

The Motifs of Light and Darkness in Faulkner's Novel Light in August

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Abstract

In this paper, we determine the role of the motifs of light and darkness in the forming of the image of the main character of the novel by William Faulkner *Light in August*. The choice of the subject matter of our study was influenced by the very title of the novel. Many researchers noted the fundamental indissolubility of its form and content. Literary scholars agree that the conflict between black and white bloods is the forming element of the central image, Christmas. In our study, we expanded the topic, since William Faulkner is famous for turning over familiar images and motifs, and we are interested in whether he does the same to the fundamental categories of light and darkness. In the course of the study, it became clear that a detailed analysis of these categories radically changes the habitual interpretation of the protagonist's image and the axiological content of the novel.

Keywords: Literature; Language Learning; Light; Faulkner; Novel.



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1. Introduction

The subject of the study is the novel *Light in August* by William Faulkner, written and published in 1932. The relevance of the study lies in the fact that Faulkner's influence is recognized not only by many classics of world literature, but also by young contemporary authors. The masterpieces of William Faulkner were included into programs both in English-speaking countries and in Russia, so the interpretation provided by this article can be used in educational process. The novelty of the study is due to the fact that analysis of the majority of literary works contains interpretation of the title, but when we started studying *Light in August* we found no explanation other than references for example, in the works by Gumbrecht (2017), Clarke (2015) to the well-known quotation: in August in Mississippi there is a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there is a foretaste of fall, it is cool, there is a lambence, a soft, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times. It might have fauns and satyrs and the gods and---from Greece, from Olympus in it somewhere.

It lasts just for a day or two, then it is gone . . . the title reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization. Even though some scholars note that to be light in August is a Southern slang term for pregnancy (Stannard, 2015), we cannot exclude literal meaning of the word light as the short story that developed into this novel was originally titled *Dark House* and the opposition is obvious (Bleikasten, 2017). The title often displays the most important topic for the author, for example, Farewell to arms by Hemingway. Faulkner himself often turned to this method both in his short stories and novels (Nicholls, 2009). In the case of *Light in August*, literary critics agreed that the motivation of the main character lies in the fact that he has both black and white blood flowing in his veins, and therefore cannot decide which side to take (Hines, 1996; Holman, 1972). In this case, no one (as far as we are concerned) has linked this important topic with the title and has analyzed the motifs of light and darkness. The aim of the study is to trace the role of the motifs of light and darkness in the formation of the image of the protagonist and to determine how a new reading of this image influences the interpretation of the novel as a whole.

2. Methods

The subject matter of the topic requires specification of a number of terms: the motif, the artistic image, the antithesis (or contrast). The image is the basic unit of artistic form. The beginning of the theory of the artistic image is found in Aristotle's doctrine of mimesis, but since our research is to a lesser degree strictly literary and to a greater degree philosophical, we will dwell on a general definition. The artistic image is the reproduction of the phenomena of life in a concrete individual form. This is a form of reflection of reality by art, a concrete and at the same time a generalized picture of human life, transformed in the light of the artist's aesthetic ideal (Weinstein, 2006). The literary image is also defined as a system of motifs connected in a single whole. Motif is recognized as a semantic element of the text, which is characterized by the following features:

- Repeatability;
- The ability to accumulate meaning;
- The ability, having appeared in some contextual situation, to refer to its former context;
- The opportunity to be revealed by its representatives.

All these features are observed in the work of William Faulkner. Light and darkness are not just repeating elements, they are semantic elements, accumulating meaning. The idea of the predicate lies in the very meaning of the term motif: just as a predicate, unfolding a message, promotes speech as a whole, so a motif promotes the narrative, unfolding the prospect of its eventual development. The basis of predicativity of a motif is actually an action at the center of its semantic structure. However, the practice of identifying a motif allows its designation through a non-predicative word. One can find, for example, the motif of death, the motive of water, etc. Semantic foundations of such motifs can be of two kinds: either the non-predicative word is still understood as a set of characteristic actions-predicates, or - and this is a fundamentally different case - the motif implies the narrative theme. In our study the motif of light and darkness develops one of the most important topics in the novel. In accordance with the dichotomous theory of the motif, we consider light and darkness as an invariant of the motif, the variants will be its concrete representatives: time of day, black and white blood, and especially color and light.

3. Results and Discussion

As we have already mentioned, no one used the analysis of the motif of light and darkness to change interpretation of the novel. However, some studies and comments have helped us look at Faulkner's text from a different perspective. The first important cue lies in the theory of Jung (2018). He introduced the term shadow into psychology to denote the negative side of personality, which is not allowed to manifest itself in real life (Jung, 2018) claimed that every person has his own shadow. This includes desires, experiences that are denied by the individual as incompatible with existing social standards, concepts or ideals. It is everything that a person does not want and cannot let into their conscious self. But precisely because these parts are hidden from a person or not recognized by them, they often control a person, especially in difficult situations (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2018).

An important aspect of the shadow is that it is not only a gloomy underside of the person. The shadow also consists of drives, abilities and positive qualities that either were once rejected by the person, because they had no place in life, or they never realized it (creativity, passion, sexuality, ability to feel deeply, spontaneity, strong desires, dreams - everything that is considered indecent, uncultured or simply unacceptable by someone else). Since childhood, everyone learns a lot of behavioral and moral norms and taboos, so a shadow is formed. It seems to us that there is an episode in the novel where the concept of the norm for the main character breaks down, which leads to serious consequences. The second cue is the fact that many researchers have repeatedly noted that Faulkner incorporates a lot of artistic principles into his work (Seri, 2014), for example, (Delazari, 2003) mentions the musicality of the novel. We draw attention to the connection of his manner with painting. All artists (writers, poets, composers and painters) widely use contrasting artistic images in their work. In literary criticism, such a technique is called an antithesis. Any literary device becomes meaningful, if it is included in the relationship of opposition. The most common use of contrast among artists is the technique of light-and-shade (or chiaroscuro) - we will explain the importance of this term later on. The Merriam-Webster dictionary gives the following definition to the word chiaroscuro:

- 1: pictorial representation in terms of light and shade without regard to color
- 2 **a:** the arrangement or treatment of light and dark parts in a pictorial work of art. **b:** the interplay or contrast of dissimilar qualities (as of mood or character)
- 3: a 16th century woodcut technique involving the use of several blocks to print different tones of the same color; also: a print made by this technique
- 4: the interplay of light and shadow on or as if on a surface
- 5: the quality of being veiled or partly in shadow

The definition contains such important concept as interplay: so opposition is not necessary. For further comments, it is necessary to emphasize the idea that the technique of chiaroscuro has nothing to do with color contrast, it is a matter of tone. Primitive visual art is characterized by a planar image of the world, i.e. by the absence of shadow. The technique of chiaroscuro appeared as a truly radical and deep innovation, which allowed to unite all the elements without forcing out details, just as the researchers of Faulkner's work noted that his works are distinguished by a sense of unity with a visible variety of details, characters and storylines. We analyze the motifs of light and darkness not in isolation, we are interested in the role they play in the formation of a holistic image of the protagonist. In this novel, the concepts of light and darkness have different meanings. The first one is light meaning rest, joy, good and darkness meaning mirk, wrong. But the main thing seems to be a different understanding of these motifs, especially the motif of darkness (Yesembayeva, 2018).

Jung's (1969) idea of the shadow part of personality suggests the dependence of shadow formation on the norms introduced from childhood. We are interested in the case with the dieter who broke the value system of little Joe. (Virgintino, 2003) for three days he waited for his punishment (for eating toothpaste), and instead he received a reward (for silence). Adult Christmas could not but know what was good and what was bad, but he continued to check. In such cases Faulkner refers to the technique of light-and-shade. Christmas he was not sure whether he had black blood or not. In his system of values, this is bad, but sometimes he seems to recognize it in himself. The problem is that he and the social structure of the American South do not allow him to combine these two principles, he is either white or black, but never a half-blood. Alienating from his own depressed qualities, Christmas somehow alienates from his essence, which, it seems to us, is the tragedy of the protagonist. The concept of shadow as an archetypal image exists in all cultures. In ancient times, the shadow of a man was considered his soul, a double. Primitive people are characterized by the idea that shadow is the second self of a man, its vital part. The loss of the shadow was tantamount to the loss of the soul (for example, a popular idea that evil spirits do not cast shadows). The opposition light-darkness is derived from the simplest natural cycle, which a man observed every day and

comprehended from time immemorial, - from the daily change of day and night, the existence of the day and the non-existence of the night. Light and darkness grow as concepts from paired mythological antitheses. Darkness was the original Chaos, and light was the first sunray, signifying the beginning of the act of creation and structuring, giving shape to the cosmos that scooped the building material from the same Chaos. The struggle between these two principles lives in every person and determines their fate. The hero of the narration is the quadron, he has black blood in his veins, while at the same time in society he is mistaken for white. The duality becomes the basis of the protagonist's character. In the text, this blood conflict is most vividly represented in terms of lawyer Gavin Stevens, but we will not dwell on it, as this problem is described in much detail in the research literature. The main thing is that despite the quotes like and then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life, it is not the black blood that makes Christmas commit evil deeds, namely, darkness in himself. If one continues to develop the topic of blood, they can add that white in the novel is not always a positive hero. For example, describing intolerant McEachern who brutally beats his adopted son, the author constantly mentions his cold, light eyes. In the novel *Light in August* Faulkner addresses one of the most important moral problems of the American South - the problem of racial relations (Pauley, 2011), but in the aspect of our subject matter this problem is completely removed, and we observe how Faulkner twists the habitual association light=good, darkness=bad.

Darkness is not evil, but the original chaos from which everything has appeared. In the darkness of Faulkner there is something primitive. One of the most striking examples to us is an excerpt, where Christmas enters the kitchen of Joanna Burden's home and hears a familiar smell that carries him to childhood. All sense organs become aggravated in the dark, a person becomes more open to the perception of the world. Sensuality awakens in the darkness as well. For example, when Christmas remembers Joanna: the sewer ran only at night - such rude and indecent wording at first glance. But even this fragment can be understood differently. It is mentioned more than once how, looking for intimacy with Christmas, Joanna waited for him in the dark green of the bushes; her hair is compared to snakes. The juxtaposition of intimacy with a woman and damp black fertile soil refers us to the original understanding of darkness being not a sin, but an original chaos. Light is not always truthful: under the soft light of the candle Joana Burden appears much younger than she actually is. At the same time, the culmination of the novel - the murder scene - occurs at dawn (Christmas returned to the hut at 7 a.m.). Faulkner reverses the binary opposition sin is darkness / goodness is light. In his world, the contrast is washed away. It is extremely noteworthy that when describing peaceful scenes Faulkner resorts to the notable borrowed word *chiaroscuro*:

1. It seemed to him that he could see the yellow day opening peacefully on before him, like a corridor, an arras, into a still *chiaroscuro* without urgency.

2. He passed through the door and into the street, the basket on his arm, walking stiffly and carefully, like a man on ice. It was hot; heat quivered up from the asphalt, giving to the familiar buildings about the square a nimbus quality, a quality of living and palpitate *chiaroscuro*.

Faulkner accompanies it with the words peacefully, still and with the epithets living and palpitate. Life is not in acceptance of one side, it consists of the interaction between darkness and light, both within a human and nature. Change of darkness and light is a natural law that cannot be approached with traditional moral standards (Antúnez, 2014).

4. Summary

The technique of *chiaroscuro* not only infuses the sense of unity to the main character, it becomes a metaphor for the dramatic complexity of life. August is the last summer month, light is waning, and at the same time Faulkner takes it to the title. In the beginning, we already said that the title itself prompted us. The name of the protagonist also supports our interpretation: Christmas. There was a pagan holiday of winter solstice celebrated on the same day. People met the longest night of the year with burning torches, candles and bonfires. Christians adopted the symbol of light and gave it a new meaning - the hope that the darkest hour is already behind. Despite the fact that the protagonist plunged so deep into the dark that he committed murder, the scene of his lynch, which occurred in the sparkling rays of the sun, brings him even closer to the image of Christ (age, five wounds, etc., have already been mentioned in literary criticism). The image of Christmas symbolizes Faith in humanity. In his Nobel speech, Faulkner said: *"I refuse to accept the end of man. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail"* (Faulkner, 1959).

5. Conclusions

Our hypothesis was confirmed, Faulkner plays with traditional reader associations. The main point of our study is the idea that darkness (the dark side of a person's personality) is not an absolute evil, but a certain predilection. The novel *Light in August* is not so much a novel about race relations (Heeren, 2016). The conflict of blood is a metaphor: darkness is suppressed qualities of personality, something a person refuses to acknowledge. Ignorance of one's identity, one's origin (the idea worthy of Faulkner, who always stressed the importance of the past), denying oneself is a tragedy. *Light in August* is rather a novel about an ancient conflict of chaos and creative beginning in every person.

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