

Corruption of justice



William Faulkner uses his short stories to tell a tale of corruption, especially through the acceptance of white culture, and “A Justice” is no different. He writes his protagonist, Doom, as growing increasingly evil at the same time as his Eurocentric growth, irrevocably connecting the two in the mind of the reader. Faulkner then gives materialism both a negative and a European connotation, showing that it leads to narcissism and should be avoided in order to keep a functional, just society. Finally, he does the same with power, showing that Doom’s exploitation of leadership leads to a corrupt, unjust community. In “A Justice,” William Faulkner shows how the adoption of white man’s customs, particularly materialism and abuse of power, leads to the corruption of justice by perpetuating selfishness and inequality rather than the good of the community.

Throughout the story, the protagonist Ikkemotubbe, or Doom, changes his name multiple times, showing how he grows more evil as his identity grows progressively whiter. As he chooses increasingly Anglo names, his morals shift to value property and power at any cost, which illustrates the selfishness and lack of justice synonymous with European culture. First, Faulkner writes about Doom as a boy, saying “Doom’s eyes were just the same as before he went away, before his name was Doom, and he and Herman Basket and my pappy were sleeping on the same pallet and talking at night, as boys will. Doom’s name was Ikkemotubbe then” (Faulkner 2). When Ikkemotubbe goes by his Indian name, he acts like a boy; especially when juxtaposed with his later actions under white names, his Indian identity correlates with his innocence and justice. Later in the story, he changes his name from Ikkemotubbe: “So when Doom told Herman Basket and pappy

that he was going to New Orleans, he said, ‘ and I’ll tell you something else. From now on, my name is not Ikkemotubbe. It’s David Callicoat. And some day I’m going to own a steamboat, too’” (3). Doom begins adopting Anglo values as his identity evolves into a whiter name, especially materialism, as illustrated by his desire to own his own steamboat.

Additionally, literary critic Robert Woods Sayre comments on Doom’s fall into the trap of materialism and white culture, saying, “ An emphasis is placed here on private property” (Sayre 15). This hints at the injustice of the white communities, as with a fixation on private ownership comes inevitable selfishness and a reluctance to share, a key factor in determining the justice- or lack thereof- of a group. In changing his name a final time, Doom’s actions grow increasingly immoral; for example: “ That was the first night that Doom was at home. On the next day Herman Basket told how the Man began to act strange at his food, and died before the doctor could get there and burn sticks” (Faulkner 4). When defining his identity with a variation of a French phrase, Doom begins murdering innocent men to achieve his ambitions of power, showing how selfishness, immorality, and a lack of fairness and justice intertwine with the European culture in which he immerses himself.

In fact, author Bruce G. Johnson confirms this in his analysis of “ A Justice”: This etymological shift in Doom’s process of renaming himself reflects the Euramerican influence on his acquired identity (Johnson 28). Every time Doom picks a new name, it deliberately reflects the change in his identity; the more European his name sounds, the deeper he finds himself drawn to Anglo values like private property and total power, which highlights the selfishness and inherent lack of justice in white culture. By characterizing

Doom's descent into selfishness and materialism through his choice of white names and identities, Faulkner shows the reader the innate injustice associated with Anglo values. Faulkner continues his theme of white beliefs corrupting justice by writing about the materialistic plague Doom brings to his tribe.

In making Doom's actions unsympathetic and cruel, he shows how materialism leads to selfishness and inequality, and therefore a lack of justice. For example, when Doom returns to the tribe, " He brought six black people, though Herman Basket said they already had more black people in the Plantation than they could find use for" (Faulkner 2). Doom views the black slaves as mere possessions and signs of his wealth and power rather than something with utility, signified by his bringing back slaves even though the Plantation had no purpose for them; this unfair treatment and lack of appreciation of the slaves and their value shows an injustice in Doom's action. Critic Patricia Galloway links this idea of injustice to white culture as she writes, " It therefore seems that Faulkner's notion that some Indians learned a new style of slavery from whites is in fact accurate" (Galloway 6). The Indians learning the concept of slavery from the whites proves that the inherent injustice connected to slavery is an Anglo ideal, cementing the idea that Doom's adoption of white beliefs leads to his corruption of justice.

More disturbingly, Faulkner shows the negative aspect of materialism through Doom's prized poison: " Then Doom took the puppy from pappy and set it on the floor and made a bullet of bread and the New Orleans salt for Sometimes-Wakeup to see how it worked" (Faulkner 4). Doom unfairly, unjustly, and immorally uses his poison to intimidate and eventually murder

his adversaries, which gives property and materialism an extremely dark connotation and insinuates that excessive materialism should be avoided. Johnson follows up on this concept, saying “ This poison, which is his greatest possession, symbolizes Doom’s infection of his own people, as he spreads the ‘ disease’ of materialism throughout his native land” (Johnson 30). Doom learns about materialism through the white men he comes in contact with in New Orleans and takes it back to his tribe, spreading the corruption, selfishness, and injustice that comes with adoption of white men’s customs. Finally, Faulkner expresses another downside of materialism when he writes about “‘ the fence around the cabin of this black man’” that Doom builds after Sam Fathers is born (Faulkner 10). By building a wall around the black man’s property, Doom excludes him from the rest of the community and creates an atmosphere of inequality, which contributes to the injustice rampant throughout the story. By characterizing materialism as a white plague, Faulkner shows how Doom’s acceptance of it leads to his corruption and lack of justice.

Faulkner also uses Doom’s lack of morals when it comes to gaining the Man’s position and his abuse of such power to illustrate how white values lead to corruption. By showing the reader how Doom cheats and murders to assume leadership and then delivers false, rigged justice when in charge of his tribe, he proves that true justice cannot coexist with the European culture perpetuating the attainment of power at any cost. First, Doom rises to power dishonestly: “ When the Willow-Bearer went to fetch the Man’s son to be the Man, they found that he had acted strange and then died too. ‘ Now Sometimes-Wakeup will have to be the Man,’ pappy said... ‘ Sometimes-

Wakeup does not want to be the Man,' the Willow-Bearer said" (Faulkner 4). Rather than get a leadership role in a fair, just manner, Doom murders and intimidates the heirs to the chief so he can come into power instead; this tyrannical, oppressive behavior accentuates the skewed sense of justice, if any, this man possesses.

On the topic of the illegality of Doom's ascent to chiefdom, Johnson adds, "The poisonous white powder that he procured during his sojourn in New Orleans is the true source of his uncontested dominance" (Johnson 30). His power comes through intimidation, not respect or merit; a meritocratic government would be fair and just, but this tyrannical, almost Macbeth-like action threatens to undermine any justice left in this community after the materialistic scourge. As the Man, one of Doom's first tasks involves settling a dispute between Crawford and a black man over a Negress, and Doom decides to slant the odds in the black man's favor in a cockfight: "' This cock belongs to Ikkemotubbe,' pappy said. ' It is his,' the People told pappy. ' Ikkemotubbe gave it to him with all to witness'" (Faulkner 7). Doom, in the position of judge and dealer of justice, chooses to corrupt justice by interfering with it and helping the black man rather than settling the dispute fairly. Furthermore, Johnson writes, " Doom uses this cockfight to manifest his authority by distributing his own brand of " justice" (he gives the slave a better cock than Crawford's because he wants the slave to win)" (Johnson 31). Justice corrupts easily; perhaps justice does not exist in this story at all since it all seems to be rigged by Doom. Doom finalizes the injustice in his tribe when, while building the fence around the black man's property, he says, " we will build the fence this high" (Faulkner 10). He mandates that the

fence will be built at that height so he can climb over it and continue his affair (from which Sam Fathers was born) with the black man's wife; this epitomizes Doom's corruption and the lack of justice in the community as a result of the abuse of power. Faulkner shows corruption and injustice thriving in a world where Anglo-style exploitation of power is accepted and encouraged.

In "A Justice," William Faulkner shows how the adoption of white customs leads to the corruption of justice. He does this chiefly by showing Doom's descent into corruption and immorality as he changes his identity to be whiter and whiter. Faulkner then establishes materialism as a Euro-American value and writes it as a negative concept that only leads to selfishness and suffering. By doing the same with power, Faulkner guarantees that the reader will view all of Doom's actions as evil and connected with European culture. By irrevocably linking white values to Doom, William Faulkner proves to his reader that white customs lead to a lack of justice.