

The Sources of Faulkner's Humanism

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Abstract

William Faulkner was one of the most internationally influential writers in the 20th century. He enjoyed a high reputation of "American Shakespeare", and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949 by virtue of his great literary achievements. His works are rich and broad, covering the fields of society, culture and history in American South. What runs through his works is his deep humanistic concern with man's, especially women's existence and fate. The sources of his humanistic spirit derive from the following three aspects: the tradition of Puritanism, humanitarianism and existentialism.

Key words: William Faulkner; Puritanism; Humanism; Existentialism

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INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner, was deemed as one of the most outstanding writers of the 20th century in America as well as all over the world. He enjoyed the reputation of "the American Shakespeare" and won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949 by virtue of his great literary achievements. All through his works, he created "Yoknapatawpha Kingdom", which is based on his

hometown Oxford, Mississippi, to introduce and analyze the society, culture, history and reality of American South. What impenetrate his whole works are his deep and profound humanistic concerns, the sources of which derive from the following three aspects: the tradition of Puritanism; humanitarianism and existentialism. The paper will illustrate the sources of Faulkner's humanism of these three perspectives in the following.

1. SEEKING ETERNITY FROM CULTURAL TRADITION

All writers grow up in a specific society and culture, whose traditions determine their thinking patterns and life attitudes, and influence their thoughts and behaviors, which is just like human gene and blood, deeply rooted in their whole life. There is no exception to William Faulkner. His writings are closely related to the society, history and cultural traditions of American South, where he was born and grew up.

American South is a place so-called "biblical belt". There, Puritanism makes up the foundation of its social and cultural tradition. Faulkner's grandfather and parents were both pious Puritans. Growing up in such a traditional family, he and his brothers were sent to Christian schools at very early age. And they were compelled by their grandfather to recite a passage of *The Bible* before breakfast every day. If they failed to do so, they would be forbidden to eat and be punished severely. This habit and practice were passed on after his grandfather's death. So from the age of a child, Faulkner had been soaked in *The Bible*, which constitutes the cultural tradition of his writing and exerts great influences not only on his emotions but also on his creative works later. However, to a large degree, Faulkner was not a real Christian writer. Instead of publicizing Christian doctrines, what he explored in his works is "the resurrection of human nature" to point out a redemption road for miserable and perplexed Southerners after the Civil War, as he said in

the Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech:

.....I believe that man will not merely endure: He will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.(Meriwether, 1965)

The "glory of man's past" is no other than the traditions and virtues advocated by Puritanism in American South. Based on "selection", "justification", "vocation", "sanctification" and "glorification", the important Christian doctrines, Puritans publicize a set of virtues, such as "piety", "solemnness", "humility", "honesty" and "diligence". This religious culture fosters a spiritual temperament of pursuing honor, full of courage, admiring self-esteem and sacrifice. American South after the Civil War was characterized by turbulence and intranquility, which resulted in not only the poor and backward economy but spiritual loss of the people there. Lost and puzzled, American Southerners then attached much more importance to these old noble qualities than before, especially William Faulkner. He spared no effort to call for and explore "the glory of man's past". In his works, Faulkner affectionately portrayed characters, who are the traditional incarnation with the eternal quality of "the glory of man's past". For example, five generations of the Sartoris in *Sartoris* are all brave, tough; dare to love and hate, leaving life and death out of consideration. Another is Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*, who refuses the sinful inheritance from his ancestors, returns his inherited land to the black people and lives a simple life himself in the forest for the rest of his life. Dilsey, a great woman in *the Sound and the Fury*, lives a life based on a set of fundamental value, such as family, faith, devotion, personal honor, mercy, and so on. She is very patient and selfless, and treats the children of her master with tender love, deep sympathy and solemn fairness. Lena, a brave and optimistic girl in *Light in August*, is pure and simple, but courageous and persistent. She is alone on the long journey to find a legal father for her unborn baby. Although abandoned by Lucas, she is still optimistic and never abandons herself. In Faulkner's works, even the wild is full of the noble qualities. For example, Old Ben in *Bear* also reflects such virtues as mercy, humility, bravery, pride and patience. In a word, "the glory of man's past" is the future and hope for human beings, by which Faulkner was meant to search for a spiritual support and road for the future of the Southerners to hold up "the house divided", American South.

Just as Jean Paul Sartre puts it, "Faulkner's vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in

an open car and looking backward (Sartre, 1996, p.79). Confronted with the invasion and impact from modern industrial civilization, Faulkner firmly stuck to the old cultural tradition, and persistently explored life forces and virtues for the Southerners as well as all the perplexed modern people trapped in moral dilemma. The redemption for them is back to tradition, that is, back to eternity. In this sense, Faulkner was a veritable conservative of cultural tradition.

2. HUMANITARIAN REFLECTION AND CRITICISM

Although Faulkner persistently stuck to cultural tradition of American South, his reminiscence and attachment to the cultural tradition cannot veil his reflection and criticism on the history and tradition of American South, which demonstrates his deep and profound humanitarianism. Human-centered humanitarianism is a constant theme in Faulkner's works.

In 1955 when answering a Japanese reporter, Faulkner said firmly, "I want to say, and I hope, the very school I belong to, and I am willing to belong to is that of humanism" (Leland, 1977, p.268). Therefore, in his Yoknapatawpha Saga, he always kept man instead of God and Christianity as a start as well as a destination of his novels. His major concern and interest lies in man himself, especially the man in conflict with himself, the people around him, and his time and circumstances. Although Faulkner was deeply influenced by Christianity, man is his first concern prior to God in his works. Thus, he constructed his own artistic world where the center is man, showing his deep humanitarian emotions. Firstly, Faulkner treated his characters tolerantly; even they are failures in life. He spoke highly of the little Caddy, a heroine in *the Sound and the Fury*, who are rebellious for free. Caddy is a beautiful and kind girl, but unfortunately she becomes degenerated and ruined due to the lack of family affection in the process of her growing up, to whom Faulkner still gave his deep care, sympathy and understanding. In addition, he could understand Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, who become pessimistic and vulnerable on account of his time and family. Secondly, Faulkner described the warmth of family fondly, such as brotherly affection and the love between fathers and sons. In a word, his works are very humane.

However, what's most striking feature is that Faulkner gave his profound criticism to myriad evils and sins in American South, surpassing the limits of rationalism, which is popular with the Southerners. First of all, he had an undying hate for the ingrained slavery in American South. Under his pen, the black people are discriminated and disadvantaged in the white-dominated society. Not only are they economically exploited, but also they are maltreated unscrupulously by the white. Cursed as "a

damn herd of wild buffaloes, they are beat and scolded, traded like the fungible commodities, even burnt to death or dismembered by illegal punishment". For example, Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, a man doomed and deracinated due to his mixed blood of white and black, wanders the Deep South all his life in search of an identity and a place in the society. After killing his perverted God-fearing lover, it becomes inevitable that he is lynched by the mob. Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a man with part of black blood, is abandoned by his white father, and killed by his half-brother. The black women are more miserable. Black women slaves are ravaged and trampled by the white slavers at will. In *Go Down, Moses*, to gratify his desire, Carothers MacCaslin, a white slaver, buys a black woman, Eunice. However, only Eunice cannot gratify his desire. Shamelessly, Old Carothers turns to sow his white seed in his mulatto daughter, Tomasina. Such beastly behaviors directly lead to Eunice's "walking into the icy creek on Christmas day...Solitary, inflexible, griefless, ceremonial, in formal and succinct repudiation of grief and despair who had already had to repudiate belief and hope" (Faulkner, 1970, p.257). In the second place, Faulkner also strongly blasted the Southern concept of woman, which is based on Puritanism. In Deep South women are shadow characters. As a second sex, they are in the subordinate status in the patriarchal society, where a Calvinistic code is prevailing. The man-centered Christian culture hold backs women's mentality and freedom. They are deprived of being themselves, and are made into ladies. Mercilessly distorted and ruined by the patriarchal yoke, Southern women have no identity and voice of their own. Oppressed and tortured by the traditional Puritan concept of women, some women resort to severe and extreme measures to make themselves live as a true human being. Miss Emily in *A Rose for Emily* is a beautiful lady from a noble family of decline. Her father deprives her of her rights to love and get married. After her father's death, she goes to extremes and falls in love with Homer, a Yankee, despite the strong objection from all the white people in her town. However and unfortunately, Homer has no intention to marry her. Tragically and horribly, Emily kills her lover and keeps his dead body in her bedroom. Since then, she sleeps with her lover's dead body until she dies. In such an abnormal way, Miss Emily pursues her own love and protests to the Patriarchal society in America South. Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* is pretty and caring but gets lost in the course of growing up. Unfortunately, she becomes promiscuous and gets pregnant before her marriage. All these are due to the excessive constraint and indifference of her family. Deserted by her family and her husband, she becomes a prostitute and a lover of Nazi staff. It is the Southern Puritan concept of women that bring about the degeneration and ruin of these beautiful women.

Generally speaking, Faulkner showed strong humanitarianism in his works, including his concerns

for individuals, especially for women, and criticism for myriad evils and sins in American South, which reflects the feelings and spirits of Christian freedom, equality and philanthropism. Therefore, the essence of Faulkner's humanitarianism belongs to western Christian humanitarianism.

3. REFLECTIONS ON THE EXISTENCE OF HUMAN BEING

As a form of philosophy, existentialism came into being in the early twentieth century, when the Western world was experiencing a spiritual crisis resulting from the two World Wars. The main proposition of existentialism is the concern about the situation of man's existence. It highlights personal freedom, value, sense of responsibility and moral restraint. Since literature explores the existence and fate of human being in a special way, so it is also called the literature about human to some degree. Therefore, there is a natural connection between existentialism and literature. Coincidentally, it is obvious to see the shadow of existentialism in Faulkner's works. Sartre and Camus, two leading representatives of existentialism in France, both spoke highly of Faulkner. Especially, Sartre made a comment on Faulkner's works in his literary essay *on the Sound and the Fury: Time in the Work of William Faulkner*, by which Faulkner made a hit in France. However, Faulkner never admitted he had learned about existentialism and denied its influence on his writing and composition. But it is apparent and easy to find the coincidence and similarity between Faulkner's thoughts and existentialism.

Existentialism is mainly concerned with the existence of individuals. Its starting point is the sense of existence and situation. As a sensitive artist, Faulkner is keenly aware of the dilemmas of the modern man and is preoccupied with human's misery and destiny. Thus, existence becomes a necessary part in realistic life and makes up the preliminary basis of his works. One of the most remarkable features of Faulkner's novels is that he gave priority to the absurd and embarrassing existential situation of American Southerners who survived the Civil War, by which Faulkner aimed at arousing the attention and concern of modern people with the problems in Deep South, in this way they can place themselves in the position of the Southerners, and thus become considerate to the miserable situation of American Southerners at that time. After the Civil War, the defeated American South experienced a dramatically historical change and social turbulence. The invasion of Northern industrial civilization destroyed the traditional agricultural civilization. Selfishness and greed on material interests were imposed on the Southerners by capitalism. The traditional beliefs and values had gone, leading to moral chaos and the collapse of old social orders. The conflicts

and contradictions between the tradition and modern world, virtues and evils, pushed the Southerners into an almost breakdown state. The difficult existential situation impelled the Southerners into the slaves of history and tradition. Although the glory of the South had gone, they were still absorbed in the glory of the past, daring not to face the reality of modern world. For the black people, their existential situations were much tougher. They were unprivileged both economically and socially. They were deprived of freedom as well as dignity. The mixed-blood people with part black were also faced with much more difficult situations, for the intermarriage between the white and the black was severely forbidden in Deep South. The women there were confronted with the dilemma of sex. They were marginalized in the man-centered south. They had no self-independence and freedom to make their decisions, having to submit to their family, their father and social customs. They were regarded as the tools for carrying on the family line. In a word, the social dilemma caused by the lost belief and faith, the racial dilemma of the black together with the marginalized sex dilemma of the women, pushed the Southerners into the edge of survival.

In light of Existentialism, the world is absurd and life is painful. But it also proposes that “existence precedes essence”, which means that the most important consideration for individuals is that they are individuals. They have absolute freedom to make choices and take actions. However, they should be responsible for their choices and actions. By experiencing anxiety, loneliness, confusion and despair, they can gain insight into the true meaning of freedom. Thus, human beings, through their own consciousness, can create their own values and determine the meaning of their life. In Faulkner’s artistic world, the characters are placed in an extremely difficult situation. They struggle bitterly against the dilemma and make painful choices, manifesting their spiritual dignity. Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, who are trapped in the spiritual dilemma and survival crisis, nevertheless, subconsciously considers himself as an heir to the spirit of the South. Hence, he undertakes consciously the tough mission of family revitalization although he himself is weak, fragile and helpless in the face of social evils. However, facing the overall destruction and degeneration of the whole family and society, Quentin, who is cowardly and lacks a clear and definite understanding of the reality, has no choice but to commit suicide by drowning himself. To some extent, his death is a way to realize his eternal

freedom. Joe Christmas in *Light in August* falls into the abyss of misery due to his vague identity of mixed blood. All his life, he is in search of his identity and freedom against the dilemma of racial antagonism. Desperately and hopelessly, Joe chooses to be lynched as a result of the murder of Joanna Burden by the white mob without any defiance. For Joe, he finds out the hope of reincarnation and freedom from death. Both Quentin and Joe Christmas bears the cross of Southerners’ agony with their own lives, thus they make atonement by their suffering. In Faulkner’s pen, death brings meaning to empty life, and add a gorgeous color to nihilistic life.

Existentialism is a very active humanistic spirit, by which Faulkner expresses his ultimate concern for the destiny of human beings. At this point, he mainly reveals and denounces all kinds of hard existential situations and evils in American South, and goes beyond his own personal feelings as a member of the Southerners.

According to the above analyses, it is evident that what runs through all Faulkner’s works is his profound and deep humanism, which originates from the three resources: the tradition of Puritanism, humanitarianism and existentialism, and by which he shows solicitude for the fate and survival of the American Southerners and the whole human beings as well. In order to revive the old and traditional humanistic ideals, he spares no effort to give his battle cry and call the Southerners as well as all the people. Based on Christianity, Faulkner reconsidered the tradition and history of the South, and reproduces the ancient glory of human nature, which has been disgraced in the present modern world. Faulkner made a theme clear to us all, that is, man is immortal, and the glory of the past, which has glittered in the history of human being, can still light up his road ahead.

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