

रूपन्देही क्याम्पस जर्नल

Rupandehi Campus Journal

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रूपन्देही क्याम्पस

सिद्धार्थनगर, रूपन्देही

Rupandehi Campus

Siddharthanagar, Rupandehi

रूपन्देही क्याम्पस जर्नल
(Rupandehi Campus Journal)

अङ्क २, २०७४ जेठ

Volume 2, 2017 June

संरक्षक

बाबुराम अर्याल

क्याम्पसप्रमुख

सम्पादन

प्रा.डा. कपिलदेव लामिछाने

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सहप्रा. डिल्लीराज भट्टराई

रूपन्देही क्याम्पस सिद्धार्थनगर
Rupandehi Campus Siddharthanagar

विषयसूची

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Struggle of Individuals against Social Forces

Parthivendra Upadhyaya and Dharma Raj Bhandari

Abstract

This paper explores the various ethical, social and political issues in reference to the novels *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson, *Maggie* by Stephen Crane and *Ruth Hall* by Fenny Fern. On the surface level these novels, which belong to different genres of literature, seem to focus on some discrete local issues but a deeper probe reveals that all of these novels, regardless of genres and local issues, seem to address the theme of individual versus society where some characters like in the sentimental *Ruth Hall* seems to triumph finally whereas in *Maggie* and *Our Nig* the society proves too strong a force for the characters and they are finally crushed brutally.

Key Terms: Black literature, American literature, Cultural studies, Female writers, Universal themes, Sentimental writers

Introduction

In every literary period, certain ideas, certain genres, certain style and certain worldview seem to play a dominant role. This is true to a certain extent even for American literature. The style that Walt Whitman preferred was not Poe's way of writing or for that matter Dickens's way of writing is distinctly different from that of Plath. However, it is argued that no matter whatever the style or whatever the genre, there are certain themes which never die out but repeatedly surface in different generations, in different styles and in different genres. These themes cannot be limited to local color and local context; such themes are often called the universal themes.

It can be difficult even for literary critics to identify the abstract quality of literary themes. While the character and the plot are directly constructed through words, a theme is implied or suggested by the text. A theme is what we synthesize after having read a fiction by asking insightful critical questions.

Even though themes are implicit in nature and require a deep understanding, critics have been fascinated by their study. However, what has gone quite unexplored is how prevalent are such universal themes in literature or more specifically in American literature. This paper is an attempt to examine the universality of one such "universal theme" namely, the theme of "individual versus society", in three different American novels from three different periods: *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson, *Maggie* by Stephen Crane and *Ruth Hall* by Fenny Fern, so as to understand the prevalence of universal themes in American literature.

Discussion

Our Nig and Its Issues

Our Nig is a novel which passes scathing social commentary on the issue of slavery taking into consideration the sensitivity of the liberal whites and to do so Harriet Wilson (2005) has "purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home" (Preface, para. 1). In this novel the writer brings up three specific issues: the issue of neo-slavery, the issue of gender discrimination and the issue of poverty. These three issues are interwoven in a rather complex web. Being a black was certainly no less than a curse in the time when this novel was written. However, the situation of woman, especially when she was poor and when considered fallen by the society, was no better. Wilson (2005) begins the description of Meg who is poor and fallen as "LONELY MAG SMITH! See her as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart" (Chapter 1, para. 2).

In the story, which is written in the omniscient narrative, the writer wants to put in a sense of realism by writing in the narrative used, giving a sense that the writer observes all that the central character "our Nig" has experienced. Even though the central theme of the novel is neo-slavery, the writer has taken ample opportunity to comment on other issues except neo-slavery like the issue of poverty and the status of women, especially fallen women in the then society at large (Boggis, Raimon, & White, 2007).

The novel begins in a time when our nig was not even born. It begins tracing the history of our Nig's mother Meg who has suffered enough hardships being "deprived of parental guardianship, far removed from relatives, she was left to guide her tiny boat over life's surges alone and inexperienced" (Wilson, 2005, Chapter 1, para. 9) owing to the fact that she is a "fallen" woman. Even the fact that Meg is a white woman does not save her from the scorn and hardships of the society because she does not comply with the established norms of her time. She has to live a pitiable life with "her melancholy increased, her means diminished. At last no one seemed to notice her, save a kind-hearted African" (Wilson, 2005, Chapter 1, para. 9) and because of this condition she is in she has to marry an African-American not for love but because she did not have an option to marry otherwise.

After the sub-plot of Meg's affair, the plot moves on to main part of the sketches of our Nig's life. Her family's weak financial status, inferior social status and even she herself being a female child becomes the eventual cause for her family to consider her expendable. At an early age she is left at the door steps of the Bellmont family and her ordeal begins from the very same day. Even though the family does not buy her, and so it would not be precise to call her a slave, the treatment she receives and the status she holds in this new foster home because of the color of her skin immediately brings up images of slavery. Once after Mary, the Bellmont's daughter, falsely accuses her of pushing her into the river "Mrs. Band and Mary commenced beating her inhumanly; then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room, without any supper" (Wilson, 2005, Chapter 3, para. 37).

So in one sense *Our Nig* is a story of neo slavery in free America which believes that slavery has been abolished.

Her condition as a neo-slave becomes worse because of her gender. She was a female and this becomes the main cause for further abuse. The mistress of the family treats her all wrong and the family's female child is quick to pick up the mother's way of treating her abusively because she is a female, so in one sense her competitor (Hubbard, 1997). When Nig starts being noted at school, it becomes a source of jealousy for Mary. Wilson (2005) describes Nig's reputation at school and Mary's growing jealous:

"Her (Nig's) speeches often drew merriment from the children; no one could do more to enliven their favorite pastimes than Frado. Mary could not endure to see her thus noticed, yet knew not how to prevent it. She could not influence her schoolmates as she wished. She had not gained their affections by winning ways and yielding points of controversy. On the contrary, she was self-willed, domineering; every day reported "mad" by some of her companions. She availed herself of the only alternative, abuse and taunts, as they returned from school. This was not satisfactory; she wanted to use physical force "to subdue her," to "keep her down" (Chapter 3, para. 31).

The story is remarkable for its depiction of most of the white females and most of the black males as characters who had a certain sense of evil around them. For instance, Nig's father and her husband are both black males who could be considered bad and Mary and her mother are white females who are the embodiment of evil. Thus, the story is balanced in the sense that the writer does not present character as good or bad just based on the color of the skin (Santamarina, 2005). Nig suffers because of the color of the skin but her oppressors are not just the way they are owing to that. White characters in the story like, aunt, the master of the house and the son are presented as the embodiment of goodness. Whereas even though Meg's husband is a black man, he is the one who encourages her to abandoning Nig. However, the factor that pushed Nig's father to actuate Meg to abandon her is not his inherent evilness but his personal, social circumstance and the greater social milieu in which the story is set in.

Maggie and Its Issues

Generally categorized as a naturalistic novel, *Maggie* is story in which the central character Maggie seems so naïve from the very beginning that the reader immediately sense her ultimately doom from in reference to social Darwinism where too weak a character seriously does not have much of a possibility to survive in the ruthless world (Gandal, 1997).

The idea of sexual chastity can be taken as a major theme in the novel. However, it would be too parochial to do so. The novel is in fact a struggle between humankind against society and its norms. At times people survive and other times people parish, as the latter happens to Maggie. However, at the same time there are certain social values which might play a huge

role in determining the survival of the worthless and the doom of the better ones. In Maggie's case the social values that propels her towards her doom is the idea of chastity for women (Stolper, 1980).

The novel starts with a description of a poor neighborhood where kids are fighting "howling urchins from Devil's Row who were circling madly about the heap and pelting at him" (Crane, 1960, p. 3). This incident introduces two of the major characters, Jimmie and Pete, as well as provides us the description of the place where the novel is set in. The setting is a slum area which is dotted with characters that are on the lowest echelon of the social order. The story soon takes turn to focus on the title character and her being betrayed by her boyfriend and her ultimate fall.

Maggie was a sweet young girl who is brought up in messed up circumstances which is best summed up in Jimmie's first meeting with his mother:

"Eh, what? Been fightin' agin, by Gawd!" She threw herself upon Jimmie. The urchin ehind the others and in the scuffle the babe, Tommie, was knocked down.

He protested with his usual vehemence, because they had bruised his tender shins against a table leg. The mother's massive shoulders heaved with anger. Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder she shook him until he rattled. She dragged him to an unholy sink, and, soaking a rag in water, began to scrub his lacerated face with it. Jimmie screamed in pain and tried to twist his shoulders out of the clasp of the huge arms (Crane, 1960, p. 7-8).

This situation was beyond Maggie's control. She has an abusive mother, a brute brother and her father passes away quite early. She has romantic feelings towards her brother's friend Pete who turns out to be a womanizer in a society where sexual chastity is considered to be the touchstone for a woman's character.

After being used and rejected by her beau, she returns back to the family hoping to get back in. But her mother has too much hatred in her heart to take Maggie back:

"Aye, she'll cry, won't she, an' carry on, an' tell how Pete, or some odder feller, beats 'er an' she'll say she's sorry an' all dat an' she ain't happy, she ain't, an' she wants to come

homeagin, she does." With grim humor, the mother imitated the possible wailing notes of the daughter's voice.

"Den I'll take 'er in, won't I, deh beast. She kin cry 'er two eyes out on deh stones of deh street before I'll dirty deh place wid her. She abused an' ill-treated her own mudder—her own mudder what loved her an' she'll never gitanodder chance dis side of hell" (Crane, 1960, p. 43)

However, quite interestingly the family which is messed up and has no moral standards for almost everything suddenly puts on the garb of being of high moral standard especially in case female sexuality. Maggie's brother has had quite a few numbers of sexual encounters. Unfortunately, for Maggie the standard is different. And thus when her family disowns her, she is finally left with no other option than to go to the streets accosting.

At the end of the novel Maggie dies an unexplained death, like her kid brother and father. With the deaths of these characters mentioned like the death of cattle, Crane brings up a bigger social problem which is poverty. Even though the obvious reasons for Maggie's fall may be being a 'fallen' woman, but in fact in the great chain of causation it is poverty and the circumstances she was living in (Gandal, 1997). Maggie wanted to run away from the house not just because she is romantically enamored by her brother's friend but also she sees in him her passport to freedom, even economic prosperity.

Ruth Hall and Its Issues

Ruth Hall, written by Fenny Fern, is a novel about Ruth and her struggles in life. The major issue in this novel is the problem one might face being a woman at the time when the novel was set. *Ruth Hall* is different from the other two previously discussed novels in the sense that while they both end up with a somber tone with the death of the heroines, Ruth survives even though all that she has to go through is no less than living death.

Fern (1986) starts the novel with the description of the prospect of Ruth getting married soon. She is anxious thinking about the possibility that the marriage would offer:

Had that craving heart of hers at length found its ark of refuge? Would clouds or sunshine, joy or sorrow, tears or smiles, predominate in her future? Who could tell? The silent stars returned her no answer. Would a harsh word ever fall from lips which now breathed only love? Would the step whose lightest footfall now made her heart leap, ever sound in her ear like a death-knell? As time, with its ceaseless changes, rolled on, would love flee affrighted from the bent form, and silver locks, and faltering footstep? Was there no talisman to keep him? (Chapter 1, para. 2).

Even though these questions sounds too trivial at the beginning of the novel, the readers later realize that at her time and place these concerns were too important (Willey, 2007).

Ruth is a smart girl. However, her arrogant brother is never ready to accept her intelligence. She gets married to a fine gentleman who dotes on her. However, her mother in law proves to be the meddling nuisance in her life who tries to break her down with all the resources she has.

Immediately after getting married, Ruth is grilled by her mother in law with trivial questions making that sound too important:

“Can you make bread? When I say bread I mean bread—old fashioned, yeast riz bread; none of your sal-soda, salæratu, sal-volatile poisonous mixtures, that must be eaten as quick as baked, lest it should dry up; yeast bread—do you know how to make it?”

“No,” said Ruth, with a growing sense of her utter good-for-nothingness; “people in the city always buy baker’s bread; my father did.”

“Your father! land’s sake, child, you must n’t quote your father now you ’re married; you have n’t any father.”

I never had, thought Ruth. (Fern, 1986, Chapter 2, para. 22-25)

Even after all these Ruth was quite content with whatever life had to offer, especially because she has a husband who would always stick by her side through all odds.

However, Ruth’s small happy world starts to fall apart first after the death of her first child and then the demise of her husband proves to be the final nail in her coffin. Her in-laws disown her, her father says that he does not have enough to help her sustain, and her brother is too arrogant to accept that Ruth is intelligent enough.

Ruth was a plain looking girl when she was at the boarding school, due to which when her friends were busy flirting with boys she took her studies seriously. However, nobody considers her studies seriously especially because it seems that one does not need a lot of intelligence to run the family or raise kids.

Ruth tires her hand at various jobs and gets rejected at all one after another for the simple reason of being a woman. People are not quite ready to trust her with jobs that she aspires to take. However, even after unfavorable circumstances she finally manages to get a worker as a columnist in a newspaper for pittance. However, with some lucky turn of event she meets a man who shows brotherly affection towards her and offers her with opportunities she deserves.

With poetic justice well served, she finally gets money, name and fame that she quite well deserved. Even her mother in law, though unknowingly, becomes a fan of her writing. At the end of the novel all who had rushed to disown her because of her miserable circumstances try to reclaim her. Quite interestingly, Hyacinth, Ruth’s arrogant brother, goes into great pain in convincing the world that Ruth is his sister, but to no avail.

Unlike the other two novels discussed above, this sentimental novel ends with a happy note.

Conclusion: Finding Synthesis in Issues

The novels discussed above have a wide range of issues from neo-slavery, domestic domination of women, to sexual morality. However, as seen in the analysis, the novels are all an attempt to pit the individuals against society and its prevailing norms. For example, in the

case of Nig she is pitted against a society where it was considered lowly to be a black and to make matters worse a black female. Nig's only fault is her gender and her color and the social forces are too brutal for her and shatter her down completely. Similarly, Maggie is an innocent little girl who is pitted against conservative social codes regarding female sexuality. She succumbs to her bodily desire and is thus stigmatized by her own family. To make matters worse, she is brought up in a neighborhood which had a bad reputation of its own. She must have seen people doing the worst of business. Besides, she was poor after Pete tried to avoid her. And thus she finally gives up her fight with the social forces and started soliciting. And finally, Ruth always experienced a lower position at her father's home and at her husband's home for the simple reason that she is a woman. Her sex becomes the cause of her hardships. It is interesting to note that in all the three novels being a woman made the situations of the central characters even worse. Unlike the other two female characters Ruth finally succeeded, but even she would not have ultimately succeeded without the help of Mr. Walter.

Clearly, human beings are always faced against the prevailing social norms; if one complies he/she might survive, but that too does not guarantee survival. On the other hand if one protests the chances of survival gets even worse, yet still human beings challenge the norms. The factors that determine what forces acts in what ways are unique to the time and place when the events occur, but the omnipresence of such forces and human struggle with them cannot be denied.

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डिल्लीराज भट्टराई

त्रि.वि. बाट नेपाली विषयमा स्नातकोत्तर र शिक्षाशास्त्रमा स्नातक गरेका भट्टराई सहप्राध्यापक हुन् । उनको रूचिको विषय समालोचना हो । समीक्षा र समालोचनाका क्षेत्रमा लागेका भट्टराईका विभिन्न साहित्यिक पत्रपत्रिकामा समालोचनात्मक एवम् अनुसन्धानमूलक लेखरचनाहरू प्रकाशित छन् ।

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