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## **Masculinity in *Dry September* : An Analysis of the Characters John McLendon**

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to trace the dots of masculinity in the character John McLendon, in the short story *Dry September*, written by Nobel laureate William Faulkner. This story revolves around the trauma and violent encounters of a coloured man, Will Mayes. Moreover, my purpose of writing is to draw the oppressive masculinity of the antagonist, McLendon who is gradually exerting his hegemony to derive his power fulfilment. However, the detailing about his character not only projects the action considering his bodily strength or virility, but also McLendon's manliness released through his clothes, accessories, tendency, and above all his interaction with (other) men and women. My intent in writing this project is to provide a critical assessment of character analysis through the lens of masculinity.

**Keywords:** Coloured, hegemony, manliness, masculinity, other, trauma.

### **Introduction**

William Faulkner is an important name in the American literary domain. His oeuvre consists of various issues of humanity. *Dry September* is a short story, an outstanding work of William Faulkner, where multiple layers of analysis could be applied to unravel the text. Faulkner is known for his narrative technique and the point of view in his writing. Faulkner is known for his novels, which depict the typical America of his time. Faulkner, whose characters are very significant in psychological depth, allows a reader to explore the unseen horizons. He creates a fictional town named Yoknapatawpha to manifest the real characters on an unreal land. Faulkner encourages the real situation in the plot and holds onto the age of modernism. Racial conflicts are one of the major themes in his writing style. This short story, *Dry*



*September*, is a plight of such racial discrimination, where the antagonist McLendon assaults a coloured man Will Mayes on the basis of a rumour that he violated a white woman named Minnie Cooper.

The story is divided into five sections and oscillates between past and present. William Faulkner is remarkably known for his usage of the stream-of-consciousness technique. *Dry September* is one such specimen, where the various patterns of the human psyche have been explored. The first section commences with the atmospheric dryness of the month of September. *"Through the bloody September twilight, the aftermath of sixty-two rainless days, it had gone like a fire in dry grass— the rumour, the story, whatever it was. Something about Miss Minnie Cooper and a negro. "* The story gains more pace, a detailed description of a barber shop captures everyone's attention when this barber addresses this negro as *'he's a good nigger'*. Undoubtedly the arrangement of the plot is set in a manner that every single aspect is very vividly shaped accordingly. Hence, the character Minnie Cooper is the single woman through whom Faulkner designed a stereotypical woman. The story clearly conjures the racist outlook through McLendon. He appears as *' a hulking youth in a sweat-stained silk shirt said'*. He was an ex-army and also the catalyst for the assault. He took out an automated pistol from his pocket and decided to finish him.

The second section is about Miss Minnie Cooper in her past. Faulkner is a great artist of narrative technique. He weaves his story with a stream of consciousness to bring out the unseen folds of the human mind. He had arranged the character Miss Cooper in a way that through her presence in the social sphere, we could easily comprehend the idea of the typical life of a single woman. *' SHE WAS thirsty eight or thirty - nine. She lived in a small frame house with her invalid mother and a thin, swallow, un-flagging aunt, where each morning between ten and eleven she would appear on the porch in a lace-trimmed boudoir cap, to sit swinging in the porch swing until noon'*. Soon the narrator discloses how aunt Minnie was beautiful-looking years back. *'It was twelve years now since she had been relegated into adultery by public opinion... . '* The second section specifically deals with the past of Minnie Cooper, who is portraying the typical social perceptions of a middle-aged single woman. She is no longer glamorous now hence, her depleting value as a commodity results in isolation.



The third section again comes back to the present time, where the first section was paused. McLendon was provoking others to seize Will Mayes and was about to leave the barber shop with a car. They saw Will Mayes standing as a night watchman. The barber Hawkshaw was constantly persuading him to stop the violence on the basis of rumour. But nothing could work. The poignant voice resonated as '*kill him, kill the black son*'. Thereafter Will Mayes was compelled to get inside the car. Faulkner very comprehensively manifested the pacing car along with the sound and dust. However, the disappearing dust and sound both dissolved as the absence of Will Mayes is a strategy of Faulkner to avoid immediate violence.

The fourth one is about the turbulent state of Miss Minnie and others' gaze towards her. Though the appearance of her was quite disturbing. She is now the news of the town. The concluding section projects the gender binary of masculinity and femininity. The marital life of John McLendon who is authoritatively converse with his wife. His passive wife silently accepts her husband as master. The story ends with McLendon's sleep in a bare body and the pistol beside him.

### **Social Background**

There is a very old saying that literature is the mirror of society. To comprehend a literary work one needs to look for social scenarios of that particular time. Hence, the text projects the actual condition of the context. Therefore, historical references and political conditions are interrelated with the text. *Dry September* (1931), is a very significant writing of the American Civil War. Racial discrimination was one of the burning issues in America at that time. Coloured people were exploited, harassed and denied for their existence. White people of southern America were hostile to Blacks. The hatred, rejection, and subjugation coiled with slavery. This is how the story witnesses the encountering of suffocative violence on Will Mayes. The story is set in Jefferson, the Mississippi region. Racial conflict is vivid throughout the story. The intensity rises with the development of the plot. The coloured man, Will Mayes and his enigmatic experiences are depicted very effectively. Increasing atmospheric heat is a metaphor to manifest the racial friction. To negotiate this uneasy issue Faulkner very aptly derived the idea of fictional Jefferson. As the publication date implies the story has gone through the crisis of the First World War and also undergone civil war. American continental colour split is one of the major themes in this writing.



## **Masculinity or Masculinities**

Sociological study looks at the domain of gender as a social construct, the binary of male and female are part of identity discourse. This is something which is not merely biological, gender is attained. It is not something fixed or static but rather fluid. The emergence of the masculinity theory was first coined by the sociologist R. W. Connell, who defined masculinity as masculinities. According to her, maleness is not to be considered under one attribute. The role-play of a male is plural. Hence, she categorically divided masculinity into four categories, viz. hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization. Hegemony, the term was borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, a social term that means someone who dominates over with the use of power. Hegemonic masculinity is seen through the social hierarchy, which subordinates others. The idea of manhood varies from culture to culture. Therefore, the notion behind masculinity is very much contextualized accordingly. The dynamics of masculine hegemony is a power exertion on subordinates, inferior or low in status. According to Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee's essay, "*Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity* " (1987), they derived this idea by saying, "*a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance*". There is another way of observing masculinity, by Robert Staples' "*Black Masculinity* ", which utters the concept of race and masculinity. This does not only apply to the opposite sex, rather man to man as well. *Dry September*, is the story of one victim, Will Mayes a man of colour who is charged with rape on the basis of rumour. John McLendon, an ex-army, leads the mob to assault. Here, McLendon primarily subjugates Will Mayes, it is only in the end we see the domestic crisis with his wife. Masculinity or role-play of being male is visible throughout the story irrespective of verbal nuisances. There are other masculine agents that are reflected in the form of automobiles, artillery, architecture and some olfactory images as well. "*The first important attempt to create a social science of masculinity centred on the idea of a male sex role. Its origins go back to late nineteenth-century debates about sex differences, when resistance to women's emancipation was bolstered by a scientific doctrine of innate sex difference. Women's exclusion from universities, for instance, was justified by the claim that the feminine mind was too delicately poised to handle the rigours of academic*



*work. The resulting mental disturbance would be bad for their capacity to be good wives and mothers. The first generation of women who did get into North American research universities not only violated this doctrine. They also questioned its presuppositions, by researching the differences in mental capacities between men and women", this is how Connell writes about male role in her work "Masculinities".*

### **Physical Description of McLendon**

Manliness is admired from ancient times, it also varies culturally. Body shape is formulated from the roots of mythology. The definition of manhood is as stereotyped as womanhood. Society declares the role or attainment of ideal status of manhood which is also social context oriented. Role play in that condition becomes a pivot of considering a man. McLendon's profession is an indicator of masculine standards. He carries a pistol, roves a car, drives recklessly. He pants, he sweats visibly. All constituent masculinity in consolidation. *"Believe, hell! " a hulking youth in a sweat- stained silk shirt said. "Won't you take a white woman's word before a nigger's? This is how a man appears, an ideal man. His sweat symbolically represents virility. Physical strength is one of the desirable features for manhood. McLendon appears in the story as, " The screen door crashed open. A man stood in the floor, his feet apart and his heavy -set body poised easily. His white shirt was open at the throat; he wore a felt hat. His name was McLendon. He had commanded troops at the front in France and had been decorated for valor". Physical strength is compatible with profession, this is how a society considers and accepts a body and its performance. Courage, valour and virility are synonymous to masculinity standards. Body shape is an important factor for physical strength. Eurocentric hegemony of the body is a matter of exuberance in the case of McLendon. He dominates Will mayes, treats his as an invisible creature. His physical superiority inflects and terminates humanity. McLendon exerts the power of white superior race on Will Mayes. The plight of being inferior , colour discrimination is poignantly described by the writer.*

**The functioning of ' sweat ' as a symbol** The short story runs on painstaking imagery. Atmospheric heat in Jefferson has been an intense effect throughout the story. The harsh heat transforms the human psyche. The sweating body, exhausted conversation are display of masculinity behaviour." *Through the bloody September twilight, aftermath of sixty-two rainless days, it had gone like a fire in dry grass– the*



*rumor, the story, whatever it was. Something about Miss Minnie Cooper and a negro attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them, gathered in the barber shop on that Saturday evening where the ceiling fan stirred, without freshning it, the vitiated air, sending back upon them, in recurring surges of stale, pomade and lotion, their own stale breath and odors, new exactly what has happened."* The above description is not only a visual one. The writer has emphatically derives the pungent smelling place, stale air to breathe are subtle representation of masculinity. There are some other instances, where his gesture also exhibits the apparent glimpses of masculine attributes. *"Butch sprang up again. The silk of his shirt clung fat to his heavy shoulders. At each armpit was a dark halfmoon. " Figure out hell! " McLendon jerked his arm free. " All that're with me get up from there. The ones that aint– "He roved his gaze, dragging his sleeve across his face. "* The sweating body, heavy shoulders are emphasizing the trait of manhood. A human body is socially constructed and identified. Hence, physical strength is manifested through the sweating symptoms. The story ends with a scene of McLendon prepares himself for bed, *" He was sweating again already, and he stooped and hunted furiously for the shirt. At last he found it and wiped his body again... . "* Perspiration indicates the physical exhaustion that is a revelation of manual labour and strength showcasing.

### **Representation of automobiles as a masculine vehicle**

The car arrives in this story a number of times, it has a significant role in the plot. From my reading perspective, I will define the place of this four wheeler with its purpose. The first time it appears in the second section of the story as an object to flaunt. *" Then the town began to see her driving on Sunday afternoons with the cashier in the bank. He was a widower of about forty – a high colored man, smelling always faintly of the barber shop or of whisky. He owned the first automobile in the town, a red runabout;.... "* The masculine state develops with the addition of a car. The male role has a significance with the art of driving. My second interpretation of demystification of cars is with violence, where it's turned into a medium of brutality. *"When he overtook them McLendon and three others were getting into a car parked in an alley. McLendon stopped his thick head, peering out beneath the top... . ' "* The cruel assault took place inside the car. McLendon was gone to catch Will Mayes and abducted him with his car. *" Let's go; let's go: here is the other car. " The second car slid squealing out of a cloud of dust at the alley*



*mouth. McLendon started his car and took the lead... . " The pace of the vehicle and reckless driving is a way of dominance over the subordinate. " They dragged the Negro to the car. " The story has woven with a deep impact of automobiles operation, suggestively announces the masculine performance. At last the vehemence was veiled, when Faulkner details, " The barber began to tug furiously at the door. 'Look out, there! ' the soldiers said, but the barber had already kicked the door open and swung onto the running board. The soldier leaned across the Negro and grasped at him, but he had already jumped. ' The car went on without checking speed. " There was no clear disposition of blood shed, it's vague. But the deadly pacing car getting into the dingy narrow lanes, dissolves into dust and we see only the barber who was limping on the road.*

### **The Barber shop, a domain of masculinity**

The barber shop, was a place which was purposefully designed by the writer. It is a place where the whole rumour converted to an authentic fact. The instigating talk on racial description about Will Mayes unveiled the pseudo notion of equality. The barber shop is the epicenter of pursuance of racial vengeance. " *Attacked, insulted, frightened: none of them, gathering in the barber shop on that Saturday evening where ceiling fan stirred, without freshening it, the vitiated air, sending back upon them, in recurrent surges of stale pomade and lotion, their own stale breath and odors, knew exactly what had happened.*" Men go out , and interact with the outer world, exchanging their commotion. That is truly well accepted and appreciated. As the social system is patriarchal in nature, hence, the male centric ideas dominate. How is Minnie Cooper? Is she loyal? There are plenty of questions hovering about her fidelity. Will Mayes, a negro this is how he is identified. He has violated Miss Cooper, that is premise for being a negro , leads to the conclusion. The argument, which was basically a rumour, ultimately represented a real incident. The victim metamorphosed to the culprit. The barber shop has arrived only in the first section of the story, and later all of them are dispersed from there to catch Will Mayes. They plot against him. McLendon was the leader, who manipulates others to harass Will Mayes. He conspires and provokes the other people in the barber shop. The discourse of masculinity is clearly depicted through various agencies.





### **Use of artillery**

Pistol is the symbol for a voice for violence. The hostility of McLendon with Will Mayes, is remarkably comprehended through the pistol usage. John McLendon was portrayed as an ex- army man, who served France and was honoured for his valour. When he was provoking others for assaulting Mayes, at the barber shop he says , " *Come on, " McLendon said. He whirled. From his hip pocket protruded the butt of a heavy automatic pistol. They went out. "* The first time the reader is aware of this pistol and it comes at the end when he moves into his room, reprimands her wife, takes off everything for move to bed. " *He went through the house, ripping off his shirt, and on the dark, screened porch at the rear he stood and mopped his head and shoulders with the shirt and flung it away. He took the pistol from his hip and laid it on the table beside the bed... . "* The event of pistol possession is a direct exhibition of masculinity.

### **Conclusion**

The precise application of diction in the story is aptly seen, in the dynamics of traumatic end of Will Mayes. The vague termination of his life , is a deliberate effort authorial negotiations with reality. The discourse of masculinity is pervasive and multiple. My attempt is to comment on different levels of masculinities. I have mentioned the textual reference to validate the doctrine of manhood. The close reading is allowed to perform the dissemination of my understanding. Through the light of hegemonic masculinity, my effort is to trace the two male characters ' coexistence. Where the binary runs on dominated and dominee within the same gender. Here race has functioned as a catalytic agent to subordinate the other. Moreover, there are some additional masculinity could be identify in this text. Like the exploitation of female characters in the text. Miss Minnie Cooper and nameless wife of McLendon's , who is recognized with the status of wifehood, are further note for study. My endeavour is banked on the characters of McLendon and Will Mayes, are the documentation of man to man equation. This paper has pointed out the subtle units of masculine traits.

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