



Common Themes In William Faulkner's 'Dry September' And Harper Lee's 'To Kill A Mockingbird'

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'Dry September', by William Faulkner, was first published in the Scribner's Magazine in 1931. His other works include The Sound and the Fury (1929), As I Lay Dying (1930), Sanctuary (1931), and Absalom, Absalom! (1936) among others. They are often rooted in American history and explore the concepts of vigilantism, prejudices and systemic injustices. 'Dry September' is based in the post-bellum era that is the post-civil war period in the southern region of America. **This paper looks at the common themes of dehumanization, ambiguity, allyship and violence in William Faulkner's 'Dry September' and Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird'.**

Pioneered by authors like Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorn, William Faulkner and Edgar Allan Poe, the short story format came to be known as the 'National art form of America' that resounded with America's fast paced lifestyle. The 1920s and the 1930s were known as the years of southern renaissance wherein Faulkner defined the lineaments of what is known as Southern literature with its own distinctive topoi. In commenting on what constitutes good writing, he said, in his Banquet speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, that it was *'the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing'*.

Dry September is narrated by a third person narrator who is unnamed. The narrator being unnamed allows more space to Faulkner for giving out a non-biased narration, wherein the reader doesn't associate the narrator with any race or ethnicity. Due to this, the narrator is able to narrate incidents of past and present from the lives of different characters without passing any judgement and the reader is left to form their own inferences out of the articulated incidents. Whereas, in 'To Kill a Mockingbird' is narrated by the protagonist Scout Finch who grows from the age of six to nine through the course of the novel. The reader is able to understand the psyche of children who don't see the world through the lens of prejudices and pre formed tropes. The reader grows and matures with the narrator and hence their own pre- formed schemas are challenged and subsequently proven futile.

'Dry September' is set in the south of the post-civil war period of 1865. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 was subsequently succeeded by a long standing war between the unionist and the eleven confederate states of the south, that culminated in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. In the 'The Gettysburg Address' wherein Lincoln mourned the loss of the dead soldiers he also affirmed his resolve that, 'These dead (Union soldiers) shall not have died in vain- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth'. Lincoln's resolution resulted in the three fundamental amendments of the Reconstruction era (1863-77) that paved way for abolition of slavery, equality of all before law and voting rights for formerly enslaved African-Americans. The southern agrarian economy had flourished because of slavery and hence the south was intolerant of its abolition. Thus, the old southern myths of white superiority and racial intolerance kept thriving resulting in laws like Jim Crow Segregation and Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, both of which form the backdrop of Faulkner's and Lee's works. They have explored the enactment of phenomenon like Southern White Goddess, Southern White Gentleman, Old South Myth and Mob Lynching of the black population.

Lee's and Faulkner's works delineate the interconnectedness between racial prejudices and sexual insecurities. Mini Cooper's inability to come to terms with ageing and the lack of social attraction surrounding her puts her in a place of inescapable desperation. Her desire to be addressed as "cousin" and constant reference to her affair hints towards her ferocious longing for youth. This is a direct consequence of her incapability to fit into the gendered stereotypical expectations from women.

Similarly, John McLendon's days of battlefield and glory are long gone. He finds himself at the end of a collapsing masculinity both in the societal and domestic sphere. His home is termed as a "birdcage" and his frustration over losing control is evident in his violent behaviour towards his wife. Hence, these gender insecurities find themselves translating through deep rooted racial tensions as both Mini Cooper and John McLendon become the primary cause of the death of Will Mayes.

Like the society that gave them its values, both Minnie and McLendon are in the "Dry September" of their lives. Their golden moment is long in the past. When we see them in this story, they are like torture victims stretched on a rack. Fantasy turns the screw at one end. Reality, inexorably, turns the screw at the other end. The murder of Will Mayes, initiated by Minnie and carried out by McLendon is the final turn of the screw. Minnie cracks, and McLendon is at the breaking point. The fantasies of both are rooted in the sexual roles ordained for them by the codes and traditions of their society. And those roles fate has not allowed them to fulfil (*"Dry September": Metaphor for Despair Author(s): Edmond L. Volpe*).

'To Kill a Mockingbird' takes place in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the Great Depression. The protagonist, Scout Finch, is a 6 years old white girl, who is raised by her father Atticus Finch and her brother Jeremy Finch. When Tom Robinson, one of the town's Black residents, is falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman, Atticus agrees to defend him despite threats from the white community. At one point he faces a mob intent on lynching his client but refuses to abandon him. Scout unwittingly diffuses the situation. Although Atticus presents a defense that gives a more plausible interpretation of the evidence—that Mayella was attacked by her father, Bob Ewell—Tom is convicted, and he is later killed while trying to escape custody. A character compares his death to **"the senseless slaughter of songbirds"** (Harper Lee) paralleling Atticus's saying about the mockingbird. The children meanwhile become interested in Arthur Radley, their recluse neighbour, who they refer to as "Boo Radley". They think of him in other worldly traits and characteristics. Boo makes his presence felt indirectly through a series of benevolent acts, finally intervening when Bob Ewell attacks Jeremy and Scout. There are four common themes and backdrop in Harper Lee's 'To kill a mocking bird' and William Faulkner's 'Dry September' that is dehumanization, allyship and violence.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay **‘Can the sub-altern speak?’** defines ‘sub-altern’ as “people removed from all lines of social mobility and having no access to change their situation”. This ‘removal’ underscores itself through the process of systemic, structural and social dehumanization. The ‘fear of the other’ is articulated in the statement, **“Not a Negro on the square. Not one” (Dry September, William Faulkner)**. This idea of dehumanization is correlated to an undermining of one’s identity and viewing the ‘other’ as a generalised homogenous group and neglecting the individualistic attributes. The changing of address from ‘Will Mayes’ to ‘Negro’ as the story progresses is hinting towards this building narrative of depriving the ‘other’ of their humane self. On the other hand Harper Lee portrays the building up of this narrative of dehumanization through the character of Boo Radley. She examines the phenomenon of the exposure of a young mind that is Scout Finch to the prejudices and stereotypes of racial discrimination. Jeremy’s and Scout’s inability to know the unseen Boo Radley leads to them creating an image of him as a “monster”. Thus, Lee points out to the idea of an imagined threat. It is only as the children start noticing the ‘benevolent’ acts of Arthur and the climatic incident of him killing Bob Ewell, they start to humanize him. While, Will Mayes becomes ‘the Negro’ in ‘Dry September’, ‘Boo’ becomes Arthur towards the ending of the plot.

The second overlapping theme among the two texts is ambiguity. ‘Dry September’ begins with the words **“the rumour, the story, whatever it was”**. Through this, Faulkner sets the tone of ambiguity right from the beginning. The space between fact and fiction allows people to form their own narratives that suit their racial tropes. It is established that nobody wishes to attempt or find the truth but are only interested in the pursuit of racial violence. McLendon’s constant denial of acknowledging the lack of evidence is similar to the psyche of the white population in ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’. Despite Atticus’ defense statement proving otherwise, Tom Robinson is accused and imprisoned. Thus, the ambivalence due to this ambiguity allows for exercise of racial prejudice. **“McLendon whirled upon him his furious, rigid face. The barber did not look away. They looked like men of different races” (Dry September, William Faulkner)**. Herein, Faulkner goes to the extent of challenging the idea of ‘race’ itself and unwaveringly question the reader on what actually constitutes a ‘race’. He lays bare the human farce of racial lines and any unnatural basis of segregation. The idea of race in itself is questioned.

Scholar Wilbert Cash in her essay talks about white woman as south palladium, mystic symbol of southern nationality, pitfall of mother of god etc. In 1941, he wrote, 'The mind of the south' and introduced the term 'Rape Complex'. He quotes, "It is a subject on which there is much misunderstanding. 'Negro' apologists and others bent on damning the south at any cost have during the last decade or so constantly and vociferously associated the presentation of figures or date designed to show that no rape menace exists or has ever existed in the southern country." With the conclusion that this "rape complex" is therefore a fraud, a hypocritical pretext behind which the south has always cynically and knowingly hidden near sadism and economic interests, so as to have it widely accepted.

The third theme is the texts is violence primarily mob lynching. Faulkner focus on the building up of a mob mentality and its aftermath. He is not interested in the display of the event itself and hence the story begins after the incident. It focus on the psyche of a mob fuelled by racial prejudices and toxic hyper masculinity. The 'southern white gentleman' sees itself failing at the prospect of a miscegenation between a white woman and a black man. Hence, this leadsto building up of a sexual frustration that translates itself as violence towards black men. The building up of a mob is accelerated post the arrival of John McLendon who challenges and provokes their masculinity. **"Well, he said, are you going to sit there and let a black son rape a white woman on the street of Jefferson?" (William Faulkner, Dry September)** Thus, the southern gentleman assumes the responsibility of restoring the pre-civil war past for the south. The attitude of the people in the barber show towards Henry Hakshaw also changes post the entry of John McLendon and they become increasingly intolerant of him. Similarly, in 'To Kill a Mockingbird' several instances of violence occur based on racially motivated tropes. The attempted lynching of Tom Robinson hints towards overstepping of the state legal structure. Through this informal white judiciary that attempt to subvert the idea of justice, Lee aims to point out the futility of a legal structure that is not backed by societal change and tolerance. Thus, Lee successfully points out how even after legal amendments, the American society is still gripped by strong racially motivated sentiments. The use of a mob to bring about fatal violence against the "sub-altern" is a testament to the lack of accountability faced by the bigoted white men for their actions. The idea of being able to get away without facing any consequences for their actions makes violence into a systemic oppression validated by the state.

Dust puffed around him . . ." (179). The moon had finally risen above the dust, but through the eyes of Hawk "the town began to glare beneath the dust" (179). Finally, the lights of the cars "grew in the dust" (179), passed him, and returned to the dust. The last paragraph of the section describes how the dust that the men had raised will simply be absorbed by the ever-present dust. The crime of the men and their guilt will be assumed and excused by their society. **(Dust and Dreams: A Study of Faulkner's "Dry September" Author(s): Arthur L. Ford)**

The fourth common theme in both the texts is allyship. Allyship is defined as intolerance towards injustices against a community that one isn't necessarily a part of. It also involves going against one's own community and standing against their oppressive actions. The two people we see trying to defend the rights of black people are Henry and Atticus. Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson even after facing backlash and out casting from the white population of Alabama. He firmly stood his ground for empathy and justice even after facing threats and attempted violence against him. Despite, his children being excluded from Christmas celebrations of the 'white church', Atticus still deeply believed against killing of the innocent "mockingbirds". On the other hand, Henry's attempts at pacifying the situation are limited only till it doesn't affect him. He decided to abandon Will Mayes, rather than facing the situation.

"Mr Henry," the Negro said.

The barber began to tug furiously at the door. "Look out there!" the soldier said, but the barber had already kicked the door open and swung onto the running board. The soldier leaned across the Negro and grasped at him, but he had already jumped. The car went on without checking speed"
(William Faulkner, Dry September)

The major difference between Atticus and Henry is that while Atticus stands against racism and is a genuine ally, Henry doesn't want to be labelled as a "nigger-lover". His constant stress upon Will Mayes' identity and name as an individual whom he knows hints towards his lack of capability to support a black person and not only Will Mayes. Scholar Karl Popper gave the "Paradox of Intolerance" wherein they point that how there is no tolerance without intolerance. It is not just enough to be a passive non-follower but rather the necessity of being an active oppose in order to bring about substantial change.

Therefore, unlike Atticus, Henry cannot be called an ally to the black population.

The works of both Faulkner and Lee depict the deep rooted racism in American society by exploring the themes of violence, ambiguity, allyship, dehumanization and collapsing white masculinity. They give the readers an insight into the minds and lives of their characters and the complexities of racial and sexual tensions and hence are the texts that stay with one long after they have been read.

WORKS CITED

1. 'Dry September' by William Faulkner
2. 'To kill a Mockingbird' by Harper Lee
3. Gayatri Spivak - Can the sub-altern speak?
4. "Dry September": Metaphor for Despair Author(s): Edmond L. Volpe
5. Dust and Dreams: A Study of Faulkner's "Dry September" Author(s): Arthur L. Ford
6. Scholar Wilber Cash 'Understanding the south'

