

The Dynamic of Representation: The Narrative Pattern in William Faulkner's Short Stories

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Abstract:

Faulkner's achievement as a fiction writer is massive. Faulkner's novels have too often been read not as fiction but as realistic accounts, with the notion that they represent only slightly distorted pictures of southern rural and small-town life.

Carothers is of the opinion that Faulkner's stories and novels have been praised and condemned for their lack of realism or of historical or sociological accuracy, and they have been praised and condemned for their realism, their sociological and historical authenticity (1984). Either way, it is made clear that their realism, social and historical authenticity is the criteria that have weighed in the criticism of Faulkner. This paper analyses a short story in

the light of a unifying narrative pattern Encounter, Termination and Initiation Proper.

Introduction:

In several of Faulkner's short stories one can find that the circumstances or environment make a woman repress her natural drive for love and sex. This has a relation to the narrative complex in question. Sally. R. Page's (1973:94-5) remark that Faulkner presents heroines whose idealistic drive for complete fulfilment in physical love results in the isolation and death may be true of "Elly", in which the protagonist is

driven to perverse sexuality by her grandmother's repressive control.

The title character of the story "Elly" is a self-obsessed young woman, who, obviously, is a victim of self-pity and over-indulges in sexuality which is a wild defiance of her grandmother's stern prohibitions. Elly engages in sexual play nightly but consistently refuses the final act which would make her lose her virginity. She returns home hating the acts but exulting in her revenge her grandmother:

She thinks I did and she will tell that I did, yet I am still virgin. She drove me to it, and then prevented me at the last moment (Collected stories: 211).

But things have totally gone against her when Elly met Paul in the shrubbery near her home. She surrenders herself to Paul de Montigny physically:

That night Elly quitted the veranda for the first time. She and Paul were in a close clump of shrubbery on the lawn; in the wild close dark for that instant Elly was lost, her blood aloud with desperation and exultation and vindication too, talking inside her at the very brink of surrender loud as a voice: I wish she were here to see! I wish she were here to see! (Collected Stories: 211).

But Elly's coming into contact with Paul, a mulatto young man, is the point of encounter that leads to greater consequences in the narrative and the life of Elly herself. First of all, this encounter terminates her virginity and secondly her romances with other young men. This intimate relationship with Paul paves the way for certain complications. Elly desires to marry Paul so that she can bring the final outrage to the tradition her grandmother represents.

So she begs Paul to marry her. But

Paul refuses politely and firmly:

That afternoon she met Paul downtown, 'Was everything all right last night? He said. 'Why, what' is it? Did they-'

No Paul, marry me, they were in the rear of the drugstore, partially concealed by the prescription counter, though anyone might appear behind it at any moment. She leaned against him, her face wan, tense, and her painted mouth like a savage scar upon it. Marry me or it will be too late, Paul.

I don't marry them, Paul said. Here pull yourself together (Collected Stories: 212).

Elly tries to persuade Paul but he sticks to his decision strongly perhaps because he is aware of the fact that Elly uses him sexually just as he is willing to use her and also perhaps because he is aware of the

racial and personal consequences of

a black marrying a white:

'Yes. All right. I've stopped. You won't, then? I tell you it will be too late'. 'Hell no. I don't marry them. I tell you'. 'All right. Then its good-bye. Forever'.

'That's O.K. by me too. If that's how you feel. If I ever see you again, you know what it will mean. But no marrying. And I'll see next time that we don't have any audience' (Collected Stories: 213).

A week later Elly is engaged to Philip, an assistant in a bank, whom she had known from childhood. In the mean while, the grandmother has departed to visit her son in Mills city. And Paul and Elly leave for Mills city to bring back the grandmother. The grandmother is infuriated when she finds Paul and Elly together again.

The complication reaches its height when Elly tries to kill her grandmother though Paul is not for that. In Mills city too, Elly begs Paul to marry her. But he refuses. Elly is made to realise that Paul will never marry her. This revelation makes her pull the steering wheel of the car in which she, Paul, and the grandmother are riding, causing it to careen over the edge of the road. Elly is thrown free of the wreck but the other two are killed in that homicidal impulsive act.

Here, the self-realisation of Elly that Paul will not marry her and that her protest cannot triumph over convention could be considered the point of initiation. But initiation seems to be altogether out of the question because violence that leads to murder cannot be considered a meaningful beginning and the impulse to outrage is not a door to a

fresh life. As Alice Hall Petry remarks:

“Elly” is an extraordinarily complex story. Its two female characters are intended simultaneously to be flesh-and-blood individuals, doubles, manifestations of id and superego, and symbols of the Old South and the New; and this complexity increases geometrically as these four roles shift and interact constantly, thereby mutually enriching and illuminating one another. Clearly this story.....

.... So, too “Elly” uses the tragedy of murder to exhort the New South to be receptive to the best of the Old. Despite its tragic ending, therefore “Elly” is ultimately a hopeful story; as the romantic glow of the Old South dims considerably in its pages. So too Faulkner’s insistence upon doubleness holds out at least the possibility of hope for the New (Cited in Minrose Gwin. *The Feminine and Faulkner* 1990:231-32).

Thus the story “*Elly*” present its protagonist’s initiation as existential isolation or seclusion. Though the protagonists in these stories reach a state of seclusion, the way by which they reach it conveys the reasons for their fall.

Elly, a young-belle meets her fall through her wild and aggressive acts, from the beginning itself. Elly is in conflict with her grandmother and her Southern tradition, both of which severely inhibits Elly’s normal sexual initiation.

Elly cannot proscribe her grandmother. Elly wants to be free from her grandmother’s repressive control (the wild acts are in defiance against Ailanthia), but she finds she cannot be free. Later, Elly tries to marry Paul, but he is not for marrying Elly. Against Elly’s intention, she is engaged to Philip. In all these acts Elly meets with

nothing but frustration. This frustration leads her to commit the homicidal act of killing Paul and her grandmother. Elly’s violative acts are spring from her frustration and her lack of courage to act.

Hence, her frustration and violation cannot be deemed the point of initiation. There had been encounter and termination, but initiation does not follow. Further investigations in detail would give the readers a deep insight.

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