

# Inherent nature of violence to the society



Hemingway's *In Our Time* and Faulkner's *Light in August* are both pieces of literature that revolve around violence. However, the authors' treatments of violence contrast sharply. Hemingway focuses on culturally sanctioned forms of violence, while Faulkner focuses on more illicit violence. While Faulkner lays a complete foundation for every violent act in his novel, Hemingway is subtler, preferring to simply narrate and avoid directly explaining emotions. Faulkner emphasizes the influence of society on violent acts while Hemingway focuses on the inherent nature of violence in society.

Hemingway's life and literature is full of violence. He eagerly enlisted in WWI, loved sports, hunting, fishing, and often got into fights. *In Our Time* reflects heavily this interest in culturally sanctioned violence. The vignettes between each story are, for the most part, graphically violent scenes of wartime or bullfighting. Many of the stories themselves involve violent acts (*Indian Camp*, *The Battler*) while others, without explicitly recalling the violence, involve the aftermath of the war (*Soldier's Home*, *Big Two-Hearted River*). It is notable that for all the instances of violence in *In Our Time*, only one comes to mind that does not fall under the category of war, sports, or good, old-fashioned fist fighting - the Indian father's suicide in *Indian Camp*.

*Light in August* is an equally violent novel, but in a remarkably different way. Most of the violence that occurs is particularly non-culturally sanctioned. There are references to war, as in Rev. Hightower's grandfather as well as Percy Grimm's desire to be a soldier. However the majority of violence, especially that perpetrated by and against Joe Christmas, is not of the sort generally accepted by society. His adoptive father, whom Joe eventually kills, beats him throughout his childhood. At various times in his life he beats

women he is involved with and kills Joanna Burden. There is, of course, his ultimate lynching.

Hemingway and Faulkner's narrative styles produce distinctly different contexts for the violence. *Light in August* is a saga, spanning generations. While Hemingway often gives background information on his characters, his descriptions are short and sweet and mainly serve to situate the story. He leaves it up to the reader to interpret the significance of the information. Faulkner, on the other hand, methodically traces the history of each character, clearly not satisfied until each character's particular actions and feelings are fully explained. It is not enough for Faulkner to make passing references to Joanna Burden and Gail Hightower's histories. He includes long sections detailing both their families' histories and life stories. What is really of note is not the amount of background information. Not only does Faulkner reveal the background facts, he offers analytical explanations of behavior, something Hemingway typically refrains from. In particular Joe's violent behavior does not stand on its own = 96 it is important to Faulkner that the reader learn Joe's past and his reasons for acting as he does. Faulkner traces Joe's childhood = 96 a history of abandonment and abuse.

Faulkner's extensive use of background information and analytical commentary emphasizes the social causes of violence. Joe Christmas is clearly presented as a victim of painful race relations and the power of social categories. Even though his "black blood", if present at all, is only a drop or so, he has been tortured his whole life. At first the children taunted him, calling him "Nigger!", but it is as if he has had that cry ringing in his head for the rest of his life and can't shake it. His violence is always linked to his

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preoccupation with race. He was so used to shocking women by telling them he was part black that the first time one of them wasn't shocked he beat her severely and was sick for two years. It is when Joanna Burden suggests that he attend what he refers to as "a nigger college" and become "a nigger lawyer" that he hits her. This leads her to consider joint suicide for the two of them, which is what leads to him committing his most violent act = 96 killing Joanna. In a telling conversation with Joanna Burden she asks him how he knows he is part black. He thinks, admits that he doesn't know and then comments, "If not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time." This is as close as he comes to conceiving of the possibility that his life need not be determined by an arbitrary gene he may or may not have.

Stevens, the district attorney, offers his theory that although Christmas runs from his crime "his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one of the other and let his body save it." His black blood drove him to violence while his white blood drove him to try to save himself. "It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already eased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment." It seems that Christmas has internalized the social established stereotypes of black and white and has succumbed to his "dark" side after all.

Hemingway's detached narration, in addition to his focus on culturally sanctioned violence, emphasizes the inevitability of violence. The war vignettes leave the reader with the sense that individual choice is impossible. For example: "The first German I saw climbed over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much

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equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that." There is no sense of personal responsibility, only the feeling that war happens, and that people kill other people in wars and that is normal and inevitable.

Hemingway and Faulkner incorporate contrasting themes of violence in *In Our Time* and *Light in August*. Both take a societal view, but Hemingway sees violence as an inherent part of society, as unexplainable as it is inescapable, while Faulkner sees violence as a product of society, and if not rational, certainly avoidable.