

Comfort Amid Chaos: An Analysis of Ta-Nehisi Coates and William Faulkner

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“Don’t bother to be better than your contemporaries or predecessors. Try to be better than yourself.” -William Faulkner, 1958

“The best part of writing is not the communication of knowledge to other people, but the acquisition and synthesizing of knowledge to oneself.” -Ta-Nehisi Coates, 2014

An author speaks in the 20th-century and another in the 21st-century. One focuses upon fiction and the other non-fiction. One hails from a white slave-owning family in Mississippi and the other a black family in Maryland. And yet they come to the same conclusion: that literature’s self-reflective nature is beneficial. This shared focus upon introspection between Coates and Faulkner establishes the connective tissue between two authors that are seemingly diametrically opposed. In Faulkner’s Southern Gothic canon, the author plumbs the cavernous depths of intergenerational trauma in the crumbling Old South through his works *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), among others. In Ta-Nehisi Coates’ 2015 work, *Between the World and Me*, the author synthesizes his contemporary experience of prejudice and the 21st-century manifestations of enslavement into an intimate, instructive letter to his son. Both Faulkner and Coates illustrate tragic realities, yet Coates’ analysis of the manifestations of racial injustice today help guide readers to understand the both sympathetic yet problematic characters that Faulkner evokes. In other words, in our contemporary society where the scar of enslavement perpetuates mass incarceration, police brutality, and general systemic racism, Coates supplies readers with an updated lens through which to view Faulkner’s account of the postbellum South, allowing readers to be wary that the ghosts of slavery’s past neither start nor end with white postbellum families.

Beware the Nostalgia

In Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, the author addresses the often limited perspective that Faulknerian characters embody, critiquing the way that Faulkner superimposes the innocence of his tragic postbellum Southern archetypes upon the brutal reality of enslavement. Before reflecting on Faulkner, Coates describes his trip to Gettysburg, imagining the horror and fear that the Civil War brought to many free black Americans: “But I, standing on the farm of a black man who fled with his family to stay free of the South, saw Pickett’s soldiers charging through history, in wild pursuit of their strange birthright--the right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body” (Coates 102). The intimacy of this experience--the palpable fear of the free, Northern black community against the monstrosity of Pickett’s army--allows Coates to reflect upon Faulkner’s contrasting illustration of the same battle. In the 1948 novel, *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner articulates that “every Southern boy fourteen years-old” is able to reminisce about the moments before the battle at Gettysburg--the beginning of the end for the Confederate army (Faulkner *Intruder in the Dust* Chapter 9). Faulkner describes young Southern boys

longing for when “it’s all in the balance, it hasn’t even happened yet, it hasn’t even begun” (*Intruder in the Dust* Chapter 9). By embodying the wistful perspective of this representative Southern boy, Faulkner portrays a youthful innocence that fails to address the brutal reality, dancing around the topic of enslavement by using the vague, unidentified “it.” Coates scrutinizes this fantasy, arguing that this “nostalgic moment” is neglecting to highlight the battle’s “corrupt and unspeakable core” (102), the fight for the enslavement of others. Furthermore, Coates uncovers that “[a]ll of Faulkner’s Southern boys were white” (102). While *Intruder in the Dust* has a black protagonist and is concentrated upon race relations during the Civil War, Coates emphasizes that--in this particular Faulkner passage--“every Southern boy” is defined as a white boy from a slave-owning family who longs for antebellum society. Even though we must consider the self-reflective, self-exonerating lens through which Faulkner operated--coming from a previously affluent slave-owning family himself--Coates suggests that Faulkner (subconsciously, and tragically) identifies with the limited perspective of the enslaver, not the enslaved. In the same passage, Faulkner expands his reminiscent tone, describing “that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out” (Chapter 9 *Intruder in the Dust*). The author’s ability to paint the landscape through elongated sentences and alliteration invites the reader into this sentimentality, drawing one into the perspective of a 19th-century young boy who lacks the awareness of equality’s importance. Although our contemporary perspective is quick to condemn this wistful description, it is possible that Faulkner is reconciling his personal struggles with his family’s legacy as enslavers and the difficulty of excoriating familial sins; he allows the reader to embody his psychological divide. However, through Coates’ enhanced awareness, we must find our own balance between appreciating the beauty of Faulkner’s contemplative prose and denouncing indulgent nostalgia.

Manifestations of Individuality

For Faulkner, exploring the depths of each antebellum individual’s shift to a postbellum reality allows readers to grasp the corruption and decadence of the Old South; for Coates, an oppressor should not be taken as an individual anomaly but as a product of the greater society that perpetuates their behavior. When Coates reflects upon the murder of Prince Jones, he asserts that “it cannot be said that [his death] was imposed by a repressive minority” (79). While the slaughter was committed by one man in particular, it is a result of the systemic prejudice that society--the majority--upholds, fomenting the impulses of the oppressor. Coates continues to describe the larger significance of the murder: “So forgiving the killer of Prince Jones would have seemed irrelevant to me. The killer was the direct expression of all his country’s beliefs” (79). By highlighting the “irrelevan[ce]” of the single person’s identity, the author argues that they are simply a consequence of widespread racism. Throughout the letter to his son, Coates returns to the threat of “los[ing his] body” that black Americans face in contemporary society (5). The deprivation of identity and “body” that the oppressive white-dominated society imposes highlights the fact that white Americans deprive black people of their individuality while giving white citizens the benefit of the doubt. Upon meeting a white person in America, few assume that they are racist; in other words, it takes a blatant act of prejudice or discrimination for one to be considered racist. Coates raises our awareness to the fact that we hold onto hope for

opportunities for the white American to do good, congratulating the bare minimum of human decency.

To that end, Coates' perspective on the racially biased manifestations of individuality calls into question Faulkner's expositions on the postbellum South, nearly all of which isolate distinct experiences. And yet, how much individuality is Faulkner truly awarding enslavers of the past? He extends no sympathy to Thomas Sutpen's parasitism or Anse Bundren's narcissism or Jason Compson Sr.'s nihilism. And when future postbellum generations try to revive antebellum antiquity, Faulkner does not hold back in detailing the harsh self-destruction that characters like Jason Compson Jr. or Henry Sutpen exemplify. With younger generations of characters Faulkner seems to award more individuality, almost sympathizing the inherited guilt of enslavement, which is compounded by patriarchal oppression in the case of women. Quentin Compson experiences unique struggles with the reconciliation of antebellum horror; Dewey Dell Bundren & Caddy Compson react in different ways to the imprisonment within the expectations of purity inherent in the Southern Belle; for simply wanting to leave the antebellum South in the past, Darl Bundren is judged as insane. Coates' perspective on individuality allows readers to navigate the sympathy they feel for the Faulknerian characters, appreciating the struggle of the future generations who are forced to reconcile the shame and guilt that the antebellum past immortalizes.

Denying Idealism: Endurance vs. Ascendancy

Though Faulkner illustrates some optimism for the future of black Americans in a postbellum world, adhering to the Bible verse that states, "Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5), Coates' contemporary experience proves to readers that Faulkner's biblical prediction has not materialized. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner focuses upon Dilsey--a freed slave who embodies the matriarchal role for both her own children and the Compsons--in order to hypothesize an potential power shift. Jason Jr. self-destructs, Quentin implodes, Benjy is castrated, and the future of the dysfunctional Compson family grinds to a halt in the new postbellum reality. Faulkner concludes the novel by suggesting that Dilsey's family is a sort of metaphorical phoenix rising from the ashes: "Dilsey. They endured" (343).

Coates reflects upon the same Bible verse in *Between the World and Me*, accentuating that endurance has not inspired the ascendancy for which Faulkner may have hoped. Coates articulates that from a young age church was not an outlet or support system for him: "I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. [...] We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God" (28). Through Coates' relationship with religion, we see a certain white ownership that isolates Coates from standard Christian faith. He rejects the optimism that Faulkner evokes at the close of *The Sound and the Fury*, stating, "I had no sense that any just God was on my side. 'The meek shall inherit the earth' meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights" (28). Coates' intimate experience contradicts the verse's message, this prophecy yet another aspect of religion from which he is excluded. The adamant denial of this idealism enhances our comprehension of Dilsey's situation, allowing one to question her perspective and experience in the newly post-Civil-War South. Faulkner characterizes her as miraculously strong

and confident when she condemns Jason Jr. by stating, “You’s a cold man, Jason, if man you is” (207). Dilsey is later pictured as a downtrodden soldier at war when she “emerged once more, this time in a man’s felt hat and an army overcoat” (266). While Dilsey’s unfortunate family may be the ones who might endure, Coates’ contemporary refusal to invest in the same biblical notion gives a window into the reality for non-fictional Dilseys--along with the character herself--who will likely not embody the same glimmer of hope that Faulkner leaves with the reader.

Quentin Compson’s Struggles Are Not Limited to Quentin Compson

Faulkner’s tragic, neurotic Quentin Compson is consumed by the corrupt legacy that he inherits as the future of the patriarchy, yet Coates helps readers to appreciate that Quentin’s issues in the 20th-century postbellum South are similar to dilemmas that contemporary black Americans grapple with on a daily basis. Faulkner dives into the complexity of Quentin’s moral bewilderment, providing remarkable similarities to Coates’ investigation of code switching. Quentin’s initial thoughts about his identity in the North versus the South illustrate his trouble with code switching, stating, “When I first came East I kept thinking You’ve got to remember to think of them as colored people not niggers” (86). Quentin is deeply confused, convinced that his tendencies must change, given a more evolved awareness than his Old Southern ancestors. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner continues to delineate the duality of Quentin’s identity when a friend’s comments, “Jesus, if I was going to have to spend nine months in this climate, I would sure hate to have come from the South” (289). While the friend’s comment seems playful in the moment, Quentin’s obsessive depression forces the reader to comprehend the gravity of any separation between his Southern home and his Northern experience. Faulkner’s subtle nod toward Quentin’s psychological paralysis stresses that even something as fundamental as the weather is oppositional between North and South. For Quentin, the split between his Southern legacy and his Northern future results irreconcilable.

Although we feel sympathetic toward Quentin’s unfortunate situation, we must be aware that black Americans are forced to endure code switching on a daily basis. When Coates reflects on his dialogue with Prince Jones’ mother, he illustrates the complexity of her voice by stating, “She spoke like an American, with the same expectations of fairness, even fairness belated and begrudged, that she took into medical school all those years ago. And she spoke like a black woman, with all the pain that undercuts those exact feelings” (144). Coates stresses Prince Jones’ mother’s duality of self, forced to weigh the fairness that should be awarded to an educated American doctor against the unjust reality of discrimination. American society has imposed that “double consciousness” upon this mother¹, inevitably leading to issues such as code switching that are prevalent today. Kendrick Lamar’s 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* develops a similar split in identity; for Lamar, the struggle stems from the divide between his childhood in Compton and his new identity as a millionaire artist who is at risk of being taken advantage of by materialistic industry. Lamar outlines how this divide leads to code switching, accentuating a comment from a friend in “Hood Politics”: “Don’t tell me they got you on some weirdo rap shit, nigga? No socks and skinny jeans and shit, ha.” This defensive song narrates the trouble that

¹ “Double consciousness” is a term coined by W.E.B. Dubois that highlights how chronic mistreatment has forced black Americans to look at themselves through the eyes of an oppressor. They are coerced into being aware of both their perspective and that of the discriminatory society.

Lamar had when returning to Compton after his material success, perhaps rejecting the accusation that millionaire Kendrick is different from Compton Kendrick. Lamar and Coates both present situations in which oppositional forces divide identity, connecting to the chasm that Faulkner identifies as separating Quentin between South and North. However, Quentin's psychological turmoil is too grave for the young Southerner, unlike Lamar who--in *To Pimp A Butterfly*--eventually champions his internal struggle as the path toward growth and awareness. Quentin Compson is one of the most tragic, sympathetic characters in the literary canon, and while we must feel immense sympathy for his turbulent confusion, we cannot neglect the fact that black Americans today suffer--and develop--through issues that Quentin never could.

Similar to Lamar, Coates has gained a grasp on irreconcilable dilemmas that proved too much for Quentin Compson, the essayist providing his son with the guidance of a father-figure in a way that Jason Compson Sr. 's nihilism prevented him from doing. Because *Between the World and Me* is a letter from Coates to his son, the author uses the second-person, a direct, intimate dialogue being created between himself and his child. When advising his son to seek solace not forgetfulness, he asserts that "You have to make peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold" (71). Coates defines his son's path, firmly establishing a roadmap for comprehending the hateful society that contains innumerable remnants of a legacy of enslavement.

While we cannot know how Coates' son responded to this advice, we are able to imagine the profound aid that this direct statement would have offered to Quentin Compson. Coates identifies the need to balance peace and reconciliation, not allowing complacency but also not permitting the legacy to psychologically consume one. Even though Quentin is racked with guilt and Coates' advice is in response to fear, the connection serves to underscore the tremendous strength that Coates embodies as a father. In contrast, Faulkner's Jason Compson Sr. gifts his son a watch, disclosing that time is "the mausoleum of all hope and desire" (76). Even though Quentin's struggle is progress toward more equality--he crumbles under the intergenerational guilt of the legacy of enslavement--the reader's critique of his father's nihilism develops the contrast between Compson and Coates. Instead of telling Quentin that he must balance the sentiment of guilt with peace, nihilistic Mr. Compson neglects to aid his son, dumping guilt and shame upon this future patriarch. The stark difference between Coates' tireless efforts to guide his son and Jason Compson Sr. 's absent, destructive presence further suggests that while our sympathy must be extended to certain Faulknerian characters, our congratulations and support of Coates' fortitude should assume priority.

It is undeniable that Coates' essential advice to his son is enhanced by a comparison to the Compson family, but more of Coates' wisdom applies directly to Quentin Compson's dilemmas. When studying at Howard University, Coates journeys through countless books and authors in order to uncover answers to questions about his own existence. When he realizes that this quest is futile, he states, "[T]he questions matter, perhaps more than, the answers" (116). Coates acknowledges that there can be no single answer to all of his questions about discrimination in America, but living with the uncertainty and the questioning is a path to deeper discovery. In *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin is overwhelmed by questions from birth to death, feeling as though he should be able to find answers about his role in the decadent

postbellum South, his relationship with his sister, the responsibility for enslavement, and more. However, if Quentin recognized the progress that questioning his birthright led him toward, he would have been able to find solace within his internal chaos. After all, it is Quentin's confused morality that makes him sympathetic; his questioning, while overwhelming, humanizes a figure from the otherwise despicable South.

Manifestations of a Higher Power

For Coates, perpetual injustices against black Americans cannot be the result of a just higher power. Instead, the author deliberates upon how the world sets the odds against black Americans. By personifying the universe as a gambler through his statement that "the galaxy was playing with loaded dice" (65), Coates illustrates the rejection that appears to be rooted in the prejudice of a higher power. Not only is the transcendent, enigmatic force gambling to decide Coates' fate, the metaphorical dice have been engineered to work against him. The "cosmic injustices" that face Coates are perplexing and confounding (65), furthering our awareness of the lack of answers to the chronic abuse which black Americans are forced to cope with. Coates extrapolates upon the discriminatory "galaxy" by stating, "These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope" (71). This personification contends that the nature of the world is perpetual hardship that never awards any pause. These "preferences" combine to suggest that the world is in constant motion, but it is always moving toward calamity: an inherent cycle of suffering.

While we must be aware that the "cosmic injustices" that Coates articulates are specific to the black experience in prejudiced America, Quentin's struggle with the ephemeral, haphazard nature of fate is better understood given Coates' heightened awareness. Quentin believes he is negligible in God's eyes, subject to a perverse deity who simply gambles to decide one's fate. Faulkner highlights Quentin's contemplations about destiny, musing about himself as a "man who is conceived by accident and whose every breath is a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him" (177). This image of a higher power as gambler overlaps between Faulkner and Coates, both feeling as though they are struggling against an unstoppable, unknown force. Quentin dives deeper into this antagonism between the universe and himself, realizing that "even [his] despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman" (178). Faulkner suggests that Quentin feels as though his suffering with guilt and shame is futile, leaving him alone in a world that is undeniably pitted against him. Quentin also directly names this higher power, calling the God-like figure the "dark diceman," suggesting a nefarious unfairness in line with Coates' "loaded dice." Because Quentin names this force, we are able to understand the weight that the "diceman" places upon his psyche, exacerbating the intergenerational trauma. The parallel between Coates and Quentin suggests that the monstrosity of enslavement not only causes black Americans to feel as though they have no merciful higher power, but also inflicts despair upon the generations who are left to confront the legacy of horror.

As I read Faulkner in 2020, I struggle with confounding manifestations of sympathy. Yes, Quentin's birth into a crumbling postbellum Southern family deserves a sympathetic tone. Faulkner illustrates the gravity of the shame and guilt that consumes Quentin's psyche, leaving suicide as the only escape from the irreconcilable antebellum complexity. However, he cannot be viewed as a completely innocent character. With Coates' updated perspective, we recognize

that Quentin's crises are similar to the reality that black Americans grapple with daily. Quentin Compson was consumed by questions and a lack of answers, yet Coates teaches me that finding comfort in the questions is the only way to ensure progress. As a white male in a Donald-Trump America, comprehending the value of questioning has never seemed more important. Complacency is the issue. The dialogue between Coates and Faulkner showcases the value of never ceasing to question our society.

Works Cited

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