

# Racial Narrative as A Structural Principle of The Image Of “America” During The “Southern Renaissance” In American Literature

Umrzakov Islomjon Isroilovich

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philology, Associate Professor of the Department of English Language and Literature, Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages named after Is'hoqkhon Ibrat, Namangan, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** The article examines the functioning of racial narrative as a fundamental structural model for constructing the image of America in the literature of the “Southern Renaissance” (1920s–1950s). The author analyzes how writers of the region rethought the national identity of the USA through the categories of “whiteness”, segregation, and the trauma of defeat in the Civil War. Drawing on the works of W. Faulkner, Z. N. Hurston, C. McCullers, and R. P. Warren, it is shown that the racial narrative ceases to be merely a thematic element, transforming into a plot-forming principle that determines the spatio-temporal organization and polyphonic structure of the text.

**Keywords:** Southern Renaissance, racial narrative, American identity, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, segregation, “whiteness”, grotesque, modernism, image structure.

**Introduction:** The literature of the American Southern Renaissance is a unique phenomenon in which regional identity entered into a complex dialogue with the national modernist project. If earlier, in the era of the “Lost Cause”, the South created a myth about itself as an agrarian paradise opposing the industrial North, then in the 1920s–1930s a breakdown of this paradigm occurred. The central instrument for destroying the old myth and creating a new image of America is the racial narrative. As modern researchers note, during this period “southern writers explored in their work themes related to identification and anxieties about race. In particular, anxieties about race mixing, border crossing, violence, and whiteness proliferate in the texts of the Southern Renaissance” (1, 156).

The relevance of the work is conditioned by the need to reconsider the role of racial discourse not as a background, but as a structural matrix generating artistic form. The novelty of the research lies in the analysis of the racial narrative as a principle of the text's

architectonics (plot disintegration, chronotope of the frontier and gothic), rather than merely as an ideological component.

The aim of the article is to identify how the racial narrative determines the structural features of the image of America in key texts of the Southern Renaissance. The objectives include: 1) analysis of the interrelation between racialized consciousness and “double vision”; 2) identification of the role of the “black gaze” in organizing the narrative perspective; 3) examination of racial violence as a plot-forming element.

## METHOD

The methodology of the research is based on the principles of the New Southern Studies, cultural poetics, and narratology. The analysis of the category of “whiteness” as a construct, rather than a biological given, relies on the works of Houston A. Baker Jr. and D. Nelson, who proposed “a productive and significant analytical shift that would view “whiteness” as its own

system of racialized power dynamics, rather than an invisible/neutral norm" (2, 87).

The material consists of the novels by W. Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Z. N. Hurston's essay "How it feels to be colored me" (1928), C. McCullers' novella "The ballad of the sad café" (1943) and novel "The member of the wedding" (1946). The choice of these texts is dictated by the fact that in them, the racial narrative most clearly performs a structure-forming function, destroying the realistic canon of depicting the national chronotope. The

method of continuous sampling and narratological mapping allowed for the identification of nodes where the racial theme intersects with composition, the character system, and the type of narration.

## RESULTS

The analysis showed that the structural principle of the image of America in the novels of the Southern Renaissance is built on three key elements of the racial narrative: the dichotomy of the "black" and "white" gaze, grotesque corporeality, and traumatic temporality.

**Table 1. Structural Functions of Racial Narrative**

| Structural Element      | Function in the Text                                                            | Example of Realization                                                                              |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Double Vision</b>    | Formation of a polyphonic perspective and the collapse of monological authority | Quentin Compson's narrative in "The sound and the fury"                                             |
| <b>Racial Grotesque</b> | Visualization of the decay of social norms, deconstruction of "whiteness"       | The character of Emily Grierson in "A rose for Emily"; Cousin Lymon in "The ballad of the sad café" |
| <b>Miscegenation</b>    | Plot trigger of catastrophe, destruction of national boundaries                 | Thomas Sutpen's story in "Absalom, Absalom!"                                                        |

A key structural feature of the Southern Renaissance literature is the introduction of "double vision" – the simultaneous presence in the narrative fabric of the perspective of the oppressor and the oppressed, white and black. This is not merely an ideological gesture, but a formal principle that destroys the linearity of the narrative. In the dissertation research of M. Matsui, it is emphasized that the white authors of the Renaissance depicted Southern society through "double vision, which includes the perspective of the racial Other, thereby dismantling the 'whiteness' that was taken for granted in Southern society, and questioning the fictitiousness of Southern society itself" (4, 23).

This is most vividly manifested in the work of William Faulkner. In the novel *The Sound and the Fury*, the section told from the perspective of the idiot Benjy Compson is an example of racial narrative at the level of grammar itself. Benjy does not distinguish race as a

social construct, but his olfactory and tactile sensations are built around the smell of trees and the "blackness" of the servants. His stream of consciousness is immanently racialized, as it fixes the boundary between the body of the white aristocrat and the black servants, while simultaneously destroying temporal barriers (3, 112).

In *Absalom, Absalom!* the structural principle is pushed to the limit: the story of Thomas Sutpen and his mulatto son Charles Bon is pieced together from fragments of phrases and conjectures. Quentin Compson and his Canadian roommate Shreve reconstruct the South as a space of tragic guilt. America in their consciousness is not just a country, but "a construction erected on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (Faulkner, 1936, p. 211), and the foundation of this construction is racial mixing. The very impossibility of finishing the story, the endless return to the moment of

Bon's murder, is a structural metaphor for the unhealing racial trauma that prevents the nation from attaining a coherent image.

The racial narrative in the period of the Southern Renaissance is realized through the category of the grotesque, which becomes the main mode of depicting national reality. Researchers note that "it is precisely the normative Southern society based on racial discrimination that is truly "grotesque", and the literary grotesque serves "subversive and liberating" purposes (2, 134).

In Faulkner's short prose, for example in the story "A Rose for Emily", the image of the old maid-aristocrat sleeping with the corpse of her black lover (or laborer, depending on the interpretation) represents a grotesque model of America. Miss Emily's house is a model of a closed nation, maintained by the concealment of a crime, the foundation of which is a racial taboo. Similarly, in the works of Carson McCullers, bodily anomalies (the hermaphroditism of Cousin Lyman in "The Ballad of the Sad Café", the androgyny of Frankie in "The Member of the Wedding") become structural metaphors for racial and sexual liminality. The tomboy Frankie attempts to overcome the prescribed script of white Southern femininity, and this overcoming, in McCullers' discourse, is equivalent to crossing the color line. In this optics, America appears not as a melting pot, but as a space of rigid binary oppositions, where any deviation generates monstrosity.

The structure of time in the texts of the Southern Renaissance is subordinated to the logic of racial guilt. The past of slavery does not recede but "invades" the present, deforming the linear progressivist narrative about the American Dream. This is confirmed by the concept of the burden of history: "Themes of the Southern Renaissance were the burden of history in a place where many still remember slavery, Reconstruction, and a devastating military defeat" (5).

If in the canonical image America is a country of the frontier striving toward the future, in Southern modernism space is compressed into claustrophobic interiors (the Compson mansion, Sutpen's house, the prison cell in "The Ballad of the Sad Café"), through which the ghosts of the past roam. Zora Neale Hurston offers an alternative to this white sense of guilt. In the

essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928), she declares: "I am not tragically colored" (Hurston, 1928, p. 153). Hurston destroys the structure of the image of America as a hell for black people, but at the same time, she builds an image of the nation as a stage where black subjectivity can exist outside of trauma, which is a direct polemic with Faulkner's narrative structure. Her position is an assertion of America as a space of improvisation and play, rather than solely guilt and atonement.

## CONCLUSION

The results obtained indicate that the racial narrative in the literature of the Southern Renaissance functions as a structural attractor, to which all levels of poetics are drawn. If the literature of the "Lost Cause" sought to present America as a union of two different but internally harmonious cultures, the Renaissance exposes the illusory nature of this harmony. The image of America here is constructed not through the opposition of South and North, but through the internal fissure of racial division within the South itself.

One should agree with the thesis that the agrarian ideology of the "Fugitive-Agrarians" was an attempt to "defend tradition and myth from destruction by the influx of new ways of thinking and living" (5). However, the analysis conducted proves that the artistic practice of Faulkner, Welty, or McCullers turned out to be more complex than these ideologemes: it does not defend the myth but anatomizes it, transforming racial anxiety into a source of a new modernist form. As shown in the review, the categories of "exceptionalism" and the "region-nation" dichotomy are themselves racial constructs that mask fundamental questions about political belonging (3, 145).

A limitation of this study is its focus predominantly on white mainstream authors, however, it is important to note that the "Southern Renaissance" is inextricably linked to the Harlem Renaissance through the figure of Zora Neale Hurston and the "reciprocal spatial significance" of these movements (1, 160).

Thus, the racial narrative in the literature of the American Southern Renaissance is not merely a thematic repertoire, but a fundamental structural principle that shapes the image of America. Through "double vision" grotesque deformation of reality, and the destruction of linear time, Southern writers created

an image of a nation internally split, whose identity is built on the repressed trauma of slavery and the fear of mixing. Further research perspectives are linked to a comparative analysis of racial narration in Southern and Latin American modernism, as well as to the study of the influence of this structural principle on the postmodern literature of the USA in the second half of the 20th century.

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