

William Faulkner's Modern Vision and Postmodern Aestheticism

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Abstract:

American novelist William Faulkner's modern vision is armed with extraordinary literary sense of postmodern aestheticism. As one of the chief literary proponents of the 20th century Southern American Literature Faulkner has always in his literary works voiced out literary opinion for the integration of the blacks into the mainstream American society as opposed to their segregation. Faulkner's literary standpoint has indeed offered great support to the Harlem Renaissance in terms of economic, cultural and social points of view. This paper underscores two important characteristic levels found in Faulkner's select novels: From the Modern perspective it attempts to focus on Socialist Realism propounded by Georg Lukacs. And from Postmodern angle the characteristics of 'Identity', 'Assimilation' and "Representation" are respectively identified and constructed on a hierarchical pyramid. Finally, the paper attempts to parley on Faulkner's modern vision whose postmodern aestheticism is compounded and magnified to a great literary extent.

INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* 1930 and *Light in August* 1932 reveal the socio-economic conditions of the American South. As a modern writer of the 20th century American Literature Faulkner has recorded the real conditions of the American South in his novels. "Vision and Viewpoint are the core elements of the 20th century American novels" VanSpankeren (1994). Faulkner as a modern novelist has positioned his plot and characterization with various vantage points often revealing the plight of the economic conditions of the American South.

As a modern writer he has visualized a world wherein the all human beings are one irrespective of their gender and race. Faulkner's portrayal of the American South in the 1930's came in at a time when American economy fell in shambles with the descent of the The Great Depression and when the country was substantially divided between the white and the black communities. Faulkner's modern vision was to break this myth and his writings focused on the need for the integration of the black communities into the mainstream society as opposed to segregating them.

Unlike some of the influential American writers who lived abroad, Faulkner chose to stay in the US and compose his literary works. Modern American writers like Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein lived abroad. The impact created due to this effect resulted in formation of a movement titled "Lost Generation". Notable works, which appeared during this period, include Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and Hemmingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

Like many successful authors, Faulkner seems to have an uncanny ability to speak the truth and voice out his opinion confined to the moment. His ideas and viewpoint arise much more from an historical springboard that is established and stemmed rather from a personal note. His novels between 1920s and 1950s arose at a time when America was amidst huge social and economic transformation. His unique style developed an innate taste and evolved over time. Faulkner's courage to compose his novels artistically comes along with hopefulness of undertaking a literary journey; one that is aesthetic and evergreen.

Major issues pertaining to reality armed with historical consciousness dominate most of his novels whose view on major and minor issues affecting the world is not to be seen or felt as a ritual performed by him. But, in the larger context, he makes a constant effort to locate such incidents within a larger framework of his ordinary vision armed with extraordinary concern. His novels have succinctly developed a strong affinity for providing solutions to the modern problems, which cast a huge burden on the modern man.

L. H. Schwartz (1998) commenting on Faulkner's role as a modern writer implies that he was a chief Southern American writer of his time and many contemporary writers had hailed his works evolutionary. Schwartz reiterates that Faulkner's novels reflected the complexity of the time and the hardships faced by the American South has been well captured in his novels. He also highlighted on the importance of communities that were existent at the time whose primary focus was to sustain and survive during the most difficult circumstances which was in essence the core of Modernism, which Faulkner contributed to a great extent through his vision.

MODERNISM

'Modernism' as a period in the 20th century literary movement found more meaningful connotations than 'Realism' and 'Naturalism' (LT, 2015). Georg Lukacs (1964) spells out four major literary and social

dimensions of twentieth century literature each armed with its own respective characteristics. Fiction of the 20th century literature according to him could be broadly classified into three different major characteristics. 'Realism', 'Naturalism' and 'Modernism'. 'Realism' according to Lukacs is the mode by which a particular ideology could be expressed. And according to him, it could be best expressed in the genre of the novel. 'Naturalism' and 'Modernism' could be construed under historical modes of fiction (Lukacs, 1964).

Further, he goes on to add a fourth dimension to willfully strengthen this effect. According to him 'Socialist Realism' is an aspect, which brought up a great reputation to American writers in particular (LT, 2015). Faulkner's novels could well be called modern novels but when analyzed from a closer perspective; it falls under the bracket of 'Socialist Realism'. The novels are also essentially modern armed with a string of social messages, which in effect is a direct reflection of his comprehension of the Southern American society at large and hence needs to be explored.

Modernism as a literary movement had its origin in the early and middle of 20th century American and English Literature. It is considered as a period, which began post the First World War (1918s). The exact birth of modernism could be placed in the year 1922 when James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* were published. Ernest Hemmingway, Scott Z Fitzgerald and William Faulkner are the most popular novelists of this period. And Southern American writers who emerged powerful during this period are Ralph Ellison and William Carlos Williams (LT, 2015).

One of the distinctive characteristic features of modernism is 'explication' which is essentially 'close reading' and specific emphasis is given to 'structure' and 'meaning' incorporated into literary works. Some of the basic components of modernism among many others include 'words', 'images' and 'symbols' (LT, 2015). In Literature and Art form, modernism as a movement operates under 'impressionism' and 'subjectivity' (Lukacs, 1964). 'Socialist Realism' as a movement firstly acts against the themes of 'alienation' and 'fragmentation' in the works of literature. 'Alienation' as a theme operates in individual characters in the novels. And 'fragmentation' is unleashed among communities in any given society, which are recorded and tabled as instances in the works of literature.

Secondly, it also focuses on individual characters and their inner struggles. For instance, Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* suffers from Jason's misgivings and misdeeds and Reverend Hightower in *Light in August* constantly fights his own battles and struggles vehemently in order to improve his standard of life. And thirdly, it also offers insight into 'reality' and Faulkner as a modern writer armed with 'Socialist Realism' has developed a great fascination for 'reality' and has held a firm grip on it. He lays particularly special emphasis on the rural and agrarian conditions of the American South. Faulkner has developed a distinct tradition of laying emphasis on these aspects, which serve as evidence in his novels that he had developed absolute concern for the wellbeing of his region (Adkinson, 2006).

The social living and working conditions of the American South reflected in Faulkner's novels have to be compounded and magnified as he attributes special attention to individual women characters in his novels as through his vision he believed in voicing out their opinions and positioning them on equal pedestals. In the case of *Absalom, Absalom!*, he takes an exception and gives major impetus to the character of Thomas Sutpen who is presented as a representative of Southern American planter. His journey is to be taken for consideration with respect to the comprehension of Faulkner's literary works from the 'Socialist Realist' dimension.

Eugene Genovese a renowned historian of the American South stipulates the existence of two distinct characteristics with respect to the living conditions of Thomas Sutpen in the Southern American society. He refers to 'aristocratism' and 'paternalism' (Brooks, 1978) as distinct features that determine the living conditions of Thomas Sutpen who in Faulkner's view is the typical representative of the Southern American planter. Eugene goes on to add that

"The distinctly Southern sense of extended family cannot be understood apart from the social structure at the centre of which stood the plantation, and it provided a powerful impetus for social cohesion, ruling-class hegemony, and the growth of a paternalistic spirit that far transcended master-slave and white-black relationships" (Brooks 1978).

According to the characteristics placed by Eugene Genovese it is critically important to analyze them one by one. First the 'aristocratism' he mentions about is a stark reminder that unlike the Compson family in *The Sound the Fury*, Thomas Sutpen is not an aristocrat by profession nor by the virtue of a family system which has been passed on to him. But, according to the attitude expunged by him he does replicate as someone who is aristocratic. Cleanth Brooks (1978) questions the fundamental purpose of Sutpen's life and legacy and compares to that of the Compsons. Brooks' concern lies in the fact whether Sutpen was a true representative of the South. According to him the Sutpens were in no way similar to that of the Compsons, or the other planters like the McCaslins and the De Spains with respect to their peaceful means of coexistence and cohabitation, which the Sutpens majorly lacked.

Second, Sutpen's life and legacy is witnessed from a paternalistic standpoint. The Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury*, The Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying* and the Sutpens in *Absalom, Absalom* have all one

characteristic in common; men heading families who exercise rudimentary controls over others in their own course of respective legacies. Faulkner in essence shapes Thomas Sutpen's life and legacy as a Southern planter who exercises tremendous power over his laborers both men and women who work at the plantation. Sutpen's rise, as a planter is made possible by the sheer use of his brute physical force and not necessarily held due to a general consensus with the community he had come to be associated with. It is further stipulated that

"If paternalism was essentially an extension to society and politics of familial attitudes and relationships, and if Woodward (and Genovese) are correct in their insistence that the society of the Old South was paternalistic, the implications for the story of Thomas Sutpen are interesting" (Brooks 1978).

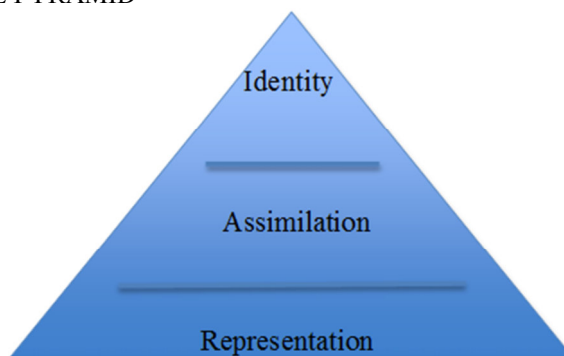
Ellen, the wife of Thomas Sutpen is easily influenced by the fortunes earned by their family in the short time they have inhabited the plantation. She finds herself accustomed and much exposed to creating apathy as against sympathy towards the workers of the plantation. She is unable to cope with the power and control exercised by Sutpen and becomes a victim of the rational choices undertaken by him and the actions that follow. Sutpen's downfall yields not only in the destruction of his own physical self but also in the destruction of the plantation, which he so long endured and developed. Engulfed in raging fire, the plantation house succumbs to being broken down to mere shattered pieces. It is through the 'creation' and 'destruction' of Thomas Sutpen's legacy, Faulkner symbolically envisions that men and their legacies depend on the cordial relationships and acts that they build over time and sheer use of 'aristocratism' and 'paternalism' could only yield in complete destruction.

'Realism', 'Psychology' and 'Experiment' are some of the defining themes modern American writers attempted to instill in their novels (Chase, 1973). Writers like Henry James along with Faulkner focused on individual characters in their novels. They also extensively experimented with new and different fictional methods. The entire subject matter of the novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) projects in unmistakable light William Faulkner's interest in the tragic implications of the developments that mark the life of the south in the crucial juncture of its history.

POSTMODERNISM

Adding to these merits, Faulkner's vision is compounded and magnified further due to the strong presence of postmodern elements in his novels. Being a modern writer he was much ahead of his time and his novels do contain certain postmodern elements (Woods, 2003), which he had originally envisioned. This development in his writing highlights the view that he was much ahead of his time than most of his contemporary novelists. His focus in the modern period has shifted gears and has advanced itself to the postmodern period, which contain in them a string of characteristics. Some of the characteristics in Faulkner's novels, which suit the postmodern scenario, are identified as 'Identity', 'Assimilation' and 'Representation' (Woods, 2003) respectively and have been placed in a hierarchical pyramid in order to study and comprehend them in a detailed way:

Figure. 1.1 HIERARCHICAL PYRAMID



Source: Compiled by the Researcher

From the figure (1.1) above, we find 'Identity' as one of the first characteristic elements in his novel, which is placed in the top of the pyramid. In Faulkner's *Light in August* 'identity' exists in the form of Lena Grove as a character who in turn exists as two separate entities. First, in the beginning sections of the novel, she identifies herself as 'Burch' and later proceeds to reveal her original name:

"I told you false. My name is not Burch yet. It's Lena Grove" (LA 1932).

We also realize that Benjy Compson's actual birth name in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* was Maury. Faulkner's focus is that 'Identity' is sometimes changed to suit a particular need, to attain a higher reason or gain a moral ground. Caddy Compson and Dilsey converse in *The Sound and the Fury*:

"How come it is, Dilsey said. Mother says it is, Caddy said. Huh, Dilsey said. Name ain't going to help him. Hurt him neither. Folks don't have no luck, changing names. My name been

Dilsey since fore I could remember and it be Dilsey when they's long forgot me" (SF 1929).

Caddy is immersed in an intense conversation with Dilsey about the reason for changing the name of Maury to Benjy. Her rationale lies in the fact that she was told by her mother that the name 'Benjy' was chosen over 'Maury' because it serves a higher purpose as it is taken from *The Bible*. Dilsey on a parallel note counters it that changing names would certainly bring no luck or damage. It is that through these intense debates by Caddy and Dilsey respectively armed with their wider implications that Faulkner has positioned these healthy and intense conversations in the novel. Further, he envisages the need for men and women to appropriately identify them in an inappropriate world, which forms the core of the 'identity' apparatus.

'Assimilation' features at the middle of the pyramid as it signals Faulkner's predicament wherein the both the whites and the black folk try and find a suitable and common ground for the benefit of each other. In the course of the novel *The Sound and the Fury*, we find that Dilsey the black servant accompanies the white Benjy Compson to the church. Luster; working as a black servant in the Compson family and Benjy Compson develop companionship amidst themselves, which in essence creates bonding rather than animosity. Luster and Benjy Compson's companionship is evident from the passage illustrated below:

"Come on, lets go down to the branch. I got to find my quarter. Maybe we can find one of they balls. Here. Here they is. Way over yonder. See.' He came to the fence and pointed his arm. 'See them. They ain't coming back here no more. Come on'" (SF 1929).

Finally, the postmodern element of 'Representation' takes the bottom most position in the pyramid and also indicates its presence in the larger portion. The novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August* record instances, whereby Dilsey's family and Joe Christmas are at their most comfortable zones when they are encountered with their own families and communities respectively. But, are often found living only with their 'Black' identity not armed with adequate representation in their immediate ambience.

Barth's 'Literature of Exhaustion' as recorded in Raymond Federman in his book *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (1981) prescribes the various dimensions of postmodern fiction. One of the chief characteristics of postmodernism that Barth denotes is; 'self-reflexivity' and that 'Art' rather than 'Nature' that becomes the object of "imitation" (Woods, 2003). Faulkner's construction of modernism in his novels with the strong presence of postmodern elements is vividly important because of the power of his 'self-reflection' through these instances.

CONCLUSION

It is through these instances, Faulkner has reiterated the importance that the American South needs to awaken itself from its decayed condition by invoking philosophical tones, creating strong powerful family bonding, by living through conservative means and attributing a dedicated voice to women. He strongly believed in the cohabitation of the white and black communities as their coexistence formed the quintessential core of his vision.

Faulkner with his immense potential as a writer of philosophical fiction has clearly established various vantage points for the readers to scan and read his literary works. Faulkner attaches great significance to excruciating details in his novels and hence explication of his vision needed a closer scrutiny under these dimensions, which operated under various living, social and economical parameters. Explication of these elements through the various dimensions has indeed brought readers of the novel closer to the rendition of his articulated vision. William Faulkner is indeed a regional author covering the landscape of the American South armed the historical consciousness in his novels which has acclaimed international phenomenon.

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