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William Faulkner's Heroines

William Faulkner's imaginary Yoknapatawpha County reflects the complex structure of Southern society in which there is little place for women to assert their individuality. It is a world dominated by men, heads of old Southern clans. Married women, although idealized romantically and spiritually by the Southern cult of true womanhood, usually play a secondary role in society and the family. It is not surprising then, that the wives in Faulkner's novels are insubstantial and weak figures.

Yet, there is no doubt that older women in Faulkner's fiction are able to establish for themselves a unique position in this masculine hierarchy of the South. These old ladies, grandmothers or aunts - for example Aunt Jenny Du Pre of Sartoris, or Miss Eunice Habersham of Intruder in the Dust, and Rosa Millard of The Unvanquished - combine strength, courage and determination with good-humoured firmness and kindness. Such white women and black women as well, the patient and loving coloured mammys, are regarded as some of Faulkner's best fictional creations.

There is another group of notable women who assert their individuality in the world of Yoknapatawpha County. These young women are concerned with sex and feel no social restraints in their pursuit of sexual interests. This type is represented by rather mindless country girls: Lena Grove of Light in August, Bula Turner of The Hamlet and Dewey Dell of As I Lay Dying. The descendants of the decaying Southern aristocracy, Temple Drake of Sanctuary, Candice Compson of The Sound and the Fury, and Joanna Burden of Light in August, are presented as educated and sexually insatiable women. Many prostitutes, for instance Ruby Lamar of Sanctuary and Bobbie Allen of Light in August, also constitute a numerous group.

The portraits of all these women in Faulkner's novels are complex studies in human nature. These individuals cannot be easily labelled either "good" or "bad", or ranked with one particular class or type. Many women have great symbolic and thematic importance. Like most of Faulkner's characters, they exist in antithesis to other characters, and, through the ideas they symbolize, provide a perspective from which to view the novel as a whole.

One of Faulkner's typical devices in developing women characters is establishing psychic distance between the fictional character and the reader. The author does not take the reader inside the mind of his heroine, does not explore deeply their consciousnesses. The personalities of Faulknerian women are gradually revealed through their behaviour, but the motives for their actions are usually hidden. The women are not characterized as strongly as the men, whose inner lives are usually presented directly. For this reason the significance of women to the novels is not evident at once because they appear to be minor characters who contribute little to the general meaning of the novels. But in reality, these women take prominent parts in Faulkner's narrative, and the technique of psychic distance, although it makes the character presentation indirect and seemingly vague, is purposeful.

The Sound and the Fury portrays an important woman character - Candice Compson, a descendant of a once influential Southern family. In the first three sections of the novel, Candice, called Caddy, is seen through the eyes of her brothers. She is the major subject of their thoughts and memories, influencing their lives, opinions and states of mind. Since she has a different meaning for each, they emphasize different facts about her and convey different interpretations of the same events. In the fourth section time has erased Candice from the scene, considered a prostitute, she is driven out of home and her name is not mentioned among the Compsons at all. Although Caddy exists only in the minds of other characters, and not many facts concerning her are obvious, she is in fact the real focal point in the novel.

The narrator of the first section is Benji, an idiot who is not able to distinguish between the past and the present. For him Candice is the centre of his childhood world, providing it with love, order and security. She is at the same time the instrument of destruction, since, through the loss of her virginity and through her

subsequent marriage, she shatters Benji's inflexible and ordered world by simply introducing change. Quentin, the next narrator, chooses his sister as the main subject of his thoughts during the last day of his life. Because Candice means so much to him, he equates religious and moral values with her innocence and conduct. Caddy's loss of virginity destroys Quentin's idealized but irrational world based on traditional values and ideas. Quentin's obsessive contemplation of Caddy's act of betrayal displays his struggle with reality and time, two facts with which he cannot come to terms. His incestuous jealousy and fear of losing Caddy cause the despair which leads him to suicide. Jason's attitude towards Candice is diametrically opposite to that of his brothers. His conviction that she is to blame for his lack of success in business turns into hate and bitterness for her. Because Caddy is away, Jason decides to take revenge on her daughter by stealing her money. His sense of injury is so deeply - rooted that it does not diminish with time. Caddy has no meaning for Jason except as the symbol of his loss and failure.

The disintegration of the Compson family is fully manifested through the utter loss of love. For only Caddy was capable of giving love, and when she is gone, selfishness and egotism completely dominate the family. Her concern for her brothers and father, and her devotion and love for her daughter, are contrasted with the hypocritical Mrs. Compson, who falls in her role as mother.

The three dissimilar, yet complementary, presentations of Caddy are connected with the problem of the discrepancy between truth and man's perception and interpretation of it. Hence Caddy's central role accentuates two themes which form an essential part of The Sound and the Fury, that of truth and of love, of which she is a symbol.

Lena Grove of Light in August also does not initially appear to be one of the main characters. The novel deals with the problem of the Negro in Southern society and with miscegenation, and at the same time explores the South's racial mentality. Lena's story, whose relation to the stories of the other characters is not immediately apparent, constitutes a frame which opens and closes the novel.

As the novel begins, Lena, a poor country girl, is shown travelling alone in search of the father of her child who is about to be born. She finds the man she is looking for, but he manages to run away a second time. At the end of the novel, without being discouraged,

Lena continues her journey with her newborn baby and Byron Bunch, a man who fell in love with her and decided to take care of her and the baby.

Numerous critics, for example Kenneth F. Richardson¹ and Peter Szegert², have considered Lena Grove an earthmother, a sort of pagan earth-goddess. Her union with nature is established in various places in the novel, suggesting Lena as timeless, beautiful and spiritual. Other critics, such as Frederick Hoffman³ and Alfred Kazin⁴, are of the opinion that Lena carries Christian implications as well. She is seen as a Christian Madonna, showing great faith in the Lord, and trust and confidence in people.

Lena is a simple, naive country girl, patiently bearing what fate might bring her. She achieves peace because she takes life as it is and firmly believes that the Lord will care for her. She is untroubled by the future, abstract ideas, or traditions. It is perhaps this simplicity and innocence which account for the peculiar power she has over people. She makes herself felt particularly in the lives of the recluse Hightower, causing his reentry into life, and Byron Bunch, whom she transforms into a man of action.

Lena Grove is also viewed in relation to characters with whom she has never come into contact. In the first place, she is seen as a foil for Joe Christmas, one of the main characters, who is a victim of Puritan mode of thinking and of the racial prejudices that demand a distinct division of Southern society into white and black. Lena, as an embodiment of instinctive nature, stands in sharp contrast to Christmas, who is alienated from nature and thus responds to life unaturally. The qualities of the natural life which Lena represents - fecundity, patience, endurance, trust, and a simple enjoyment of experience - are contrasted with the narrow and life-denying rigidity of Joe Christmas. Symbolizing fertility, Lena Grove stands in contrast primarily to Joanna Burden, an old spinster, who like Christmas and many other characters, produces nothing and is only the cause of misfortune, destruction and death.

Lena Grove is above all a symbol accentuating the main contrasts on which Light in August is based, the contrasts of birth and destruction, peace and violence, nature and the world of abstractions. Lena's natural response to life, her peacefulness and simplicity are set against the violence and obsessions of a rigid and intolerant society. Her mere presence seems to generate a vital life force which affects various people. She brings out the good in people by intro-

ducing the laws of nature into society. The ending of the novel with Lena on the road again, is an affirmation of life.

Faulkner's Negro women are strongly presented as persons who act with motives as complex as those of their white counterparts. They demonstrate loyalty, capacity for passion and endurance, and dignity which is often contrasted with the dissipated families they serve. To such loyal servants and mamies belong: Elmore of Sartoris; Louvinia of The Unvanquished; and Aunt Molly Beauchamp of Go Down, Moses.

Clytie of Absalom, Absalom! is also a faithful servant who guards the secrets of the white man, Clytie, a mulatto and the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner and a Negro slave, considered it her duty to take care of the last descendants of the family and to pay, through work and suffering, for the wrong that her father has done.

Nancy Mannigoe of Requiem for a Nun is the only Negro woman in Faulkner's prose who appears to be a criminal. But her crime is symbolic and in fact, a manifestation of her great devotion to the family she serves. With full moral awareness Nancy smotheres the child of Temple and Gowan Stevens in order to preserve their marriage. Her act brings Temple to the realization of her own duty and her own guilt. Nancy is a personification of absolute faith and provides the work with an affirmative note.

The most memorable Negro character in all of Faulkner's novels is Dilsey of The Sound and the Fury. The last section of the novel, devoted primarily to her, takes place on Easter Sunday on which she prepares breakfast and then goes to church. The members of the deteriorating Compsons stand in contrast to Dilsey, who is a constant reminder of permanent human values. With her fidelity, patience, endurance and love, she preserves the best values of the past which the Compsons have irrevocably lost.

Dilsey has become the centre of the household, taking over the maternal responsibilities of the foolish and self-giving Mrs. Compson. After Caddy is driven out, it is Dilsey who cares for the idiot Benjy and Caddy's daughter. Dilsey's humanity and simplicity provide a contrast to the cynical Compsons, their obsessions and sterile philosophizing. Because she faces the pains of life with courage and dignity, Dilsey is able to create order out of disorder by calmly going about her household chores. Dilsey does not ask abstract questions, and she accepts whatever time brings without considering

it a destructive force. The full significance of Dilsey's role as an ethical norm is revealed by the Easter service in which she participates with her family and Benjy. Her actions and participation in the service testify to "the old universal truths...love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Dilsey is an unforgettable character who embodies affirmation which counterbalances the nihilism and despair of the novel.

Some women emphasize an important theme pervading Faulkner's novels - the opposition of nature with society. Against the image of modern, dehumanized man in a modern society Faulkner sets the characters of Lena Grove, Nancy Mannigoe and Dilsey Gibson who are simple, non-intellectual women. They have not been affected by the complexities of society and are therefore free to respond naturally to experience and to life. Lena symbolizes nature, but Nancy and Dilsey are in union with nature by reason of their race. These simple and primitive characters are isolated from society. Nancy and Dilsey, as Negroes and servants, are on the fringe of it, and Lena, indifferent to its laws, is free from its influence. Although Candice Compson is not a member of this class, she, too, is separated from society because she is rejected by her family and proclaimed a "fallen woman." Candice gives herself to life without being restricted by abstract concepts, and in this respect she is similar to Lena.

Taking into consideration the role of women in Faulkner's narrative, one can then see a relationship between technique and meaning. One way of accounting for the indirect method of presenting women characters, as if from a distance, is that for Faulkner women do not exist or act in the realm of abstract thought. Faulkner's women do not seem to attach so much significance to words because they sense the inadequacy of words to reflect reality. Addie Bundren of As I Lay Dying realizes that there exists a gap between words and what they attempt to express. She puts great emphasis on her children and on sex, which fulfill her nature as a woman and give her a sense of being alive. What Addie verbalizes pertains to many other feminine characters, and perhaps explains the meaning of Faulkner's artistic strategy. Edmond Volpe's explanation of the nature of Faulknerian women provides a further clarification of the problem.

The tendency toward abstraction, which removes the human being from his own nature and the natural world is, in Faulkner's view, tempered in the female by biology. As childbearer and mother, the

female has strong instincts related to reproduction of the species. Attached more firmly than the male to the forces operative in nature, the female is less liable to be absorbed by concepts that have no connection with reality.

Those women who are victims of abstract concepts or who are unfit for the role of mother are alienated from nature and as a result acquire masculine features. Joanna Burden of Light in August, almost man-like in her dress, is a victim of her upper-middle class background. Her great devotion to her work for the benefit of Negroes results in the denial of her femininity. Temple Drake of Sans-thury, a corrupted girl of respectable family, acts more like a seducer than one seduced. Her name supposedly points to her masculine features. In Requiem for a Nun, a sequel to Sanctuary, Temple, driven by a sense of guilt, examines her experience in terms of abstract concepts. Both Joanna and Temple voice the stories of their lives and analyze the forces which have influenced them.

This essay has presented only a rough sketch of some important women characters in Faulkner's fiction. The analysis has emphasized those women who are faithful to the natural laws of the universe and to their identities as women. Their union with nature enables them to acquire an instinctive knowledge of the truths of life. They are loving mothers or mother substitutes and have Faulkner's utmost respect and admiration, although the author's imagination has placed them beyond the sphere of abstractness and tradition, even in some cases beyond social respectability. Due to the method of indirect presentation, the importance of these characters is not immediately evident to the reader; however, their symbolic functions, as well as individualities, lend thematic and artistic significance to the novels in which they appear.

Streszczenie

Mityczna kraina stworzona przez Williama Faulknera, Yoknapatawpha County, odzwierciedla skomplikowaną strukturę społeczeństwa Półdnia, w którym kobiety odgrywały rolę drugorzędną. Jedyną rolę można wskazać wiele postaci kobiet, które stanowią wybitne studia natury ludzkiej. Do tych kobiet wyróżniających się swoją indywidualnością należą: starsze przedstawicielki arystokratycznych rodów, Murzynki - wierne służące i piastunki, jak również naiwne wiejskie dziewczyny, prostytutki oraz kobiety pochodzące z podupadłych, niegdys' wpływowych rodzin.

Artykuł przedstawia zaledwie pobieżny szkic niektórych ważniejszych postaci podkreślając ich znaczenie dla ogólnej wymowy utworów. Większość Faulknerowskich kobiet w porównaniu z postaciami męskimi jest ukazana z glisicje, stąd rola i znaczenie kobiet są widoczne dopiero po wnikliwej analizie utworów. Wynika to z faktu, że za "prawdziwe" kobiety Faulkner uważa kochające matki i opiekunki, które w jego twórczości związane są bardziej z przyrodą niż ze sferą intelektu i abstrakcji.

References

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Pornografia czy literatura?
"Kochanek Lady Chatterley"

David Herbert Lawrence jest z pewnością pisarzem kontrowersyjnym, co podkreślano wielokrotnie przy rozmaitych okazjach. Jedną z nich była jeszcze niedawno dyskusja nad obecnnością niektórych jego dzieł, dyskusja, która osiągnęła apogeum w roku 1960, kiedy to odbył się proces "Kochanka Lady Chatterley". Wydawcy zostali oskarżeni o naruszenie moralności publiczne. Jednocześnie Królestwa przez rozpowszechnianie nieprzystojnego języka powieści. Wydawcy wygrali proces / o którym nb. powstała cała książka/, co stało się wydarzeniem precedensowym w upowszechnianiu innych, dyskryminowanych dotąd dzieł i co przysporzyło popularyzacji, choć nieco fałszywej, samemu autorowi.

Wśród krytyków renesansu zainteresowania Lawrence'em nastąpił w połowie lat pięćdziesiątych; opublikowano wówczas dwie ważne pozycje: biografię "The Intelligent Heart" H.T. Moore'a /1954/ oraz rozprawę krytyczną "D.H. Lawrence: Novelist" F.R. Leavisa /1955/. Następnie pojawiło się kilka książek, których celem była rewaluacja dotychczasowych pojęć o autorze "The Rainbow". Z ważniejszych odnotować należy: G.Hough, "The Dark Sun" /1956/; E. Vivas, "D.H. Lawrence. The Failure and the Triumph of Art" /1961/; J. Moynahan, "The Deed of Lifer" /1963/; H.M. Dalecki, "The Forked Flame" /1965/; Colin Clarke, "The River of Dissolution" /1969/; oraz F. Kermode, "Lawrence" /1973/. Wspólnym mianownikiem większości tych prac jest zmiana nastawienia w stosunku do końcowego okresu twórczości D.H. Lawrence'a. Chodzi tu szczególnie o jego ostatnią powieść "Kochanek Lady Chatterley", którą docenia się obecnie, a nierazko przecenia, ze względu na niezwykle sugesty-