

Patriot of the
fourteenth ward:
henry miller's black
spring



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The opening passages of *Black Spring* seem very endemic to the New York attitude. Henry Miller says that he is a patriot of the Fourteenth Ward of Brooklyn and he discusses how all great heroes and literary figures were merely fantasy compared to the boys like “Eddie Carney, who gave me my first black eye” (4) and “Lester Reardon who, by the mere act of walking down the street, inspired fear and admiration.” (4) This discourse bespeaks of a particular worldview which recreates the city as a conglomeration of villages pushed together by some insane planner. Miller makes it more explicit when he states: “For me the whole world was embraced in the confines of the Fourteenth Ward. If anything happened outside it either didn’t happen or it was unimportant.” (6)

In other writer’s hands, this limited view of the world would be depicted as a cage or proof of a type of degeneracy in the characters. Yet, Henry Miller celebrates the Fourteenth Ward as a place of youth and fire in which the workers are infused with strange nobility. The workers with their black hands have a “grit that has sunk so deep into the skin that nothing could remove it, not soap, nor elbow grease, nor money, nor love, nor death!” (5) This phrase reminds one of Zola’s *Germinal* in which the miners are depicted as brutish and debauched. Zola wanted to depict the humanity of his miners in their strike, but he did enjoy waxing about the lurid life of the miners coming back from the mines to drink up all of their pay and barely bring enough bread home. One can imagine the description of the grit in the skin written by Zola, right before it gets to the ending about money, love and death. In almost every phrase, it feels like Miller is celebrating the dirt and the grime

of this existence. One almost feels like he's playing up the image of the low-class decadent American for his audience.

Similarly, Rob Ramsey, the minister's son is introduced as the man who went to war and came back " of a Sunday afternoon and standing in front of the minister's house puked up his guts and then wiped it up with his vest." (6)

One of the major thrusts of the Dada movement involved offending the audience. After World War I, the traditional aesthetic values concerning beauty and truth no longer had meaning for the modern world. Aristotle's model of a tragedy about a noble man who has one flaw was no longer so important. For centuries the Aristotelian model dominated. The nobility were the heroes of stories while the lower classes represented the comical characters. Terms like chivalry referred to the people who owned the horses. Etiquette became a sign of nobility and high class.

Henry Miller reverses this worldview in the person of Rob Ramsey. " They liked him because he was a good-for-nothing and he made no bones about it." (6) He did not care if it was Sunday or Wednesday; in other words, unlike his minister father, he did not keep the Sabbath. Every day, he was working with his legs wobbly as if in drink, tobacco spitting from his mouth and " warm, silent curses and some loud and foul ones too. The utter indolence, the insouciance of the man, the obscenities, the sacrilege." (6) In another book Rob Ramsey would either be the proletariat hero to show how foul the world makes people or he would be the villain. When I was in high school, my class read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and I remember feeling uncomfortable with the fact that Bob Ewell was the villain of the novel. Even though the novel dealt with institutional racism, Harper Lee went out of her way to depict the

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character who was falsely accusing the African American of rape as an ignorant stupid white trash psychopath. She even included a “ noble” poverty stricken character in order to make the reader hate Bob Ewell even more, since he could have been a decent and polite human being, but he chose to live as a cretin.

I was thinking of Bob Ewell when I read the description of Rob Ramsey and I have to admit that I felt extremely happy when Henry Miller stated that he was a man who inspired love. “ His frailties were human frailties and he wore them jauntingly, tauntingly, flauntingly, like banderillas.” (6) Even as Henry Miller gives the reader this description which is almost Christ-like in tone, he follows it up with an anecdote about Rob Ramsey walking down the street with his fly open, suspenders undone and “ vest bright with vomit.” (6) Just in case the reader is not disgusted enough with this scene, Henry Miller adds that while Rob was vomiting, “ Crazy Willy Maine would be standing on the shed over the paint shop, with his pants down, jerking away for dear life.” (7)

Many books recount the youth of the narrator. Often the youthful years are full of nostalgia and a wistful desire to return to the innocent time of one’s youth. In this particular text, Henry Miller also engages in the wistful youth convention. He depicts his childhood in the same nostalgic tones that one would expect from a Steven Spielberg movie. Yet, only Henry Miller would also include public vomiting and masturbation in these wistful childhood reminiscences. Rob Ramsey even gets a Christ-like ending for his vomiting existence: “ And a little later, in his warmheartedness, in that fine, careless way he had, he walked off the end of a pier and drowned himself.” (7)

The mixture of the sacred and the profane continues as Miller transitions into the ways that he and his friends would sit on Rob Ramsey's doorstep watching the customers and women from the local saloon moving back and forth. Even as the description of the local saloon/brothel becomes intense, Miller reminds the reader that Rob Ramsey's father is a minister and depicts this piety in the most absurd terms: " All this from Rob Ramsey's doorstep, the old man upstairs saying his prayers over a kerosene lamp, praying like an obscene nanny goat for an end to come, or when he got tired of praying coming down in his nightshirt, like an old leprechaun, and belaying us with a broomstick." (8) Even though Henry Miller has a profoundly spiritual outlook on life, he has contempt for the representatives of the established religion. Not only does he find Christ-like behavior in the local drunk, he depicts the Ramsey's preacher father as a " leprechaun" and an " obscene nanny goat."

In conclusion, the opening passages of Black Spring display Henry Miller's narrative power as well as his spiritual bias which finds spirituality in the most profane characters and absurdity in the representatives of an established religion.