THE BLACK MAN AND THE MACABRE
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

A dying Black slave, eyes pecked out, hangs from a tree in Hector St. John de Crévecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer published in 1782; a Black man’s ears are cut off and his leg muscles severed in George Washington Cable’s The Grandissimes published in 1880; acid destroys the Black man’s face in Stephen Crane’s “The Monster” in 1899; a Black is castrated in William Faulkner’s Light in August in 1932; he is mauled by a lion in Saul Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King in 1959; he plans the annihilation of his race in Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow in 1973. The cruel and often sadistic treatment of Black characters in white American literature is as striking as it is pervasive, for the association of the Black with the macabre and the terrible is as native to American fiction as apple pie is to American life.

The origin of the association of the Black man with the macabre can in part be accounted for by the firmly established metaphoric use of the color black itself. Joel Kovel, in his book White Racism, explains that even before the Negro people came into the Western historical view, the dictionary definition of black had negative connotations. Thus the Oxford English Dictionary gives the following meanings for the word black before the 16th century:

- deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirty, foul...
- Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister...
- Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked...
- indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc.

Kovel concludes that “whatever objects the human could conceptualize as bad, the abstract idea of badness itself, became coordinated with blackness.” ¹ Hence, in the Bible, God is pictured as emanating light, while the devil is known as The Prince of Darkness.

These negative associations with the color black were easily transferred to the black-skinned African slaves, who, the Puritans believed, were the descendants of Ham’s evil son Canaan. The blackness of the Negro was thus accounted for by the Puritans as a manifestation of God’s curse and displeasure. The Negro, therefore, often becomes a symbol of evil incarnate in the works of white American writers. Thus Melville presents us with the evil slaves in Benito Cereno, who practice “unspeakable rites” on their Spanish masters and are without any redeeming characteristics. A similarly evil Black figure is Fedallah in Moby-Dick, who worships fire, hides beneath the deck, is an incarnation of the devil himself, and who literally beckons Ahab to his death.

Since the Puritans believed the body was a reflection of the soul, and black skin was regarded as a punishment from God, it is not surprising that many Black figures in our literature are represented as physically deformed and grotesque. Melville, for example, presents us with the Black dwarf in The Confidence-Man, whose distorted body is a reflection of his distorted and evil soul.

In the same way, Thomas Dixon’s figure of Gus in The Clansman reflects his “brute nature” in his appearance. He is described as having “the short, heavy-set neck of the lower order of animals. His skin was coal black, his lips so thick they curled both ways, up and down with crooked blood marks across them. His nose was flat and its enormous nostrils seemed in perpetual dilatation. The sinister beady eyes, with brown splotches in their whites, were set wide apart and gleamed apelike under his scant brows. His enormous cheek bones and jaws seemed to protrude beyond the ears and almost hide them.’” ²

Yet another figure whose low nature is reflected in his grotesque appearance is found in Thomas Nelson Page’s Red Rock where we meet Moses, the “trick doctor.” He is described as having a “protruding lower jaw, deformed teeth, blue gums, villainously low forehead and furtive rolling eyes, that ‘looked in quite different directions’” and “immediately brand him the brute that his behavior proves him to be.’” ³

It is possible to explain these portraits on the grounds that Gus and Moses are, after all, the villains of the works mentioned and they reflect the authors’ attitudes towards this role in the fictional world presented. It is significant to note, however, that even those authors who portray the Black in a sympathetic role thrust upon him the same physical handicaps and unjust punishments that we find in the most unsympathetic portrayals. Thus a character of color such as Queequeg in Melville’s Moby-Dick, an admirable figure in almost every respect, is described as having a body horribly disfigured by tattoos, and Pip, the gentle cabin boy, is made grotesque by his madness.

James Fenimore Cooper displays a similarly grotesque but sympathetic character in his portrait of Caesar in The Spy. Caesar is warm-hearted and loyal, but physically is “short, and we would say square, had not all the angles and curves of his figure bid defiance to anything like mathematical symmetry.” But it was in his legs that nature had indulged her most capricious humor. There was an abundance of material injudiciously used. The calves were neither before nor
behind, but rather on the outer side of the limb, inclining forward, and so close to the knee as to render the free use of that joint a subject of doubt.' 4

Stephen Crane, too, in his story "The Monster" focuses on a deformed and disfigured Black man, whose mind and body are destroyed by acid while trying to save his employer's son from a burning house. So horrible does the Black man become as a result of his heroic deed, that he is referred to as "it" throughout the story and is seen roaming the area, an American Frankenstein monster, terrifying the local inhabitants out of their wits. In many scenes he appears almost comic, a ludicrous parody of his earlier self. Crane here illustrates the tendency in American fiction to picture the Black as a grotesque, "a combination of the laughably ridiculous and the terrifying." 5

There is, then, a fundamental ambivalence in the portrait of the Black by many white writers which manifests itself in this simultaneous indulgence in sympathy and sadism. In the South, this ambivalence is especially marked. Thus George Washington Cable, who wrote with great sympathy towards Blacks, and whose works "The Silent South" and "The Negro Question" demonstrate a liberality of spirit that made him an outcast in his own land, gives us a characteristically ambivalent picture of Palmyre's slave woman in The Grandissimes; she is loyal and devoted, but also "ape-like." 6 Similarly, the dedicated Black slave who cares for a Creole leper in "Jean-ah-Poquelin" is a mute; the efficient Baptist in "Posson Jone" is a "short, square, old Negro, very black and grotesque." 7

Although the Black man is often portrayed as physically grotesque, his most macabre aspect is the result of the violence which is done to him by others. Physical punishments of all sorts are dealt out to him, often ostensibly to show the depravity of the white man. Looked at as a whole, however, the amount and intensity of the physical abuse visited upon the Black character is too astounding to be attributed merely to the social consciousness of the white author. There is an obsessiveness with violence, an indulgence in sadism which the writer himself seems unaware of.

George Washington Cable, for example, though treating the plight of the slave Clemence in The Grandissimes with sympathy, lingers at length on the scene in which she is first hanged, then cut loose and told to run, and then shot while running away. The noble savage, Bras Couperé, almost a heroic figure in his strength and spirit, is tortured, his ears cut off and his leg muscles cut for daring to strike his master. In his True Stories of Louisiana, Cable tells a tale of one French woman who kept her Black cook chained in the kitchen, pursued a Black child over the roof until the child fell to her death, and half starved her slaves. When her house burned down, Blacks were found in various stages of deterioration. One creature, we are told, "had a large hole in his head; his body from head to foot was covered with scars and filled with worms." 8

Joel Chandler Harris, while he does not display sadism on a realistic level, indulges in it in his "creature tales" in which Brer Rabbit is a symbol for the Black man. Although he always escapes in the end, he is often tied up, beaten and humiliated.

The macabre in Harris's realistic tales is manifested more through mental anguish than physical abuse. We never actually see his slaves beaten, but we do see their psychic scars. Thus Free Joe dies of a broken heart when he learns that his wife has been sold to a far-away plantation and he will never see her again. Similarly, Crazy Sue in Daddy Jake the Runaway remains haunted forever by the cries of her little babies who starved to death because her white master refused to let her nurse them. In yet another story, "Where's Duncan," a mulatto woman who gave birth to her master's child suffers for a lifetime because the master sold her "onliest boy." 9

Mark Twain also indulges in some sadism which coexists with his sympathy for the Black figures in his work. While Jim in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is one of the most famous Blacks in our literature and one who equals Huck in stature and surpasses him in moral judgment, Jim is mistreated both mentally and physically. Tom and Huck make him share his prison with spiders, assorted bugs, and snakes. They chain him unnecessarily, and force him to spend his days scratching marks into wood and digging into the ground around him. Although in reality free, Jim is forced to escape, is recaptured, and is made to endure the humilities of a run-away slave. In the sequel, Tom Sawyer Abroad, Jim is left to do all the work and made to entertain the boys at great personal danger to himself. In one incident, he is told to balance upside down on the top of an Egyptian pyramid.

In another novel, Pudd'nhead Wilson, Twain portrays the drama of a mulatto woman who passes her own son off as white while she brings up the real white child as a Negro. Although the white boy who speaks and acts like a Negro is virtuous, loyal and affectionate, the real Negro mistreats his mother, murders his benefactor, and eventually is executed for his crime. This double-identity plot allows Twain to present the Black in a favorable light by emphasizing the virtues of the fictitious Negro and at the same time enables Twain to punish the Black by making the real Negro a murderer.

It is a twentieth-century writer, however, who excels in both the ambivalence and the sadism in Black portraiture. Erskine Caldwell, like most of the other writers discussed, writes ostensibly to show the humanity of the Blacks and the depravity of the whites. The result, however, is more a manifestation of his own sadistic and lurid imagination than his social consciousness. His work abounds in Black victims of all kinds. He is especially fond of picturing the rape and victimization of mulatto girls. Although Kathyanne in A Place Called Estherville continues to rebuff the advances of her white employers, and because of this loses job after job, she is finally kidnapped and made to "entertain" some out-of-town lodge brothers of one of the influential whites of the town. In The Journeyman, Mr. Sermon, a white preacher, rapes Sugar, a mulatto girl, and then shoots her husband, who has come to ask for
her return. In still another work, *This Very Earth*, a young mulatto girl is followed home and raped.

While it is the mulatto women who are especially singled out for sadistic treatment in Caldwell’s world, the mulatto men also receive their share. Again, they are usually punished because of their supposed sexual attractiveness. Ganus, Kathyanne’s brother, is a good-looking light mulatto. He is seduced constantly by frustrated housewives when he delivers the groceries. He is finally murdered when a white girl who has taken a fancy to him declares she has been raped.

Not only are Caldwell’s Blacks victimized sexually, they are also victimized economically and legally. Thus we see several pictures of Black field hands who are kept in perpetual debt by their landlord and therefore can never leave the land. The position of these Blacks is actually worse than it was under slavery, when at least the master protected them as he would any financial investment. Thus, old Uncle Jeff Davis of *A House in the Uplands* cannot leave the land and, when he tries, is threatened and harassed by Grady. In the short story “The End of Christy Tucker,” a Black man who has avoided getting into debt in the above manner is insulted and threatened and finally shot when he refuses to accept a whipping for his prudence.

The reverse of this plot is found in the story of the old Negro who has spent his life on one farm, but is turned out by the landlord when he is too old to produce. Thus, in “The People vs. Abe Latham, Colored,” an old man and his family work and live for forty years on one farm. When Latham is past sixty and cannot do much work, the white owner tells him to get off the land. When he refuses, he is ordered arrested and thrown off. He is locked up on the trumped-up charge that he threatened the white landlord. None of the white lawyers in the area will take his case because they know a white jury will convict him. Thus Abe Latham, Colored, is left to spend his last years in jail.

Even in a so-called comic story the figure of the Black is terrorized and victimized. In “The Negro in the Well” a Black falls into the well of a white man, who refuses to let him out until he decides to give the white man two of his hounds. In *Georgia Boy*, the Negro Handsome becomes the butt of Caldwell’s crude jokes. He is made to climb a tree in order to scare away the woodpeckers which have been disturbing a white family. When he is high off the ground, the birds begin to peck at him. He remains in the tree, however, to the great satisfaction of his employer, who finds that the woodpeckers are indeed quieter when pecking at Handsome than when pecking at the tree. In the morning Handsome displays a head almost pecked clean of hair and explains that he did not descend the tree earlier because he had fallen asleep. Even his suffering isn’t allowed to give him dignity because his stupidity turns every potentially tragic situation into a humorous one.

Caldwell also presents us with a novel, *Trouble in July*, which concerns the lynching of a young Negro boy who has been falsely accused of rape. The theme of the false accusation but real punishment of the Black man is common in American literature. It is notable that, although the author is sympathetic to the Black and it is clear in each case that the guilt rests with the white women who accuse him and the white men who Lynch him, the Negro is nevertheless murdered at the end of each story. In addition, the Negro, while innocent in these stories, is usually depicted as stupid, pathetic, defenseless, and dependent upon the fair dealing of the whites, rather than his own intelligence, to save him. In these tales, the emphasis is on pity rather than justice, on the white man’s good (or evil) nature rather than the Black man’s courage. Faulkner’s short story “Dry September,” Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tennessee Williams’s *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit*, and Robert Penn Warren’s *Brother to Dragon* are examples of such works.

The lynching theme in American literature can be traced back to nineteenth-century writers like Thomas Dixon, whose fear of the “Brute Negro”—the revenge-seeking, recently emancipated Black man—is apparent in works such as *The Leopard’s Spots* and *The Clansman*. Significantly, however, in the twentieth century, the ostensible motive for the lynching is different, but the result is the same. Although writers like Erskine Caldwell and the Black novelist William Attaway see the Negro as an oppressed victim of a capitalistic society rather than a brute villain in an idyllic South, a horrible death at the hands of the mob is still his fate. It is interesting to note that John Steinbeck, in his role of social crusader, proves this point by his portrait of Crook in *Of Mice and Men*. Although his crippled body and distorted mind are the result of a restrictive social and economic system rather than God’s curse on his race, his grotesque appearance differs little from that of Melville’s Black dwarf.

One cannot help observing that the Negro suffers indignities and tortures in the works of white writers that far exceed the fates of the white characters. Eudora Welty, for example, in her story “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden,” describes how a dim-witted, club-footed, diminutive Black man is forced to dress like an Indian and eat live chickens as part of a carnival act. In another Welty story, “A Worn Path,” an old Negro woman is seen making her way into town to get medicine for her sick grandchild, whose throat has been damaged by lye he has accidentally drunk. In “Powerhouse,” a mulatto musician is told of the suicide of his wife, and in “Livvie,” we witness the death of old Solomon.

Faulkner too illustrates the same association of horror and the grotesque that we have already noted, although his portrayals of Blacks are not all marked by these traits. Thus Tout le Monde, a Black preacher in *A Fable*, is killed; Will Mayes in “Dry September” is lynched; Rider in *Go Down, Moses* is executed for murder, as is Mollie Beauchamp’s grandson. A Black slave whose daughter commits incest with the white master kills herself in *Go Down, Moses*; Nancy Mannigoe is kicked, flogged, and finally executed in *Requiem for a Nun*; Jim Bond in *Absalom! Absalom!* is a Black idiot who rumbles in the ashes of the family mansion, unable to cope with the world.
Faulkner reserves his worst punishments, however, for his Blacks of mixed blood. Irving Howe notes in his William Faulkner that, because of Faulkner’s ambivalence towards miscegenation, the “mulatto occasions some of Faulkner’s most intense, involuted and hysterical writing. As a victim the mulatto must be shown in all his suffering, and as a reminder of the ancestral phobia, must be made once or twice to suffer extravagantly. But since Faulkner is trying to free himself from both phobia and the injustice it sustains, the mulatto also excites in him his greatest pity, a pity so extreme as often to break past the limits of speech. On the mulatto’s frail being descends the whole crushing weight of Faulkner’s world.” \(^{10}\) Thus, while Faulkner sympathizes with his characters of mixed blood on a conscious level, his need to punish them manifests itself in their death and destruction in his fiction. Thus Joe Christmas is castrated in Light in August; Charles Bon of Absalom! Absalom! is murdered by his half brother; and Paul, in the short story, “Elly,” is killed in an automobile accident caused by his white girl friend.

In all fairness it must be said, however, that Faulkner, more than any other white American author, also presents many portraits of Blacks who not only receive sympathy and respect from their creator, but who also prosper in his fictional world to a greater extent than his white figures. Thus we are given the portrait of Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury, Lucas Beauchamp in Intruder in the Dust, Sam Fathers in Go Down, Moses, Ringo in The Unvanquished, and Ned in The Reivers. It must, therefore, be noted that Faulkner’s attitude towards his Black characters is far more complex than that of most American white authors.

The association of horror and the macabre with Black characters in the twentieth century is not limited to Southern writers by any means. The same tendency is notable among Northeastern writers. Although the role of the Northern Black is more symbolic than realistic, his fate is often as harsh as his Southern counterpart’s. In Norman Mailer’s An American Dream, for example, we find the figure of Shago Martin, a Black musician, who, although he has a vitalizing effect on the white characters, dies a violent and mysterious death. Similarly, in Saul Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King, we find the idealized figure of Darfu, who meets his death as the victim of a lion’s mauling. A less sympathetic Black in another of Bellow’s novels, Mr. Sammler’s Planet, also suffers an unpleasant fate. He is almost beaten to death by the half crazy son-in-law of Mr. Sammler. Bernard Malamud, too, in his recent book The Tenants, shows us a Black man and a white who violently destroy each other.

Because these white writers have few Blacks in their works, it is especially notable that the proportion of violence done to the Black characters far outweighs that which is done to the white. Whatever the reasons, the association of the Black character with horror and the macabre has been prominent in white American literature from Crévecœur’s figure of the bleeding Negro hanging on a tree in his Letters from an American Farmer of 1782 through Thomas Pynchon’s presentation of the Black commandos dedicated to self-annihilation in his Gravity’s Rainbow of 1973. The Black character—tortured, distorted, mistreated, and misjudged—is very much a part of American literary tradition.

Roslyn Siegel
New York University

NOTES

3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., pp. 31-32.
5 Ibid., p. 65.