

The Wild Palms and The South

By

Dr. Sanjeev Kumar

Assistant Professor of English

D.A.V. (P.G.) College,

Bulandshahar

Uttar Pradesh

India

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this abstract is to represent the image of south in *The Wild Palms* by William Faulkner. This aspect is surely the very important feature of his novel. Here the paper aims at putting the total stuff into a hole, which is still in a scatterly way. Besides, the paper highlights how the south fills the centre core of this novel, especially after two world wars, and its impact on the life in general of southern man. This element represents a modern phenomenon along with the social, cultural and moral problems he suffers from. It represents the life of modern man full of confusions, seclusions and harassment. In the novel man are flow his own destroying passions and thoughts. Here if Harry's thoughts are accepted as Faulker's, many readers and critics tend to do, the obvious parallels with "Old Man" must be ignored, and "Wild Palms" becomes a silly thing to sterile love.

Introduction:

Faulkner sets into belief those characteristics of the modern world which made southern society unnatural and that alienated modern man from his own nature and from the natural conditions of existence. For this purpose he projected the concept of the natural man in Dilsey and Lena Grove, worked out more fully in 'Old Man', one of the two stories in the novel. He designed two separate stories i.e. 'Wild Palms' and 'Old Man' as one book, entitled as 'Wild Palms'. He divided each story into five sections and each section reflects the mentality and the spirit of southern man who is morally corrupt.

He tries to represent the image of modern southern man through the consciousness of characters who are aimed at discussing in this chapter in some detail. Unlike his preceding

novels, Faulkner added another dimension to the modern novel by permitting his reader to indict himself for sympathizing with the kind of romantic love the author is satirizing. There are many indications in both stories that the genesis of 'Wild Palms' may have been an annoyed reaction to the tendency in literature to romantic love excessively which has been the basic concern of southern man.

Several evidences can be put forwarded to prove that Faulkner has sought inspiration from his contemporaries to serve his purpose. It appears that Faulkner is not only condemning a general tendency in southern society to take romantic notions as literal truth, but that he is also quarreling with Fleming way's concept of the nature of reality. In A Farewell to Arms the hero escapes the firing squad by jumping into river. When he emerges he is cleaned of his romantic notions about war and about war life. In the same way Faulkner's double story can be viewed as an extension of this crucial moment. The hero of "Old Man" remains in the river and discovers reality; the hero of "Wild Palms" peruses romantic love to its ultimate tragic conclusion.

The protagonist of "Old Man" is a victim of literary romanticism while the protagonist of 'Wild Palms' listening to the cry of a loon, muses "how man alone of all creates deliberately atrophies his natural senses and that only at the expense of others; how the four-legged animal gains all its information through smelling, seeing and hearing and distrusts while two-legged one believes only what it reads. The love between charlotte and Henry is romantic carried to excess and is idealized to the point of absurdity. More significantly the idea of love is a creation of human imagination rather than ideal which the civilization has cheapened. The combined stories in the novel constitute a satire on romantic love, but at same time they dramatize a view of reality and human existence; they indict our culture for substituting symbol for reality; and studied in something mythological terms, the mysterious relationship of the male and female.

In the best of all his work, Faulkner's vision encompasses man in time and simultaneously man outside of time: the individual and the type, the specific and the universal. In the novel, the old man is identified as Adam: Faulkner seems to suggest that man in any age is trapped in an alien universe that he cannot understand but must exist in. He broadens the novel's scope of vision by combining the realistic story of charlotte and Harry, two sophisticated modern people living within the confines of a world created by civilized man.

Below the surface details of the story are elemental patterns and types which serve the mythological stories about gods and goddess, to explain the unknown forces within man and the unknown forces in his universe. The historical events provide the accuracy and their influence on southern man i.e. the Mississippi flood of 1927 and the Economic Depression in the United States during the 1930's. But the convict is also out of historical time. In his battle against the flood, he is elemental man struggling to provide safety, food, and shelter for the child-bearer, the earth-mother. And Harry Welbourne is elemental man bewitched by the demon goddess Lilith.

The essential characters in each story are a man and a woman who are two aspects of the essential male and female. The pregnant woman in 'Old Man' is Eve the mother. Charlotte in 'Wild Palms' is Eve the temptress. And Harry and the convict are Adam, on the one hand, tempted by Eve, and on the other hand Adam trapped into caring for Eve the mother. The two women seem to embody the extremes of "the female principle".

In both stories, the principal male characters are continually described as being in a state of amazement or incredulity or outrage; and both are somehow a victim of the mysterious female principal that seems to represent uncontrollable forces which realistically exercised a forming influence on southern man. Just, for example, Rittenmeyer, Charlotte's husband, and Wilbourne are Charlotte's victims. The fact convict of 'Old Man' prefers one hundred and ninety-nine years of prison to facing the woman whom he transported across a state line. The sole desire of the convict is to get rid of the principal pregnant woman and to 'turn his back on her forever, on all pregnant and female life forever and return to that monastic existence of shotguns and shackles where he would be secure from it.

In the lime light of above discussion, it can be noted that Faulkner, perhaps, wants to discover the fact that the female principles in South served as dominating hidden forces deciding the life of man. The men, there, were dragged into alien world by female, while the male's sole source of power was his maleness, and his instinctive moral integrity. If he asserts his maleness, he can, as the tall convict does, know a limited fulfillment a limited success. If he does not, he is, like Harry, doomed. Relevant to this emphasis on femaleness and maleness are the joking references in each story to the union of the male and female in one organism - hermaphroditism. In the novel, when Charlotte and Harry leave their Chicago apartment to go to Utah, the manager of the house shakes hands with both of them. Welbourne, who never before or after in the story smiles, let alone makes jokes, says to the manager:

When it is isolated from the whole novel, the convict's statement about drawing if it is not either male or female is incomprehensible. In terms of the conjoined narratives, however, it sums up sufficiently the difference between the tall convict's and Harry's responses to their separate but similar encounters with an overwhelming force - the roaring flood waters and the raging passion of love. Both men begin and end their adventures in a monastic world; both are unusually naive men about women; both are uprooted, by chance, from a secure, routine existence; and both, in the end, choose the all-male world of prison. Together, they have spanned the extremes of female principle from the mother Eve to Lilith Eve. The convict asserts his maleness and retains his integrity; the romantic lover sacrifices his integrity and, figuratively speaking drowns. Considered separately, both the stories have a number of loose ends. The emphasis upon the convict's attitude towards women in 'Old Man', for instance, is hardly substantiated by the narrative. His experience with the female sex is so limited that his vehemence is unwarranted; the emphasis in the story is on his heroic struggle against the forces of Nature and the line with which the tale concludes "Women".

Another aspect of southern life which Faulkner highlights is the life of modern man full of confusions, seclusions, and harassment. He finds men there full of his own destroying passions and thoughts, his observations are contrary to the obvious facts and his perceptions often imperceptive. If Harry's thoughts are accepted as Faulkner's, many readers and critics tend to do, the obvious parallels with 'Old Man' must be ignored, and 'Wild Palms' becomes a silly paean to sterile love.

A full appreciation of Faulkner's book depends upon the recognition the Harry's thoughts must be approached warily. He begins to muse about the nature of woman:

It's not the romance of illicit love which draws them, not the passionate idea of two damned and doomed and isolated forever against the world and God and the irrevocable which draws men; it's because the idea of illicit love is a challenge to them, because they have an irresistible desire to take the illicit love and make it respectable (42).

Further, Faulkner tries to generalize the women values. He discovers that it was not chosen to make love respectable since

He represents the romantic notion of love as a dominated passion in the life of modern man in Harry's words, a major character in the novel:

I don't believe in sin. It's getting out of timing.
You are born sub-merged in anonymous
Lockstep with the teeming anonymous myriads
of your time and generation; you get out of step
once, fatter once, and you are trampled to
death (36).

In this novel Faulkner opens that society has no place in it for love and the truth is that Charlotte and Harry are not harassed by society because they are living in sin.

The only external force that poses a real threat to love was poverty. The lovers are victims, as were most Americans living in or out sin during the 1930's, of a collapse in the national economy. Except for one bribed period, the lack of money haunts them throughout their year together. But poverty is far less a threat to them than their slavish romanticism. Even ignoring the historical fact that by 1930 the economy was beginning to recover, their decision to leave Chicago and go to the lake and love until starvation overtakes them or McCord finds one of them a job is a species of sentimental bravado that borders on the stupid. For example, hunger, Charlotte preaches to Harry with several painful pokes in his stomach, is not in the stomach, it is in the heart. Poverty, in point of fact, is not their mimesis. After their idyll at the lake, Harry is able to beat poverty: he puts Charlotte to work dressing stove windows, and he sits home writing stories for confession magazines.

When society fails to ostracize them morally and socially, and poverty no longer can bolster Harry's romantic image of "two damned and doomed and isolated forever against the world and God", he resorts to respectability this is this 'respectability' that threatens their love so much that it can be preserved only in the forty-below-zero. Harry's image of respectability is children. As he explains it to McCord:

I would be waked in the mornings by the noise
of children passing in the street; by the time
spring came and the windows would have to
stay open I would have been hearing the fretful
cries of Swede nursemaids from the park all day
long and, when the wind was right, smell the
smell of infant urine and animal crackers (77).

But here Faulkner asserts that society alone was not responsible for any kind of problem the man suffered from; it is, to some extent, their own bourgeois instincts that pose this absurd threat to their love. This bourgeois type of thinking made Harry to declare that there is no place for love in the world today.

Another image of man which Faulkner represents is his being too much cultured, societies and traditional which are taken as obstacles in the life of modern man who is the least conventional; but is inspired his own instincts. For example, Harry and Charlotte are not out of step with their generation and time. They are so much in Lockstep with it that they are out of step with life itself. They are personifications of their society, carrying to an extreme one of the symbols that their culture has substituted for reality. Most aspects of human society are rooted in fundamental human needs and not in traditions and its form.

Working for example provides essential subsistence, and, as the convict of 'Old Man' learns, working for money can even provide a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. But in our society, the making of money has become an end in itself. They do not work for the symbol of subsistence, but the symbol of status and power. The same thing was true of security, morality, respectability and love which have been abstracted from function.

In the same way love, in southern society, was conceived out of its natural purposes which violate society respectively. For instance, Charlotte conceives love, as an ideal separated from its roots in the natural sexual function of the human being. It becomes an end in itself, expressed through sexual contact but isolated from the natural purpose of sex. Love, for Charlotte, is a cord that must be served by nothing less than immolation. Such love, love, as tragedy of Harry and Charlotte proves, can only end disastrously not because it violates society but because it violates life and nature. It can only exist under unnatural conditions, and anything that anchors it to normality threatens it.

References:

1. Abid, .P. 42
2. Abid, .P. 36
3. Abid, .P. 77