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The Color Fetish

OF CONSTANT fascination for me are the ways in which literature employs skin color to reveal character or drive narrative—especially if the fictional main character is white (which is almost always the case). Whether it is the horror of one drop of the mystical “black” blood, or signs of innate white superiority, or of deranged and excessive sexual power, the framing and the meaning of color are often the deciding factor.

For the horror that the “one-drop” rule excites, there is no better guide than William Faulkner. What else haunts *The Sound and the Fury* or *Absalom, Absalom!*? Between the marital

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outrages incest and miscegenation, the latter (an old but useful term for “the mixing of races”) is obviously the more abhorrent. In much American literature, when plot requires a family crisis, nothing is more disgusting than mutual sexual congress between the races. It is the mutual aspect of these encounters that is rendered shocking, illegal, and repulsive. Unlike the rape of slaves, human choice or, God forbid, love receives wholesale condemnation. And for Faulkner they lead to murder.

In Chapter IV of *Absalom, Absalom!* Mr. Compson explains to Quentin what drove Henry Sutpen to kill his half-brother Charles Bon:

And yet, four years later, Henry had to kill Bon to keep them from marrying. . . .

Yes, granted that, even to the unworldly Henry, let alone the more traveled father, the existence of the eighth part negro mistress and the sixteenth part negro son, granted even the morganatic ceremony . . . was reason enough. . . .

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Much later in the novel Quentin imagines this exchange between Henry and Charles:

—So it's the miscegenation, not the incest which you can't bear. . . .

Henry doesn't answer.

—And he sent me no word? . . . He did not have to do this, Henry. He didn't need to tell you I am a nigger to stop me. . . .

—You are my brother.

—No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry.

Equally, if not more, fascinating is Ernest Hemingway's employment of color-ism. His use of this wholly available device moves through several modes of color-ism—from despicable blacks, to sad but sympathetic ones, to extreme black-fueled eroticism. None of these categories is outside the writer's world or his or her imaginative prowess, but how that world is articulated

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is what interests me. Color-ism is so very available—it is the ultimate narrative shortcut.

Note Hemingway's employment of color-ism in *To Have and Have Not* (*The Tradesman's Return*). When Harry Morgan, a rum smuggler and the novel's main character, speaks directly to the only black character in the boat, he calls him by his name, Wesley. But when Hemingway's narrator addresses the reader he says (writes) "nigger." Here the two men, who are in Morgan's boat, have both been shot up after a run-in with Cuban officials:

. . . and he said to the nigger, "Where the hell are we?"

The nigger raised himself up to look. . . .

"I'm going to make you comfortable, Wesley," he said. . . .

"I can't even move," the nigger said. . . .

He gave the Negro a cup of water. . . .

The nigger tried to move to reach a sack, then groaned and lay back.

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“Do you hurt that bad, Wesley?”

“Oh, God,” the nigger said.

Why the actual name of his companion isn't enough to drive, explain, or describe their venture is not clear—unless the author intends to pinpoint the narrator's compassion for a black man, a compassion that might endear this bootlegger to readers.

Now compare that rendering of a black man as constantly complaining, weak, and in need of his (more seriously injured) white boss's help with another of Hemingway's manipulations of racial tropes—this time for erotic, highly desirable effect.

In *The Garden of Eden*, the male character, called “the young man” first and David later, is on an extended honeymoon on the Côte d'Azur with his new bride, called alternately “the girl” and Catherine. They lounge, swim, eat, and make love over and over. Their conversation is mostly inconsequential chatter or confessions,

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but running through it is a dominating theme of physical blackness as profoundly beautiful, exciting, and sexually compelling:

“. . . you're my good lovely husband and my brother too. . . . when we go to Africa I'll be your African girl too.”

[. . . .]

“It's too early to go to Africa now. It's the big rains and afterwards the grass is too high and it's very cold.”

[. . . .]

“Then where should we go?”

“We can go to Spain but . . . It's too early for the Basque coast. It's still cold and rainy. It rains everywhere there now.”

“Isn't there a hot part where we could swim the way we do here?”

“You can't swim in Spain the way we do here. You'd get arrested.”

“What a bore. Let's wait to go there then because I want us to get darker.”

“Why do you want to be so dark?”

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“ . . . Doesn’t it make you excited to have me getting so dark”?

“Uh-huh. I love it.”

This strange brew of incest, black skin, and sexuality is so unlike Hemingway’s separation of “Cubans” from “niggers” in *To Have and Have Not*. Although in that novel both in fact refer to Cubans (people born in Cuba), the latter is deprived of nationality and a home.

There is a perfectly good reason for the part color-ism plays in literature. It was the law. Even a casual examination of the “so-called” color laws makes the case for the emphasis on color as indicator of what is legal and what is not. The legislative acts of Virginia to enforce slavery and to control blacks (collected by June Purcell Guild as *Black Laws of Virginia*) are, as the foreword notes, representative of laws which “permeated the life of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Negro, whether slave or free; and by implication, the fabric of life for the white majority.”

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For example, a statute of 1705 stated that “Popish recusants, convicts, Negroes, mulattoes, and Indian servants, and others not being Christians, shall be incapable to be witnesses in any cases whatsoever.”

According to a criminal code of 1847, “Any white person assembling with slaves or free Negroes for purpose of instructing them to read or write . . . shall be confined in jail not exceeding six months and fined not exceeding \$100.00.”

Much later, under Jim Crow, the *General Code of the City of Birmingham of 1944* prohibited any negro and white, in any public space, from playing together in “any game with cards, dice, dominoes or checkers.”

Those laws are archaic and, in a way, silly. And while they are no longer enforced or enforceable, they have laid the carpet on which many writers have danced to great effect.

THE cultural mechanics of becoming American are clearly understood. A citizen of Italy or

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Russia immigrates to the United States. She keeps much or some of the language and customs of her home country. But if she wishes to be American—to be known as such and to actually belong—she must become a thing unimaginable in her home country: she must become white. It may be comfortable for her or uncomfortable, but it lasts and has advantages as well as certain freedoms.

Africans and their descendants never had that choice, as so much literature illustrates. I became interested in the portrayal of blacks by culture rather than skin color: when color alone was their *bête noire*, when it was incidental, and when it was unknowable, or deliberately withheld. The latter offered me an interesting opportunity to ignore the fetish of color as well as a certain freedom accompanied by some very careful writing. In some novels I theatricalized the point by not only refusing to rest on racial signs but also alerting the reader to my strategy.

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In *Paradise* the opening sentences launch the ploy: “They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time.” This is meant to be an explosion of racial identification which is subsequently withheld throughout descriptions of the community of women in the convent where the attack takes place. Does the reader search for her, the white girl? Or does he or she lose interest in the search? Abandoning it to concentrate on the substance of the novel? Some readers have told me of their guess, but only one of them was ever correct. Her focus was on behavior—something she identified as a gesture or assumption no black girl would make or have—no matter where she came from or whatever her past. This raceless community neighbors one with exactly the opposite priority—race purity is everything to its members. Anyone who isn’t “eight rock,” the deepest level of a coal mine, is excluded from their town.

In other works, such as *The Bluest Eye*, the consequences of the color fetish are the theme: its severely destructive force.

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I tried again in *Home* to create a work in which color was erased but could be easily assumed if the reader paid close attention to the codes, the restrictions black people routinely suffered: where one sits on a bus, where one urinates, and so on. But I was so very successful in forcing the reader to ignore color that it made my editor nervous. So, reluctantly, I layered in references that verified Frank Money, the main character's, race. I believe it was a mistake that defied my purpose.

In *God Help the Child*, color is both a curse and a blessing, a hammer and a golden ring. Although neither, the hammer nor the ring, helped make the character a sympathetic human being. Only caring unselfishly for somebody else would accomplish true maturity.

There are so many opportunities to reveal race in literature—whether one is conscious of it or not. But writing non-colorist literature about black people is a task I have found both liberating and hard.

How much tension or interest would Ernest Hemingway have lost if he had simply used

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Wesley's given name? How much fascination and shock would be dampened if Faulkner had limited the book's central concern to incest rather than the theatrical "one-drop" curse?

Some readers coming for the first time to *A Mercy*, which takes place two years before the Salem witch trials, may assume that only blacks were slaves. But so too might be a Native American, or a white homosexual couple, like the characters in my novel. The white mistress in *A Mercy*, though not enslaved, was purchased in an arranged marriage.

I first tried this technique of racial erasure in a short story titled "Recitatif." It began as a screenplay that I was asked to write for two actresses—one black, one white. But since in the writing I didn't know which actress would play which part, I eliminated color altogether, using social class as the marker. The actresses didn't like my play at all. Later I converted the material into a short story—which, by the way, does exactly the opposite of my plan (the characters

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are divided by race, but all racial codes have been deliberately removed). Instead of relating to plot and character development, most readers insist on searching for what I have refused them.

My effort may not be admired by or interesting to other black authors. After decades of struggle to write powerful narratives portraying decidedly black characters, they may wonder if I am engaged in literary white-washing. I am not. And I am not asking to be joined in this endeavor. But I am determined to de-fang cheap racism, annihilate and discredit the routine, easy, available color fetish, which is reminiscent of slavery itself.

