

Marxist criticism of the watsons go to birmingham–1963



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Marxist Criticism of The Watsons Go to Birmingham

Christopher Paul Curtis certainly makes a point to address class in his telling of the Watsons' story, but beyond this, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* carries more direct allusions to specifically Marxism. The novel chronicles a snapshot in the lives of the Watson family in Flint, Michigan up to and including their summer trip down to Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. The trip coincides with the historic bombing of a Black church—a cataclysmic tragedy that critically impacted the Civil Rights Movement. Curtis writes the story in such a way that seems to naturally carry Marxist overtones, not necessarily in a sense that supports Marxist ideology but, rather, in a sense that more deeply illustrates the complexities of White America's angst in the struggle of race relations.

The novel is set in the year 1963, and this year marks arguably the dead-center of a period in American history when citizens and government alike were madly disquieted by the threat of Communism, which is a socioeconomic ideology inclusive of Marxism and several other schools of thought (e. g. anarchism, general anti-capitalist perspectives, etc.). From the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, J. Edgar Hoover's special, FBI program, COINTELPRO, operated to "ensure financial and public support for the FBI" under the guise of pursuing the deliberately exaggerated threat of Stateside Communism (Time Archives). This is a period in American history retrospectively dubbed the "Red Scare," and it greatly influenced the historical episteme of the era; that is to say that the language people used and what they chose to talk about were affected by the FBI's heavy anti-Communist propaganda campaign.

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There were many African Americans prior to this who had embraced aspects of Communism because Capitalism had not served them economically as a people. Some as early as Booker T. Washington wrote radical essays on the subject, advancing the notion that Blacks should be proponents of Communism. It can be argued that the backlash of these events manifested in events much like Hoover's impetuous campaign and, most tragically, the church bombing around which Curtis's novel is centered. There is evidence throughout the book of the ideological influence of this propaganda as well as that of the Cold War, such as, Byron's fake movie: "Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death" (Curtis 64). It is a rather playful chapter in that its title is comically lengthy and that Byron is merely playing with toilet paper; however, this scenario, much like several others throughout the story, speaks to the preoccupation of the common, American civilian with eastern European evils, so to speak.

These are markers of an ideology, and ideology is a concept on which Marxism hinges. Another concept that serves as a cornerstone of Marxist theory is termed dialectical materialism, "the theory that history develops as a struggle between contradictions that are eventually synthesized" (Dobie 87). It originates from *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx's own 1845 publication. To an observable extent, this is a concept that holds true in many contexts, especially that of the Civil Rights Movement. The struggle between the violent and nonviolent methods of the movement—between early Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.—is often considered a very necessary struggle for the movement to achieve the success it achieved. As

comforting as it is to imagine that leaders like King and Thurgood Marshall were the primary drivers of change in America, the persecution of Blacks would arguably have snuffed out this movement were it not for the acrimonious steps taken by leaders like X and Louis Farrakhan. Similarly, the struggle to come of age is negotiated from opposite ends of an ethical spectrum in the story, as rendered between Kenny and Byron. Both approach maturation differently, but both begin as mischievous children. The struggle between them, though, is necessary because it culminates in the trip to Birmingham and the subsequent experiences that cause them to grow.

Even the use of a coming-of-age story to broach these subjects is replete with meaning as the coming-of-age model is traditionally considered to be of German conceptualization in origin—hence the literary term, *bildungsroman*. This speaks to the German influence on American culture at the time in a small and subtle way. Another subtle allusion comes by way of Grandma Sands whose name, in and of itself, is a spoonerism, a type of pun that swaps the order of consonants to create a play on words. The allusion reaches back to Bill Withers's classic, Blues standard, "Grandma's Hands," which carries immense ideological meaning due to it being pregnant with religious and spiritual connotations. Specifically Althusserian Marxism, also known as production theory, symbolically associates the hands with the concept of manual labor, and it establishes manual labor as a proletariat (working class) characteristic, which comprises the base—the means of production. The proletariat, however, is the majority in whose hands, Louis Althusser argues, rest the power for revolution or, more appropriately in this context, change.

Most fundamentally, Marxism criticizes Capitalism and calls for the proletariat to exact change with the hands of the people, and it is to Grandma Sands that the Daniel and Wilona bring Byron to change his behavior. More broadly, everyone experiences change, whether large or small, with Grandma Sands, including Grandma Sands herself in the perception of the reader inasmuch as she simply turns out to be far more virtuous than initially anticipated. Curtis uses certain Marxist elements as a theme to advance various parts of the story but more so to bury nuanced references to what was perceived as a universal conflict in the discourse of the period—Communism vs. Capitalism.

Works Cited

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