart of southern history" (170). It becomes quite clear from the beginning of the novel that there is no promise of a better life for Christmas, and as all of the action takes place in the South, this feeling only solidifies into fact.

Christmas, as a result, becomes the embodiment of a tumultuous past blemished by violence and discrimination—a person who cannot understand the motivation behind his own actions.¹¹ Christmas who remains a foreigner to Jefferson suffers not only from a mixed racial makeup but also ambiguous actions that perplex the townspeople. The relationship Christmas shares with Joanna Burden culminates in his lynching—bringing into focus the racial codes of the South. Joanna Burden who is a spinster living in Jefferson is ostracized by the community because of her beliefs toward blacks.¹²

The socio-historical construction of the novel fully comprehends the Southern ideals with all its flaws and myths intact. Faulkner's usage of miscegenation is one such instance through which he has covered most of the destabilized Southern landscape. The idea that Joe Christmas is of mixed race and labeled as a foreigner has been fully utilized throughout the novel. But it is the relationship between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden that sparks and ultimately explodes the racial unrest—the final bugle that marks the end of many lives. It has never been made clear whether Christmas really decapitated Joanna or not, and Faulkner it seems has never intended to do so. There is only a rumor in the air of Jefferson at the end of

¹⁰ On account of an ideology of white supremacy that survived both the Civil War and emancipation, the political atmosphere did not allow blacks to improve their conditions since "the group that had an opportunity to define the freedman's place in the American social order was, to a large extent, the same group that had resisted the abolition of slavery and had fought the United States in the Civil War" (Franklin 166).

¹¹ Abdur-Rahman elucidates that "Joe Christmas represents Faulkner's meditation on the civic equality of black men in the post-Reconstruction era and its effect on the psyche of whites. Christmas acts out his historical moment and anticipates, if not precipitates, crises in the established economic, gender, and racial systems of that historical moment" (171-72).

¹² Joanna Burden who comes from a family of abolitionists is considered as a "Yankee" and a "foreigner." A Northerner living in the South, she is not welcomed within the community of Jefferson, as she recalls "They hated us here. We were Yankees. Foreigners. Worse than foreigners: enemies. Carpetbaggers. And it—the War—still too close for even the ones that got whipped to be very sensible. Stirring up the negroes to murder and rape, they called it. Threatening white supremacy" (*Light* 249).

the novel—suggesting, speculating and assuming the perpetrator of such gruesome act to be a nigger. What fuels the rage of the townspeople is not that a white woman has been brutally murdered but that she is murdered by a black. Interestingly, these are the same people who have ostracized Joanna for having a different set of beliefs regarding blacks.

The study of *Light in August* cannot be completed without attempting to analyze the death of Joe Christmas. While it becomes clear that the fate of Christmas would ultimately be tragic, it is only after Faulkner introduces Percy Grimm that things go awry for the last time. Percy Grimm appears in the last pages of the novel but is able to seal the fate of Christmas with undue haste and violence. The problem of mixing past and present and assumption that one race is superior to another can best be seen in the character of Percy Grimm, the young captain in State national guard. Through the character of Grimm, Faulkner reconstructs the cruel force of the white supremacy and its mix up with the society by the fundamentalists. Once inside the house of Hightower where Christmas is hiding, Grimm shoots at Christmas five times.

The violence that supersedes the course of justice in the case of Christmas is hardly surprising. During the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century lynching was a common occurrence. Since the violence was directly sponsored by the government, it was not only difficult but impossible to stop lynching.¹³ Particularly in Christmas's case, it seems that Faulkner employs this sort of violence to depict the South as he perceived. The implication of Christmas's blackness disrupts the white ideology by referring to a paranoid assumption of entering into the white space by a black. While Christmas is unable to free himself of his supposed blackness, it is really the people of Jefferson who are able to impose upon Christmas the tag of 'other.' Faulkner institutionalizes this idea of 'otherness' in the community of Jefferson by strengthening the fear of a blackwash on the white pervasive ideology. The fusion of national and cultural backgrounds enables Faulkner to depict gaps in Southern society and fill them with fear and hatred that thrive on uncertainty and obsession with racial purity. In contrast to the social schema, Christmas is a man neither with an identity nor a social role. The tragedy of Christmas is that he can never find a place or role within social order of things and is, thereby forced to live on the fringes of society.¹⁴

It is the past that does not allow the South to change its mindset—unchain itself from a racial paranoia that destabilizes the lives of its people. The actions of characters in the novel

¹³ Kimberley Johnson argues that "violence was ever present in the Jim Crow order, from its roots in election related voting intimidation and mob attacks during Redemption to its end with the bombings and beatings during the white South's massive resistance. It was state-sponsored or at the very least state condoned violence and terror that had stripped civil rights and political and social citizenship from southern blacks, and it was violence and terror that maintained the color line that was subsequently established (43).

¹⁴ Robert Penn Warren observes that "in Joe Christmas, the key of the drama is the anguishing effort to find a personal reality; since he has only the social role—and is not even certain what his social role is—his struggle becomes somehow an image of the existential struggle of all men" (261).

can be understood as a re-imagining of the social and racial codes that Faulkner as a Southerner is well aware of. By and large, each character is made to act in a certain manner, adhering to the codes that were prevalent in the Jim Crow South. In *Light in August*, Faulkner has been able to arrest the very spirit of Southern society that is obsessed with racial purity—an important element to maintain the Southern way of life. Jefferson, therefore, is an authentic model of the South, inhabited by Southerners who are blinded by the color of skin, and conform to social and racial codes as a result.

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