

A Study on the Self-Construction of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*

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Abstract

On the basis of Lacan's theories of Mirror Stage and Three Orders, the paper analyses the process of seeking and constructing of protagonist's self-identity in William Faulkner's *Light in August*, exploring the inevitability of self-lost. Joe Christmas has been abandoned in an orphanage by his grandfather since the day he was born because his grandfather has suspected that Joe has the black blood. Joe became aware of his black identity as a result of the verbal abuse of the word "nigger" in other's mouth. After that, he has been searching for his identity in the thirty years of short life. However, in the conflict between the self in the mirror and the name of the father in the symbolic order, Joe, on the one hand, gradually admitted his black blood without hesitation in front of the outsiders, and on the other hand, he extremely despised the black blood in his heart. In the extreme alienation, Joe gradually lost self and eventually died. According to Lacan's theory, the self always exists in the connection with the other, and establishes self-identity by obtaining recognition from the other. It will easily lead to the self-alienation once the relationship cannot be handled correctly. Joe's tragic fate caused by failure construction of self-identity not only arouses the sympathy of the readers but also arouses people's reflection about their own identity. Even in the face of abnormal beliefs about race, religion, and so on, people should complete the construction of self-identity and recover ourselves.

Key words: William Faulkner; Self-Construction; Three order

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INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner (1897-1962), who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949, is not only a pioneer of American Southern literature, but also one of the pioneering figures in modern American literature. Throughout his life, Faulkner wrote a number of literary masterpieces which are both peak of content and thought. Faulkner covered a wide range of themes in his work under the York system created around his hometown. Most works take repentance as the theme, describing the tortuous transformation of the American South from the 18th century to the late 19th century, interrogating the South's morality, human nature and the old order which is collapsing increasingly. As "a novel of extraordinary force and insight...and filled with that spirit of compassion which saves those which look at life too closely from hardness and despair" (Henry, p.156), *Light in August* is no exception to describe some sad souls who have gone astray because of self-lostness. The novel describes two different worlds, one of which is a world in which the abandoned and the homeless Joe Christmas has been searching for his own position in the society without fruit and ultimately harming others. The world also includes Joanna, a woman who had close relationships with Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower, who spent the rest of his life in his own house as a priest. The other is the world represented by Lena, who is looking for a lover. And the world also includes Byron, who falls in love with Lena and cares for her and her followers.

As one of the masterpieces work in the world literature, *Light in August* has immediately attracted the attention of scholars at home and abroad since publication in 1932. With the help of both domestic and foreign scholars, great achievements have been made in the study of *Light in August*. Throughout the study at home and abroad, the light of August has been analyzed by scholars from various perspectives and aspects, such as psychoanalysis, post-colonialism, feminism, existentialism, Marxism, theme, and narrative techniques. However, the famous Faulkner researcher Michael Millgate pointed out that *Light in August* "is one of the most confusing novel that is most difficult to incorporate into the perspective of rational speculation or aesthetics" (Millgate, p.31). Therefore, the far from grasp novel still has a broad vision and deserves every effort to conduct deeper research and analysis. Perfect personality and life are the tireless pursuit of human beings. In the case of spiritual wasteland and unstable living, how to maintain spiritual independence and build an independent self in a chaotic and gloomy physical world is a major problem. And the tragic life of Joe, the protagonist of *Light in August*, who is looking for self-identity gives us some inspiration. Therefore, the paper attempts to use Lacan's mirror theory to analyze the process of Joe's subject construction in the previous world, in order to reveal the pursuit of self of the black people after the Civil War, as well as Faulkner's concerns and reflections on the fate of the southern society and black people after the war. At the same time, Joe's alienation and lack of self-identity not only reflect the inner conflicts and vagueness of modern people but also help people build independent self in the chaotic and disorderly modern society.

Lacan's mirror theory determines the time of self-consciousness by observing the reflection of the baby's own image in the mirror, and divides the generation of human self-consciousness into three stages: pre-mirror period, mirror period and post-mirror period. The pre-mirror period is that the infant has weak control and has not produced self-consciousness. The self is an imaginary self. During the mirror phase, the baby began to recognize his own image. He would regard the image in the mirror as the actual existence, and could not distinguish the imagination from himself. If you remove the mirror at this time, the baby will lose the understanding of the self-image and lose the reference to the self-image. At the post-mirror period, the infant's control of the body is enhanced. And it is possible to distinguish the self from other things or people. Lacan thinks that in the post-mirror period, children can effectively and clearly understand the connection between the "self" and their parents. But it can only be effective after acquiring the ability to identify self in the mirror period. In fact, the original figure is an image of others. The baby builds self-awareness relying on the other. The mirror phase not only plays a role in infancy, but also shapes the human self throughout life as the other.

Lacan thinks that the mirror stage mainly includes the three parts: Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order, and the Real Order. The Imaginary Order arises from the mirroring stage, in which children can get everything from their mothers, and the mother constitutes the whole world of the child, so the child has the illusion that the mother is one with himself. The function of the imaginary order is "mistaken recognition". The symbolic order begins with language acquisition. The symbolic system of language helps children to distinguish themselves from others. "I" am "I", and not "you" or "he". Lacan thinks that it is the separation of "I" from others that separates the symbolic order and imaginary order. In the symbolic order, children also find it necessary to abide by social rules. This kind of rule usually appears in "the name of father". The child found that the mother did not belong entirely to himself and she also belonged to her father. The desire for "the name of father" gradually replaced the desire for the mother. "The name father" actually refers to the culture, order, and rules of the real society, such as customs and ethics. As children gradually understand the rules of the symbolic world, they will gradually establish the "others" they want to become. The "other" is an important person that children encounter in the process of completing self-construction. Real Order refers to a state of the real existence beyond the rules of human society that cannot be described in words.

1. THE IMAGINARY ORDER—BEING ALIENATED IN OTHERS

The "mirror stage" is the most important and core part of mirror theory. At this stage, the infant can identify his own body image and identify his real body with self in the mirror to complete the process of self-identity. In Lacan's view, the mirror stage is a critical period and an important turning point for a child. This is the initial stage of everyone's self-identification. In other words, people are always looking for some concrete and reliable image in the process of self-construction of the subject, which requires the external others to constantly enrich and confirm themselves, so as to identify them as self. However, in the Imaginary Order, the baby would form misrecognition about ego if the baby lacks learns of ego and mature cognitive ability according to the image.

In the *Light in August*, Joe's grandfather Hines not only is the first image of other in Joe's life but also is the chief culprit of Joe's tragedy. Hines was a cruel racist, a white supremacist. In order to "execute God's will", Hines abandoned the newly born Joe on Christmas Eve at the orphanage in Memphis. Later, he became a doorman of the orphanage, and he monitored Joe for five years, and spreads that Joe is a "nigger". Gradually, Joe knows that "he was never on the playground for instant that the man was not watching him from the chair in the furnace room

door, and that the man was watching him with a profound and unflagging attention” (Faulkner, p.99). For the white-skinned Joe, this name of “nigger” made him confused, and he gradually knows that he was different from other children, and begins to perceive himself as a “nigger”. Although he does not understand what “nigger” meant, he faintly feels that it is not a good thing. “From God’s own boiler room he watched them children, and the devil’s... Because he didn’t play with the other children no more now. He stayed by himself, standing still” (Faulkner, p.276). When he asked a black man in the orphanage, the black man replied that: “You don’t know what you are... you won’t never know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you won’t know...because don’t nobody but God know what you is” (Faulkner, p.277). In this state, Joe is regarded as a black person by others. The role played by the adoptive father and people in the orphanage are “Mirror” the key words in Lacan’s “Mirror Theory”. When Joe was in the orphanage, the other children called him nigger. Just as when a child in the mirror stage saw his own image in the mirror, his mother told him, “This is you.” Joe knows himself through the “mirror”, and Joe does not understand that this “ego in the mirror” is not his true ego. From then on, the words “white-faced nigger” and “devil, Satan’s incarnation” began to settle in the depths of his subconscious, contributing to his alienated consciousness of identity. The mystery about “Who am I?” begins to torment him until he died.

2. THE SYMBOLIC ORDER—SEEKING OF SELF

In the Symbolic Order, the subject experiences new changes when Name-of-the-Father appears. The symbolic order is the domain in which the subject gets the further construction under the influence of the Other. Symbolic Order plays a dominated role in Lacan’s psychological structure of the subject. The subject can express his feelings and desire with language activities after he entering the Symbolic Order from the Imaginative Order through the entrance—Name-of-the-Father. According to Lacan, there must have a father-figure to break the binary relationship between mother and child, which lead the child into the ternary state of father-mother-child. And then the infant gradually realizes their relationship with the Other and society under the restriction of Name-of-the-Father. By identification to the Name-of-the-Father., the infant gains his own “subjectivity” and establishes the relationship with the Other.

In *Light in August*, Joe, who was sent to the orphanage from birth, has never seen his birth mother. However, there are not only indeed some mother-like figures but also father-figures appearing in Joe’s life. These people have had some influence on the formation about Joe’s identity. Dr. Hines is the first father-figure in Joe’s life. As

a fanatical racist, Hines killed Joe’s father when he was born and then killed his mother by preventing the arrival of the midwife. Hines separated him from his mother and replaced his father before Joe made contact with his mother. Hines left Joe isolated by secretly telling the other children that Joe is a “nigger”. Although the young Joe didn’t know who was, there was a subconscious belief that “he hates me and fears me. So much so that he cannot let me out of his sight...” (Faulkner, p.99). Therefore, Hines’s watch was a shadow in Joe’s heart, and Joe refuses to accept the name of the father in his life.

When Joe was five years old, he was adopted by McEachern and left the orphanage. Mr.McEachern is the second father-figure in Joe’s life. Although Mr.McEachern adopted Joe, he did not give him his love, and he just let him accept his beliefs. When they arrived at the door of the house, the foster father said to Joe “I will have you learn soon that the two abominations are sloth and idle thinking, the two virtues are work and the fear of God” (Faulkner, p.104). Under the strict discipline of his adoptive father, the five-year-old Joe did not enjoy his father’s love. Mr.McEachern advocates a life of asceticism, and hates all pampered life and pleasure. He forbids Joe to attend the ball, drinking and dating with girls, and wholeheartedly wants to cultivate Joe into a devout Christian. In the name of father and God, he tried to realize his religious ideals in Joe, and to shape Joe as a so-called devout Christian in accordance with his own mind. However, for Joe himself, he refuses to accept the identity given by others and begins to resist everything that others impose on him. Joe suffers a lot of pain due to his father’s faith. Therefore, in the depths of the heart, Joe resisted the name of the father. Joe did not want to enter the symbolic order where represented by the name of the father. At the age of 18, Joe fell in love with a waitress named Bobby. Bobby is also the image of a mother who Joe really wants to establish a relationship with her. In the intercourse with Bobbie, Joe restores a former unitary identity, even only in the figurative way. Here, Joe’s love for Bobbie is a symbol of returning to a Preoedipal unity. The McEachern’s action of preventing Joe and Bobby are the symbolization of letting the child accept the name of the father and enter the symbolic order by separating the child from the mother, trying to break the mother-child binary relationship. When killed his adoptive father he wants to run away with Bobby. Bobby pointed at Joe and screamed that “Bastard! Son of a bitch! Getting me into a jam, that always treated you like you were a white man. A white man” (Faulkner, p.157). Hence, Joe not only failed to establish a relationship with mother figure, but also lost the opportunity to enter the symbolic order to establish self-identity. He opened up the road of self-pursuit for 15 years and wandered between the imaginary order and the symbolic order.

He still pursues his identity after he left the foster father’s house. As he grew older, he tries to accept his

black identity, so he wanders between black and white. On the way to the wandering, he actively admitted that he was a black man. Even before he has sex with a woman, he clarifies that he is a nigger. Most women stay away from him after recognizing that he was a black man. The idea that he could escape a lot of responsibility by admitting he is nigger, reinforced his recognition of black blood. But in his heart there was always strong resistance to black people. This arrangement satisfies Joe's contradictory impulses. However, his struggle that wants to constitute an ego-subjectivity by confessing to Negro blood is successful, and Joe is trapped between the imaginary and symbolic order.

Finally, Joe met Joanna because of stealing. Joanna's father is an abolitionist. She is an old virgin living in the town of Jefferson. And she is a woman who loves niggers in the eyes of white people. Here, Joanna appears to be a representative of the northern abolitionism, contrary to the white racism of the South which represented by Joe's grandfather and adoptive father. But in essence, they all advocate the supremacy of white people. In the eyes of Joanna, black people "But after that I seemed to see them for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow... And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross" (Faulkner, p.183). As an extremely determined abolitionist, Joanna is determined to carry out her plan, which threatens Joe with violence to acknowledge his black identity and to concentrate on the work of the missionary. However, in essence, the behavior of Joanna is forcing Joe to accept the name of father. But this is what Joe can never accept. Because once he admitted his black blood, Joe denied the 30 years he had spent, and denied the 30 years experiences that made him choose the path of life. The conflict between them reminded Joe his low status, so Joe finally chose to cut off the throat of Joanna to get rid of this threat. Killing Joanna implies that Joe once again refused to accept the name of the Father and refused to enter the symbolic order represented by the name of the Father. Therefore, he is still drifting between the imaginary order and the symbolic order, and Joe's self-construction failed again.

3. FAILURE IN CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECT

Lacan thinks that the real order is an unreachable spiritual realm. Once one grasps the language and enters the symbolic order, it means that it is inevitably separated from the real order. The real order refers to the real existence beyond the rules of human society that cannot be described in words. Lacan believes that "we depend on the field of the Other" (Lacan, p.246) and thinks that human desire is that of the other. Subjectivity is built in the recognition of the other because the subject constantly seeks the meaning of existence – subjectivity under the

other's desire. Once the subject is not recognized by the other, it will not be able to construct the self-subject. As a subject of desire, Joe only longs for a definitive identity in a world recognized by the white. It is clear that the kind of desire is contrary to the laws of society. Therefore, it is an inevitable result that Joe is excluded from the society. Lacan claims that anything that is rejected by the symbolic order will reappear in the real order to some extent. When Joe was rejected by the symbolic order and failed to establish self-subjectivity, he will desire to return to the real order and be eager to rebuild self in the real order.

During many years of wandering life, Joe tried to live with black people and compromise his black identity. However, these efforts ended in failure, and he was always unable to accept the black identity imposed on him by symbolic fathers. If Joe can agree and succumb to the "desire of other", admit his black blood, and go to the black school according to Joanna's request, he would not kill Joanna, and eventually lead to the tragic ending of being castrated and shot. It can be seen that in the process of personal authentication, the self-construction of the subject must be constructed with the help of symbolic symbols. Through identification with others, the subject can achieve self-identity. The failure of Joe's self-subject construction is that he has fear and hatred against blacks in his own framework of Puritanism, racism, and white male supremacism. Unwilling to accept the name of father and compromise with his black identity, he spent his life and could not prove the white identity he wanted. Joe could not stay outside of the cultural symbols of the South to pursue the true unity of self when he resists the name of father. Finally, he chooses to end the meaningless life. Only in this way can he get rid of "It had made a circle and he is still inside of it...But I have never got outside the circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (Faulkner, p.244).

CONCLUSION

The uncertain identity of Joe is a manifestation of social rights, caused by the entire American Southern society. Racism makes Joe in an isolated position in social life, and also leads to his own alienation, so that he has always in the dilemma of whether he belongs to white culture or recognizes the black culture. He spent the rest of life looking for a category of his self-identity, but the other around him constantly categorized him, trying to shape him. He wants to create a complete self, but he could not get rid of the influence of the other.

According to Lacan's idea, people's self-identity is established in the mirroring stage, and the self-identity is closely related to the mirror image and the other. Joe's self-seeking is a good example of the "self" in different mirror stages, and explains the role of "others" in identity

reconstruction. At the same time, it shows us that if black people want to get rid of pain and confusion and find their identity in the American society dominated by white people, they should combine the self with others and rediscover the culture and tradition of black people. Keep the faith in order to achieve the true “flying” of the spirit. The exploration of Joe’s self-identity not only mercilessly mocked the so-called “racism is a purely subjective bias without an objective basis”. (Xiao, p.335) Joe’s alienation and the lack of self not only reveal the darkness of the real world, but also is a microcosm of people in the modern material society. In a chaotic and disorderly modern society, people must find themselves and successfully construct self-identity to get rid of confusion and to achieve personality independence. This work reflects the author’s deep concern about the human living conditions of human beings and has profound practical significance.

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