MANIFESTATIONS OF FAITH IN AMERICAN SOUTHERN SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

The word "south" in American southern literature is often excluded into a common definition and heavily stigmatized. Many writers suggest that it is time to remove the imaginary borders and stigmas encompassing the South, such as those attached to slavery, the civil war, and religious devotion. One such border is the generalization that it is possessed by a singular faith, namely a protestant-centered faith. This stagnant faith hanging over the South is conflicted by the variety of faith found in contemporary southern fictional literature. This research elaborates on the definition of the South by introducing a new perspective of faith presented in American southern fiction. Particularly, this research analyzes how three short stories represent multiple versions of faith through the narration, character actions, and literary language used. The representations of faith outlined in this essay include faith in physical works, in the inherent goodness of humanity, and in personal redemption.

Essay

Southern Literature is a problematic enterprise when it comes to identifying key attributes of the genre. The value of exploring literature comes in the reader's ability to see language working as a combination of fictional, moral, linguistic, impractical, and normative expressions (Eagleton, The Event of Literature 25). Such complexity suggests that trying to pin down a single definition of a genre, say southern literature, is not a straightforward enterprise. Thomas Haddox argues that the South should not be a term used to describe southern literature since readers may instantly think of abused slaves, the civil war, and a devoutly righteous people. Instead, the plural term, the "Souths", should be used when describing southern literature, to prevent it from being perceived from a stigmatized point of view (Haddox 250). Haddox demonstrates that there is no single work of literature that could stand for the absolute mother of all southern literature, but that each subculture within this southern culture has the opportunity to branch off into its' group that makes up the definition of the "Souths" (260; Mackethan). Therefore, the most reasonable attitude and approach one should have when discussing southern literature is to wrestle with the multitude of definitions and be open to discussion (Haddox 260). Ultimately, southern literature reflects the South as it is an ever-evolving subject that cannot be restrained to a single point of view. My research focuses on the analysis of three short stories written by contemporary American Southern writers and how diverse representations of faith can be understood through the narration, character actions and literary language found within southern fiction.

Susan Ketchin introduces the South as one that has been not Christ-centered but Christ-haunted. Southern writers regularly write on topics of religion and faith, being thoroughly concerned with the salvation of souls, loss or gain of eternity, and humankind's desire for God. However, an ever-changing society has posed a threat to the beloved southern values of family, community, and place (Ketchin, The Christ Haunted 15). Nevertheless, writers of the American South collaborate with this evolving region, fueled with nostalgia, by continuing to write about these cherished topics. For some writers, the most important aspect of producing southern fiction is to understand the complexities of faith, and for others, like Larry Brown, religious reference is a way to world-build in fiction (17). Still, religion holds tightly onto the writing of many literary artists, as a light to see the unfolding of the human experience (Ketchin, Religion in Twentieth 735). Ultimately, Ketchin depicts southern writers as individuals seeking to connect their southern origins to their understandings of spirituality and faith (736). Writers of southern literature reflect the shaping force religion has on the South by centering faith in their literary language. Many writers criticize the development that modernization has caused in the South, believing it has lost its sense of community that was not only tied to a faith-based, but also a societal force (Wilson 251). Writers of American southern literature are introducing a new view of faith in the American South through their writing.

Southern literature incorporates the effects that modernization has caused in the South and assists the reader in understanding what the South truly is. Micheal Bibler wants to "smash the Mason-Dixon line," meaning that he wants to remove the border that encompasses the South, inhibiting it from growing into the diverse society that it is. This invisible border promotes an exclusionary point of view of the South (Bibler 153). Depictions of faith in southern literature support the notion that faith is more expansive than the "protestant religion" that has blanketed the South for years. The South needs to be re-introduced through American literature and should be depicted in the light that the South is a diverse location that cannot be confined to standard definitions or ideals (154). Such as the standard definitions of faith in the South. Amazing southern literary artists and new ideas that are reshaping the South are dismissed because of the stigmas that have been associated with it (Ravenel). The audience of southern literature is limited as many readers believe in these stigmas and avoid the genre altogether. The genre of the "Souths" combines works based on their likeness but is upheld by the individual diversity of each; this shows how the many different southern groups

interact with their stained history and evolving society (Mackethan). American southern literature allows the reader to explore the differences between groups and acknowledge the diversity that makes up the South.

Furthermore, literary representations of southern faith may fail to capture the complexities of faith practices in the South. Faith is not confined to a single type of belief or religion. Contemporary southern literature points to the diversity of faith that is in the American South (Bibler 155). It is not limited to the Protestantism that haunts the South (Ketchin, The Christ Haunted 17). As a result, conceptions of faith in the South are not as narrow as one may think. The literary language used in southern fiction conveys this. Southern faith goes beyond Ketchin's landscape, which is evident in many works of American southern fictional literature. As it follows, the idea of a single stagnant way of belief hanging over the South is conflicted by multiple versions of faith presented in contemporary American southern short fiction.

When one reads a work of fictional literature, one can analyze the text in numerous ways by looking at how language functions through the various features that constitute the story. For example, both the narrative and character action of the story are two worthwhile qualities of literature to examine. The literary language used in the narrative and character actions of short fiction can position the reader to see different forms of faith. In "Zero Hour and I'm Taking Up Taxidermy" by Morris Collins, "Little Big Show" by Kathy Flann, and "SAB" by Ann Pancake one can see through the narration and character actions, how faith emerges in the form of physical works, a belief in humanity, and personal redemption. Character actions in fictional literature show the reader how the characters interact with the people and the world around them. In Flann's "Little Big Show" Alexander is a man who has lost seemingly everything in life but still hangs onto the belief that humanity is ultimately good and that everything will be okay in the end. The protagonist in the Collins' "Zero Hour" is losing his wife and has faith that acts of redemption will get her back. Lastly, the narrator in Pancake's "SAB" has endured through pain and brokenness; nevertheless, she puts her faith in personal atonement. The prose in each of these stories suggests the various ways that the characters express belief in something other than themselves.

The narration incorporates literary language that demonstrates faith in the form of the character's belief in physical works as a way to save his marriage. In the story, the narrator uses the first-person view inviting the reader into his life where he tries to win back his wife by resurrecting, through taxidermy, a dead bobcat he peeled from the road. The narrator described the state of their relationship, and presents a reason for picking up the bobcat, "my wife was heartbroken and almost gone, brittle as glass to the hammer of my dull touch" (Collins 125). This communicates to the reader that his wife is "almost gone," yet the "almost" implies to the reader that there is still a thread of hope left to hang on to. Particularly, the protagonist of the story places his faith in acts of redemption and holds on to the hope that he will be able to win her heart back, believing that "sometimes love requires a gesture that transcends the usual ceremonies of marital discord." (125). Consequently, the narrator poses the question, "what can you do when what you've already done is the problem?" responding that "Sometimes escalation is in order" leading to his dependence or faith in this last attempt to preserve unity (126). The narrative describes how the main character depends on this act of redemption as a way of maintaining faith that his marriage will work out in the end.

Furthermore, one can see how language enables the character's actions to produce faith in physical works to win back his wife. In Collins' "Zero Hour", the main character interacts with the world around him as he peels the bug-eaten brittle bobcat off the pavement. Back at home, the narrator brings the reader and the bobcat down to the basement to begin work on the big cat. Hopefully, he declares, "And me? And now? Alone, yes. But not for long. A little spattered in gore, perhaps—but isn't that the real stuff of the heart?" (130). He wishfully holds on to this idea that the cat could save his relationship, proclaiming that he is "alone, yes. But not for long" (130). The narrator trusts that healing and re-convention are possible, telling the audience, "where once this cat was mangled, I have made him whole. And where he was by man and tire rent, I have sutured him with bright neon stitching and, I should add, made him fatter than he ever was—for the flesh, like the heart, is more elastic than we think" (130). As he mends the dead, weathered, insect-chewed cat he hopes he can mend his own relationship. The declarations that he has "made him whole," where once this cat was battered and bruised, and that he has "sutured him with bright neon" shows that the protagonist's belief that there is still hope (130). He hopes that his attempt to reconstruct their marriage is bright enough, like neon, for hopefully his wife to notice. Additionally, the narrator indirectly interacts with his wife. Although hope is scarcer than food during a famine, when his wife "turn[s] and say[s], will you help me with these boxes?", at a last desperate attempt to save his relationship with his wife, he helped her with the boxes (131). There is an implied faith in these acts of redemption. Faith that stuffing a dead animal as a present and helping with the moving boxes, that will take his disappearing wife away, will somehow bring back together their "trembling hands," their "unfinished flesh" (131). The narrator is attempting acts of resurrection, like the physical resurrection of the deceased bobcat, as an allegory of his faith in the resurrection of his own marriage.

Comparatively, Flann's "Little Big Show" is another piece of southern literature that utilizes narration in the third person view and character actions to portray faith in humanity. Alexander, the main character, has faith that humanity is ultimately good and that someone will come to his rescue. Consequently, he reaches out to his sister, girlfriend, parents, secretary, in faith that someone will be at the other end. At the beginning of the story, his sister's

girlfriend, parents, secretary, in faith that someone will be at the other end. At the beginning of the story, his sister's car is stolen along with Alexander's briefcase holding his precious proposal for work. Desperately, he thinks of all the people who could save him, thinking that "if his parents weren't trekking across the U.S…. Maybe they'd have been excited to do him the favor since he rarely asks" (Flann 151). The narrative leads the reader to expect that Alexander's faith in his parents will result in his rescue. Through the bleak circumstances, he "realizes what it is, the thing he keeps wanting to know from everyone he loves: "Are you there?" he says" (159). Alexander has faith that someone he loves will respond. The continual hardships the narrator faces test his faith in humanity, especially in the face of impossible circumstances.

Additionally, the way the protagonist interacts with the world around him works to produce his faith in humanity. Throughout the story, the narration utilizes flashbacks in order to provide insight from the past that makes up Alexander's present. Through the instantaneous time travel trips, the reader learns that Alexander had endured some level of suffering. The reader can recognize this through the loss of his new-born infant. Alexander recalls the memory as he "blinks away the doctor's thick fingers, the way they worked tubes up the twins' noses," remembering how "they were perfect—too perfect to be alive and also too perfect to be dead" (157). Furthermore, soon after the death of their children, Alexander's wife, Sheryl, left him. Moreover, the once flourishing relationship he used to have with his sister began to dissipate as well. In an attempt to save this connection, Alexander invites his sister to go on a hike with him "as a way to win Marietta back," like a fearless warrior, "if that's what it took, he'd do it" (149). Coming down from the hike, they notice the car is not in sight. Someone stole it. Alexander struggles with the stolen car and the loss of his proposal. He sought rescue from his secretary and his parents, but neither was able to provide a helping hand. The narrator resorts to comfort as he looks for someone to sympathize with him. Eventually, he is able to contact Nichole, a newly made friend. Finally, someone shares his concern, "Oh no! That's awful!" she says. "Are you okay?" (159). Notwithstanding the reality of his life, Alexander has faith that someone will ultimately be there for him. His faith lies in the possibility that things will turn around for the good as he tries to mend the relationship with his sister or reaches out to someone for help.

Lastly, Pancake's "SAB", depicts how narration and character actions work to show faith arising from personal redemption. The narration presents the story from the first-person point of view of the main character writing to her cousin, Sull. Both the protagonist and Sull have endured hardships induced by others and procured from themselves. The narrator writes to her cousin after she had come back to their hometown after 15 years of being away, wishfully writing that Sull had "returned to reach for what, after my own wreckage, I found" (Pancake 3). The main character addresses Sull multiple times, and sympathizes with her, "Sull, I feel the hurt of you" telling Sull about how she had faith that things could improve through personal redemption (1). Personal redemption came in the form of life from the nature around them and the life found within her cousin. The narrator reinvented herself, in a way, through nature as she "learned how the trees, if you move between them long enough, will eventually rub off your dirt" and learned how to "hear [the] unsingable song" (6;1). The narrator moves from telling Sull about the woods and the hills that "if you can open, will carry past your pain" to what was going on in her present and how she observed her cousin (1). The narration shows the reader how an interaction with nature led the protagonist to have faith in a personal redemption.

Faith in personal redemption is not only seen through the narration of "SAB", but also through the character actions within the short story. The narrator depicts her life as one marred with her troubles since life had taken her "son, husband, breasts, innocence, righteousness, [and] security" (6). To this end, she did not only have faith that nature was working for her reparation but also life. The narrator depicts the life sewn within her surroundings, "still the land sings" even though her whole world was collapsing, there is still some life in the dying body. The main character tells Sull that she finds life in her, "I saw it. The live coal of you, Sull. I smiled myself, then turned away. Partly to give you privacy, but part because I wasn't sure. I wanted to be for a while with the probably. That sab I took for me" (8). Sab is a term the narrator used to describe salve, which is a substance used to promote healing. The narrator's sab is seeing the "live coal" that was Sull, burning to feed the fire, the life within her. Altogether, nature does something for the narrator, but it is the healing and the life within her cousin, Sull, that ultimately gives the narrator faith in her redemption. The healing power of the sab manifested itself from the goodness the narrator saw within her cousin. The narrative leads the reader to believe that the narrator draws faith that her healing was possible by seeing the healing of her cousin, Sull.

Ultimately, literary language functions to imply faith through the characters' beliefs in something other than themselves. Such as in personal redemption, hope in humanity, or physical acts. As previously stated, this idea is depicted in Collins' "Zero Hour" by showing the main character's attempt to save his marriage through the physical reconstruction of the dead bobcat he picked up from the road. Similarly, faith in humanity is shown in Flann's "Little Big Show" as Alexander holds on to the hope that someone will be there for him even though everything has been taken away from him. Lastly, the protagonist in Pancake's "SAB" has faith that personal redemption will heal her brokenness. Nevertheless, as a reader, it is important to remember that the characters' form of faith in these short stories can be interpreted in many different ways than just the ones presented here. When analyzing a fictional work, specifically the narrative and character actions, it is important to look closely at how the language functions to create each effect. Through these pieces of southern short fiction, the reader can better notice the diversity of definitions for faith that

that constitute the South. This interpretation fits with the long-running conversation that the New Southern Studies are addressing of the fluidity of the South. Understanding the literary elements of short stories equips the reader to see the complex and diverse representations of faith across the full range of southern literature.

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