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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS RACISM: THE "ORDINARY" WAY OF LIFE

Robert Crawford

The Jim Crow era illustrates an example of society's flaw of blindly following traditions without questioning the ethics of them. Without a doubt, discrimination and violence against a person on the essence of skin color are unlawful. Alice Walker and Erskine Caldwell courageously address racial injustice and other social issues in their pieces of literature. In Walker's beautiful yet ugly short story, "The Flowers," the protagonist's optimistic perspective of the world suddenly meets destruction due to the mutilation of a man's decaying body. Caldwell's story, "Saturday Afternoon," involves the same brutality with the addition of a casual tone. In the text a butcher named Tom Denny, and his friend Jim Baxter, proudly participate in lynching an African-American man named Will Maxie. Both Walker and Caldwell use imagery and aptronyms to abolish the acceptance and normalization of the immorality of racism.

The combination of the sociopolitical conditions of the rural South in the United States and the invincible ignorance of Caucasian southerners established the perfect breeding grounds for racial segregation and inhumanity; this began the Jim Crow era. Simultaneously, the period briefly glimpsed the potential economic success newly freed slaves could have. To prevent implementation of that, racist southerners used interrogation as a tool to reestablish the idea of racial superiority, and that ultimately evolved into violence. A conventional method to inflict violence was by the brutal practice of lynching.

In "The Flowers" and "Saturday Afternoon," Walker and Caldwell were able to capture the grotesque unpleasantness of the practice of lynching, and at the same time, showcase America's regularization of racial prejudice through the imagery present in their stories. Walker vividly describes an unrecognizable man's corpse by strategically manipulating the description of words to reveal the unattractive components of the nature of racism. Walker effectively does this when she states, "she pushed back the leaves and layers of earth and debris ... he'd had large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken." The typical characterization of the beauty of a smile is

equivalent to those of the man's, "large" and "white." However, Walker's selection of words immediately alters the context of that with adjectives such as "cracked" and "broken;" it perfectly embodies the facade minorities, at the time, must adapt to counteract racism: a broken smile. Though there are various similar definitions for the phrase, Walker's work describes it as falsifying a smile to hide suffering. Walker deepens the overall message in this aspect of the story by the condition in which Myop finds the body. Walker purposely camouflages the man's remains with the earthy materials to expand on her theme of society during this period, burying the wickedness of racial violence to the point that racism naturally appears acceptable.

In contrast to Walker, Caldwell's story addresses the atmospheric aspect of lynching from the perspective of the spectators to develop the normality of racism in the story. To give a clear example of this, "Doc Cromer's boy was doing a good business with his Coca-Colas ... five or six bottles of the first three cases were left ... There were only a hundred and fifty or seventy-five there today." From the vending of beverages to the supportive attendance of people, the example produces images of a sporting event or some form of entertainment venue in the readers' minds. Caldwell deliberately does this to unveil society's normalcy for racism; more explicitly, Caldwell utilizes the store owner's son as a vehicle to deliver this idea. The boy subconsciously perceives the participants' dedication to attend and perform the lynching as indirect validation to be a racist. Caldwell incorporates the theory of sociocultural context — environmental surroundings that influence interpretation and actions— in a manner that conclusively confirms the reason for the prevalence and tradition of racism. He implies that racism is a behavior that one obtains by indoctrination. Interestingly enough, Caldwell uses a tertiary character to exemplify the main idea of his story. The imagery present in, "The Flowers" and "Saturday Afternoon" compellingly captures the awful aspects of lynching and the regularity it reinforces to racism.

Alice Walker and Erskine Caldwell creatively sprinkle the customary acceptance of racism throughout every detail of their short stories. Walker and Caldwell's artistic embedment of the theme creates underlying messages that readers can only comprehend upon further analysis; they use aptronyms to do this.

Walker's main character, Myop, is a young, naïve girl. Myop playfully envisions the world during the Reconstruction Era, that seems impossible to see from that perspective; unfortunately, that suddenly ends with the accidental discovery of a dead, decaying body. Walker intentionally unravels the story in this matter to emphasize the character's figurative short-sightedness. The character's name, Myop, is the literal interpretation of the story's climax. Myop, the name, is perhaps myopic or myopathy but shortened; the two terms derive from the Latin word myopia meaning nearsightedness. Walker's introduction of the victim's death concurrently introduces the end of Myop's nearsightedness; Walker reveals this detail in the story when she writes, "Myop laid down her flowers." The character accepts the harsh reality that she must be tolerant of racism because "more than meets the eye." Myop's vicarious experience of pain and despair creates the realization that her nearsightedness would have ultimately led her to the same fate as the man, dead. Walker's character Myop illustrates the participation of both minorities and racially superior individuals' contribution to the normalcy of racism.

Unlike Walker, Erskine Caldwell applies the aptronym to both a primary character and a secondary character in "Saturday Afternoon," and that is Tom Denny and Jim Baxter. Caldwell's story relies on the third person limited point of view to tell the story. The narration allows the audience to see explicitly, the revolting personalities the characters display throughout the story and the aptronyms he links to them. Take, for example, "'Come on, Tom! Git your gun! We're going after a nigger down the creek a ways'... Tom tied on his shoes and ran across the street behind Jim". Caldwell indicates that Tom and Jim are figurative and physical embodiments of Uncle Tom and the Jim Crow laws, two popular terms of the Reconstruction Era. Originating from the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the character Uncle Tom is a virtuous and religious black

slave. However, due to bias film adaptations, Uncle Tom's depiction in movies are as an overly obedient individual and, as a result, gave birth to the derogatory term, Uncle Tom. In the example, Tom unquestionably obeys Jim and performs the lynching. Caldwell intentionally initiations the lynching in this manner to display racism as typical behavior. To justify the normalization of Tom's actions, Caldwell utilizes Jim Denny; the character perfectly emulates the goal Jim Crow laws set to achieve. Jim's encouragement for Tom's participation imitates the Jim Crow laws' enforcement of racial segregation. Walker and Caldwell's unique usage of aptronyms shows the involvement of accepting the immoral belief of racism in the characters names.

By inventively using imagery and aptronyms, Walker and Caldwell were able to effectively reveal society's acceptance of racism as universal and morally adequate. The authors' stories "The Flowers" and "Saturday Afternoon" demonstrate that two different methods can yield the same results. Although both writers' fictional narratives function to deliver the central idea, in this case, Walker's conveys it more efficiently, despite its shorter length. The character, Myop, in Walker's story is relatable for the reason that minorities can understand the acceptance of the harsh reality that accompanies racism. Caldwell's piece loses relatability by incorporating the perspective of racism from the racists themselves. Walker's African descent and Caldwell's European descent may be the influence and reason for the selection of characters and perspectives they present in their stories. The difference in the authors' ethnic backgrounds enables the reader to visualize and understand from opposing ends of the spectrum. Walker's approach is not only more powerful, but it still has relevance in contemporary society due to the youthful yet mature mood of the story. Caldwell's addition of racial slurs and southern dialect in the story decreases the timeless value his work could potentially have. In spite of Walker's and Caldwell's distinct approaches to a controversial topic, both authors expose the damage that racism inflicts on society.

Erskine Caldwell. "Saturday Afternoon." American Studies at the University of Virginia. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~drbr/caldwell.html>.

Walker, Alice. "The Flowers." The Literary Link. <http://theliterarylink.com/flowers.html>.