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Femininity and Southern Gothic Literature: William Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying"

Abstract: William Faulkner's identity, largely, entails a continuous re-reading of his past, the history of the antebellum South, and the period of the Reconstruction. This obsession with the past and the need to face and understand its conflicts and dislocation, often, form the moral and psychological standards of the characters. But William Faulkner is neither a historical novelist nor a factual reactionary of the Southern past, only commenting on its loss and moral decline recounted in the lives of the Compsons ("The Sound and the Fury," 1929) and the Bundrens ("As I Lay Dying," 1930). These Gothic elements: love and loss, declined values, moral degradation, brooding atmosphere of gloom, horror, abhorrent psychological states of the characters continued in the novels like "Sanctuary," 1931, "Light in August," 1932; and "Absalom, Absalom," 1936. In these novels, however, the issues of race and gender have been mingled with the Southern history of America. The research quest

of this present paper is to explore the relationship between the femininity and the Southern Gothic literature. The broader concentration on the women characters in the novels of William Faulkner will provide the readers' larger space to think- Is the femininity a tool that Faulkner has used to create the Gothic atmosphere as incest, rape, adultery, suspense, feminine eccentricity, often, form the featured Gothic elements; or is the Gothic a tool that he has used to focus on the gender issues and problems prevalent in twentieth-century America?

Keywords- Eccentricity, Femininity, Gothic, Morality, Suspense

Introduction

In spite of being one of the foremost modernists of American fiction, William Faulkner's identity, largely, entails a continuous re-reading of his past, the history of the antebellum South, and the period of the Reconstruction. This obsession with the past and the need to face and understand its conflicts and dislocation, often, form the moral and psychological standards of the characters. But William Faulkner is neither a historical novelist nor a factual reactionary of the Southern past, only commenting on its loss and moral decline recounted in the lives of the Compsons ("The Sound and the Fury," 1929) and the Bundrens ("As I Lay Dying," 1930). These Gothic elements: love and loss, declined values, moral degradation, brooding atmosphere of gloom, horror, abhorrent psychological states of the characters continued in the novels like "Sanctuary," 1931, "Light in August," 1932, and "Absalom, Absalom," 1936. In these novels, however, the issues of race and gender have been mingled with the Southern history of America. The research quest of this present paper is to explore the relationship between the femininity and the Southern Gothic literature. The broader concentration on the women characters in the novels of William Faulkner will provide the readers' larger space to think- Is the femininity a tool that Faulkner has used to

create the Gothic atmosphere as incest, rape, adultery, suspense, feminine eccentricity, often, form the featured Gothic elements; or is the Gothic a tool that he has used to focus on the gender issues and problems prevalent in twentieth-century America?

Literary Survey

The Southern Gothic is a literary genre prevalent in American literature from the early nineteenth-century to this present day. While related to both the English and the American Gothic tradition, the Southern Gothic is, mainly, rooted in the South's tensions and deviations as well. Edgar A. Poe (1809-1849) became the earliest Southern Gothic writer to totally explore the genre's full potential. But in his time, most literary scholars and critics did much to discredit Poe as well as the Gothic genre in publicly and to discard traces of the Gothic in the works of the canonical national writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. The consensus seemed to be that "Gothic was an inferior genre incapable of high seriousness and appealing only of readers of questionable tastes." Scholars and critics of Southern literature were not very much impressed with the Gothic elements either, and thus, the novelist Ellen Glasgow called the tradition "the inflamed rabble of impulses in the contemporary Southern novel." She also said that Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, and some other new Southern writers displayed a disturbing tendency of "aimless violence" and "fantastic nightmares." In that year, Gerald W. Johnson, in an article titled "The Horrible South," claimed that Erskine Caldwell, Thomas Wolfe, T. S. Stribling, and lastly William Faulkner had established "a certain reputation for Southern writing." He categorized them "the merchants of death, hell, and the grave ... the horror-mongers in chief." In spite of these controversies, writers like Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), Carson McCullers (1917–1967), and Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) drew on Gothic elements largely. And more importantly, the generation of southern writers after Faulkner continued the exploration of the clashes between the Old and the New South. Works of the writer like O'Connor is

particularly steeped in the grotesque, a sub-genre of the Gothic. Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) and Richard Wright (1908-1960), the African American authors have had their own distinctive perspective on the Southern Gothic and the pent-up racial tensions at the center. The Southern Gothic also frames the bleak and jarringly violent stories by the contemporary Rough South writers, such as Barry Hannah, Cormac McCarthy, Dorothy Allison, Ron Rash, and William Gay.

Since its literary beginning, the Gothic literature has distinctive women characters and these characters are, often, central to the uncanny narrative characteristics of the genre. There are two main female roles within the Gothic literature: the ‘predator’ and the ‘victim’. The first is dangerous yet powerfully attractive; she helps to portray pain and pleasure paradox that has come to be synonymous with the Gothic literature. The latter is fragile and vulnerable; she gives the heroes something to rescue and the prize for their brave actions. Faulkner, along with the other Southern Gothic writers, broke the tradition of the imperiled young and inexperienced woman cautiously exploring the old, dark house or castle where she is physically confined by the force. In spite of that departure from the trodden path of Gothic, he is not still free from the set-taboos. The portrayal of the women in the American literature, undoubtedly, in the Gothic is still influenced by an author’s personal judgment or frequent socio-political stereotypes of the women.

Leslie Fiedler claims, “For better or worse and for whatever reasons, the American novel is different from its European prototypes, and one of its essential differences arises from its chary treatment of women and sex.” Readers expect more independent, deviant, courageous, sexually matured women figures from the American writers. In the writings of Faulkner, we have a large group of women characters from different classes- from the most trivial to the most profound. The feminists, often, charge him as a misogynist for his poor treatment of the women in most of his writings though in the literary field there are so many

critics who defend the misogynistic approaches of Faulkner. Cleanth Brooks states that Faulkner portrays women with great skill and argues that he represents his women characters with much admiration and compassion. Like the women characters of F. Scott Fitzgerald's and of the other reputed American writers,' Faulkner's women characters are badly victimized while almost at the same period Zora Neale Hurston portrays her characters as strong, free-spirited, and self-sufficient women. Though he has applied all the modern techniques in his novels, he could not make himself free from portraying the women characters from the existing stereotyped traditional concept that the women are motherly, are dominating, and are promiscuous, and so on. He sees the women from the perspectives of 'good' and 'bad', and thus, his 'good' women are, always, the elderly females like Miss Rosa, Granny Millard, Aunt Jenny Du Pre, Dilsey who go through menopause and have no sexual charms. We find some dominating and possessive woman like Belle Mitchell who intentionally uses her body to confirm her domination over the men. The same intensity of the hatred is thrown against that lump of the fertility, Eula Varner in "The Hamlet," and against the young woman like Charlotte in "The Wild Palms," and Laverne Shumann in "Pylon" who sin not through committing crimes but through the insensitive mechanics of their sex. They use their sexuality with cold calculation in order to reach their goals. Faulkner hardly portrays the women characters with matured sexual love. His fascination is, always, towards frustrated, threatened femininity as his female characters are, often, incestuous, illogical, eccentric, destructive, and violent. He is the creator of many promiscuous women who are unreasonable, aggressive, and capable of betraying the men without hesitation or any sense of guilt. We come across numerous sex-driven bitches in the novels by Faulkner. There is Cecily Saunders, the 'papier-mache virgin' of "Soldier's Pay," there is Patricia Maurier, the 'sexless yet somehow troubling' flapper of "Mosquitoes," and there is an abominable girl Temple Drake in "Sanctuary".

Temple Drake, the protagonist of “Sanctuary,” is the most vulnerable of Faulkner’s female characters. She not only suffers but perpetuates violence as well. She is kidnapped and brutally raped by a Memphis gangster Popeye who is sexually impotent; and, therefore, must execute his purpose by indirect methods which are overwhelmingly brutal and revolting. Temple is eventually found in a brothel and returned to her father’s care. Her perjury at the ensuing trial leads to a false conviction for Lee Goodwin. Although the crime’s true perpetrator Popeye receives a form of poetic justice when he is later hanged for a crime he did not commit. Critics say that Temple Drake actively participates in determining her fate. Thus, Faulkner intentionally creates Drake to perform the positions of marginalization so that she can fulfill the grotesque, horrific atmosphere of a Gothic.

Femininity in “As I Lay Dying”

1.1. Addie Bundren

William Faulkner’s writing area is so wide that it is almost impossible for me to summarize all the female characters in an article. I am, therefore, taking the effort of analyzing my research query with special reference to “As I Lay Dying”. In “As I Lay Dying”, the whole theme revolves around Addie Bundren though she is dead throughout most part of the novel. In this novel, Faulkner has used the stream of consciousness technique- a distinctive narrative structure with multiple points of view and inner psychological voices of the characters. Actually, the novel centers of Faulkner’s penetrating description of the Bundrens’ journey across the Mississippi countryside to bury Addie, the wife and mother of the family. The story is narrated in turn by each of the family members, including Addie herself. But she is neither an ideal matriarch figure nor a passionate mistress. For a short time, she involves herself in an affair with Whitfield, the local minister and gets a son by him. Addie possesses a dysfunctional personality that creates all the sufferings, gloominess, and unnatural situation in the whole family. In one way or other, all the members of the Bundren

family are alienated. The alienation is a result of their constant fears and worries. Perhaps, they are threatened by their mother's infidelity and father's carelessness to the family. Dewey Dell is alienated and frightened by her pregnancy whereas Jewel is afraid as he discovers that he is not the real brother of Darl. Thus, all the troubles arise from Addie's negative personality and her disinterestedness in her family. Addie is a perfect representation of the Gothic heroine fulfilling all the criteria required for the particular genre. She is the source of all types of evils. Readers never get a scope to inquire of why Addie is so hateful to her husband and her family and takes revenge by engaging with the extramarital affair and getting pregnant.

Though horror, violence, and revenge, etc. are the characteristic features of Gothic literature, the Southern Gothic extends these features in a physical sense. Addie exposes herself as the most violent and grotesque figure so far as her morality is concerned. From the very beginning of her life, she is affected by the nihilistic approach of her father. Addie feels that during her whole life she is neglected and when she marries Anse, she hopes that through the violence of birth she can acquire a consciousness of life. She imposes her presence upon others only through violence and through participating in some types of violence feels less alone. When she works as a school teacher before the birth of Cash, she hates her students. And it is not because her students annoy her rather she wants to disturb them. The only way she makes an impact on them is by whipping them, and this makes her feel alive. After she becomes a mother, Addie realizes that the children have never violated her profound aloneness. Discovering that she is impregnated, Addie thinks that her aloneness has been penetrated, especially through the forthcoming childbirth. Soon after the birth of Cash, Addie's life becomes more terrible as she does not feel any motherly connection to the child of Anse. Thus, Cash is conceived as an act of violence. But years after, when she discovers that she has Darl in her womb, she realizes somehow she has been tricked by Anse's words.

As she has been tricked, she can never accept Darl. To take revenge Addie closes herself to Anse. She says that Anse is dead even though he does not know that he is dead. After ten years, Addie meets Whitfield and she sees in him the symbol of violence that she has been seeking because the garment which he exchanges for sin is sanctified. Addie believes that Jewel has been conceived in revenge and violence, and he, therefore, becomes her natural choice for salvation though both love and salvation have to be the products of violence. After the affair with Whitfield, Addie begins to prepare for her death. She admits that she gives birth to Dewey Dell to negate Jewel and gives birth to Vardaman to replace the child she robs off Anse. Thus, in the novel motherhood is presented as a chore and a punishment as well. Here, it seems that the author blames Addie for being cold, loveless, and dysfunctional to her family.

Through the characterization of Addie Faulkner establishes the concept of existentialism, that is, the terrific and horrible situation of human predicament where a woman/ man had to perform something to prove her/ his existence. Addie's character perfectly matches that she always perpetuates her presence by violence. Likewise, to prove her non-existence her children use symbols and compare her to animals. After Addie's death, Vardaman runs away as he is unable to fully understand that his mother is dead. He finds a fish in the dust and says, "It is cut up into pieces of not fish now, not blood on my hands and overalls- I jumped off the porch. I will be where the fish was, and it all cut up into not fish now."

1.2. Dewey Dell

Throughout the whole novel, there is hardly a space for the character Addie to grow up. She is a pre-determined character perfectly matched with a Southern Gothic. Aside from the discussions of the character Addie to make the paper more reasonable and, at the same time, to find out the research inquiry properly, it is necessary to analyze the characters Dewey

Dell as well as Cora Tull. Dewey Dell, who is born to negate another child, approaches life negatively. She moves in an orbit of egoism, seeing each action only as it immediately affects her. And as with Anse, she cares only for herself and uses any amount of deceit to get her way. She is unmarried and gets pregnant at a very early age. She refuses to assume any responsibility for her pregnancy. While the other Bundrens are busy with Addie's funeral, her whole concentration is in getting to the druggist in town for abortion. Her thoughts and slow actions are compared to a cow. She feels completely helpless after the death of Addie Bundren. The scene in which she becomes pregnant exemplifies the idea that the women are controlled by the men. To her, life becomes struggling and miserable, and she suspects all men. She should have been presented as a sportive, lovable, spontaneous, and rebellious female figure. But in every inch, she resembles her mother Addie Bundren. Thus, Faulkner presents her as incompetent, unfulfilled, and inconvenient to the family.

3.3. Cora Tull

“A woman's place is with her husband and children, alive or dead...I have tried to live right in the sight of God- for the honor and comfort of my Christian husband and the love and respect of my Christian children.” In the very beginning, this utterance indicates that Cora Tull has complete allegiance to her family, religion, and society. She is a very patronizing character and only female voice from the community, and due to her investment in white, middle-class Christian norms regarding mothers and wives, she rudely criticizes Addie. When Addie insists on her burial in Jefferson to her blood-relatives rather than in the nearby farm, Cora critiques it as “a woman's place is with her husband and children, alive or dead.” But through careful reading, readers can understand that she is a hypocrite and is not as loyal and religious, as she says. She establishes the status-quo for the women in the rural South. She promotes the orthodox concept of a patriarchal society that one should be loyal to

one's family over one's individual wishes and desires. As a narrator, she is not very reliable too. The representation of such type of woman is a common feature of a Gothic novel.

Conclusion

Thus, to find the relationship of Southern literature with the femininity I can see that the Southern literature does not treat women very positively. Whereas twentieth-century emerges with a new concept of womanhood with some prominent female authors, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Sarah Orne Jewet, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin who try their best female voices to reach the ears of readers and speak firmly of their rights and dignities; a group of Southern authors, like Faulkner and most other Gothic writers, present women in their writings as abominable and cursed as well. So, while the contemporary female authors who create such wonderful characters, like Delia ("Sweat," 1926); Janie Crawford ("Their Eyes Were Watching God," 1937); Faulkner represents his female characters as vulnerable, threatened, raped, liar, promiscuous, and sex-driven immoral creatures only to create the background of his Southern Gothic. Not a single female character of Faulkner's is powerful (both in the psychological and moral sense), independent, and brave that readers expect from a modern writer like William Faulkner. In this respect, it is important to mention that this antebellum concept of femininity, which Faulkner describes, is probably conceived of by him on the basis of actual Southern practice. Thus, Faulkner's concept of Southern women, though bias and negative whatever it is, seems to have been influenced greatly by his knowledge of Southern history and the Southern concept of womanhood.

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