

# Comparison and Contrast Between Dilsey in *The Sound and The Fury* and Miranda in *Mama Day*

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## Abstract

William Faulkner created a positive and enduring black woman called Dilsey in *The Sound and The Fury*. Sixty years later, also from the south, Gloria Taylor built another more ideal black woman, Miranda. This paper, based on the comparison and contrast between the two women, intends to disclose the degree to which the two writers from different races and genders care about black women, their perspectives, and the deeper social and historical reasons behind them, the evils of slavery and the influence of civil rights movement and feminism. Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize and hence his influence has been powerful. Research on him is proliferating. Naylor has won the American National Book Award and has written five novels, which has enriched and promoted African literature, while domestic research on her is far from adequate. By means of the comparison and contrast between the two black women, this paper tends to draw more attention to the literature of minorities and to further the study on American literature.

Key Words: Dilsey; Miranda; Black women; Comparison and contrast

## I. Introduction

Although William Faulkner, the author of *The Sound and the Fury*, and Gloria Naylor, the author of *Mama Day*, live in different eras, both of the two novels are classic literary works in the twentieth century. They involve race and gender issues, just as “the study of minority literature cannot be separated from the study of mainstream literature, because excellent writers of minority literature are familiar with mainstream literature; and they have made special achievements that surpass them on the basis of absorbing the essence of mainstream and native literature” (Liu, 2010, p.29). Naylor, a black female writer, is no exception. In an interview, Naylor admitted that she had read many works by the writers such as Faulkner and given her compliments. She says that those works are very good, and they have taught her the charm and use of language. Meanwhile, Naylor combines her personal situation with those works and gives objective analysis. She concludes that those works fails to teach her how to understand reality. When black female writers write, they realize that there is a kind of history and other meanings (Carabi, 2002). As a result, Naylor changes her views on American literature. Although she is not sure whether other black women are writing, she is sure that they have different creative perspectives. Black female writers discover and tell the history and life meaning of black people that have been forgotten or ignored by mainstream writers through the perspective of black women. They deconstruct the Western knowledge and representation system, and use myths, legends, folk tales, etc. to reproduce and highlight the history of black groups. It can be concluded that Naylor is not only influenced by Faulkner in her writing, but also surpass Faulkner by combing with the reality of black people. The relationship between the two is inheritance and development. Whether it is the creative form such as multiple narrative perspectives and

characterization, or the creative themes such as death and love, the two novels of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Mama Day* have many similarities. This article first compares the similarities and differences between the black female characters Dilsey and Miranda in the two novels, and then explains the varied views of the two writers on black women and the social and historical reasons behind the difference.

## II. Similar Writing Backgrounds and Characteristics

Firstly, the works of William Faulkner and Gloria Naylor are influenced by Shakespeare. The title of the book *The Sound and the Fury* comes from the lines of Macbeth in the fifth scene of Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*: life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Just as the theme the novel reveals, the Southern family has no choice but to decline and slavery is bound to be abolished. All obstruction and perseverance cannot stop the progress of history in the end, and all struggles means nothing. The plot of *Mama Day* shows obvious intertextuality with *The Tempest* written by Shakespeare in his later years. While appreciating Shakespeare's works, Gloria Naylor has integrated the traditions of black people to reflect and rewrite her own works, focusing on writing her own stories. By adapting *The Tempest*, Naylor looks for the difference between works with black people as the main character and those with white people as the main character in the intertextual relationship. She explores the cultural differences between African and white people, and brings a more open-minded thinking and expression for black literature.

Secondly, the social backgrounds of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Mama Day* are similar. Faulkner has created a fictional "postage-sized place" based on Oxford, Mississippi, and called it Jefferson, and renamed Lafayette County, where Oxford locates at, to Yoknapatawpha. His fifteen novels and most of his short stories take place in this fictional place. Naylor has lived in a large black family since she was a child, and she often heard elders talk about black women in Mississippi. They are good at herbal medicine and play a very key role in the black community. Therefore, Naylor has created *Mama Day* based on it, and fictionalized a small town located in the southern United States—Willow Springs, a small isolated island that is far from the mainland of the United States. The island is located between Georgia and South Carolina, but it is not shown in the map. It is only connected to the American continent through a bridge over the sea. In the preface of *Mama Day*, the *Providence Journal Bulletin* has once commented on Naylor, "There are few young writers who can create this Faulkner-style and self-contained fictional world" (Naylor, 1988). Like Wessex by Hardy and Yoknapatawpha by Faulkner, Naylor makes up the small town of Willow Springs.

Thirdly, both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Mama Day* adopt similar narrative methods—stream of consciousness and dislocation of time and space. Works by Faulkner are usually regarded as modernist ones. *The Sound and the Fury* is a typical novel written by stream of consciousness. Through the transformation of four narrative perspectives of Benjy, Quentin, Jason, and Dilsey, the jump of narrative space and the flow of language show the compound effects of the flow of consciousness. Readers can reconstruct the order of time and space to enhance their participation and reading effects. *Mama Day* uses the third-person omniscience perspective of Cocoa, George, and Miranda, and recalls what happened between the two worlds of Willow Springs and New York through the dialogue between the living Cocoa and the late George and Miranda. It also encourages readers to participate in the reconstruction of time and space in the novel. The multiple perspectives in *The Sound and the Fury* concentrates on the narrative of Caddy's loss of virginity. It reconstructs the process of Caddy's fall, and tells the declining of the Southern aristocratic Compson family, which reveals the inevitable downfall and demise of the Southern family after the Civil War. However, the author has portrayed a positive character in this novel—the black maid Dilsey. It reflects the in-depth thinking of Faulkner on race and gender and his contradictory and complicated feelings about his hometown—the American South. The multiple

perspectives of *Mama Day* focus on the narrative of the love tragedy of Cocoa and George. The novel reshaped the image of black women through the narrative method of magic realism, so that the history of black groups and their cultural traditions can be carried forward and passed on. The two novels reflect the concern of Faulkner and Naylor about black women, while the similarity in narrative methods demonstrates Naylor's inheritance and transcendence of the portrayal of black women in the novels by Faulkner.

In terms of language expression, both Faulkner and Naylor use a large number of African American dialects in their works, which increases the reading difficulty. "American dialects seem to be messy and unpredictable. But in fact people only need to study a little and they will find that although the different dialects of the United States (including black dialects) are not the same in phonetics, spelling and grammar, they also have many commonalities, especially in grammar. There are rules to follow" (Sun, 1981, p.37). Black dialects often use double or even multiple negation to express the simple concept of negation. For example: "Now, Cicero, you ain't got no business in there and you know it" (Naylor, 1988, p.41), and "They ain't nowhere else to take him", Dilsey said (Faulkner, 1929, p.147). In phonetics, the pronunciation of some voiced consonants in black English is exactly the same as the pronunciation of corresponding voiceless consonants, just as [b] [d] [g] is pronounced as [p] [t] [k], and these phonemes can also be silent. The use of a large number of black dialects in literary creation "enables the continuation of black dialects and serves as a weapon against mainstream society" (Fang, 2003, p.111). Both Faulkner and Naylor value and extensively use concise and humorous language of black people.

### III. Christian Archetypes of the Two Black Women

Both Faulkner and Naylor are deeply influenced by Christian traditions. The American South described by Faulkner has always been called as the "Bible Zone." Christianity supports southern society, politics, and culture, as well as slavery and racism. Faulkner grows up, lives and writes in such a cultural environment. He once comments on the influence of Christianity on him, "I grow up in it, unknowingly digested it, and it is in my body" (Gwynn, 1959, p.19). In the two novels, many characters have their prototypes from Christian intentions. Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* and Miranda in *Mama Day* are such Christian figures. They both represent the image of loving, strong, active and rational black women. They bring people hope and let people see the glorious love and humanity.

Faulkner often writes about blacks and their living conditions. He once says, "Dilsey is one of my favorite characters because she is brave, courageous, bold, gentle, and true" (Li, 1984, p.86). In *The Sound and the Fury*, unlike the rebellious female Caddy and the selfish Mrs. Compson, Dilsey cares far more about the children of the Compson family than their mothers, though she is only the cook of the Compson family. Dilsey sympathizes with and protects the weak, and is a caring and strong woman. She has given the children selfless love without asking for any return. She is the true mother of the children of the Compson family. After Caddy lost her virginity, the Compson family despised her, believing that she had brought humiliation to the whole family. However, Dilsey sympathizes with and protects her. For the stupid Benjy whom his mother hates, Dilsey does not loathe him, but she always let her grandson Luster look after and protect him. When little Quentin is abused by Jason, Dilsey always cares about and protects her. She even arranges for the meeting of Caddy and Quentin without giving in to Jason's strong obstruction. In the series of misfortunes of the Compson family, Dilsey is optimistic and is never tired of the world. She faces everything calmly, alleviating the seemingly chaotic and lifeless atmosphere of the novel, making the theme slightly optimistic, and also bringing hope for the tragic story.

As the first black offspring to own the island of Willows Springs, Miranda in *Mama Day* possesses magical

witchcraft and becomes the incarnation of the Virgin that blesses the black residents on the island. She can talk to nature and use witchcraft to help women in pregnancy and cures the islanders of diseases. Although Miranda has no children, she is the mother of the entire island in the eyes of the residents of the island. Her power is in harmony with the vitality of the island, and she knows how to cooperate with nature to help all creatures regain their vitality. She is the protector of the black community in Willows Springs. The black wife Polis wants to have a child but she fails. After she secretly takes western medicine to conceive and becomes seriously ill, Miranda uses her years of herbal experience to cure Polis and help her to have a child. Ruby, who is driven by jealousy, uses witchcraft to poison Cocoa. Miranda mysteriously uses witchcraft to lead lightning to strike Ruby's house to punish her, bravely fighting against evil forces. When Cocoa is seriously ill, Miranda tries her best to treat Cocoa and wake her up with the help of George. In *Mama Day*, Miranda is the patron saint of black groups and families, and the inheritor of black culture.

#### IV. Differences Between the Two Black Women

The two black women shoulder similar important responsibilities in their hometowns, but their status and influence on others around them are not the same. Compared with Miranda, Dilsey has no social status. She is just a maid of the Compson family, and her maternal love is secret and firm. Dilsey has devoted her whole life to the children of her white master, and regarded herself as a member of the Compson family. She has once rebuked her grandson Luster, "You will suffer as much torture as the Compson family" (Faulkner, 1929, p.381). But till the end, Dilsey does not gain the respect and gratitude of her master. The little Quentin rejects the kindly intimacy of Dilsey with disgust, and even calls her "an old nigger". Jason often insults Dilsey. Racial prejudice makes it difficult for Dilsey to fulfill her responsibilities to her children wholeheartedly as a mother, and even requires her severely demand that her children continue to perform the role of servants of the Compson family. She often scolds Luster violently, but "this is not out of arrogance but love, which helps him face the cruel reality in the future"(Adams, 2012). Dilsey protects little Quentin from Jason's whipping, but when Jason plays with Luster, she can only let it go. On Benjy's birthday, Dilsey explicitly requires Luster that, "for what he is going to do, you must follow him, black boy"(Faulkner, 1929, p.183). After discovering that Luster is teasing Benjy, Dilsey pulls Luster out of the corner, shakes him vigorously, and reprimands him, "I wish I was as young as I used to be, then I could take away your half-life. I must lock you in the dungeon and not let you go to the show tonight. I must do that" (Faulkner, 1929, p.72). Dilsey is tolerant and full of love to the children of her master, but she must be harsh and indifferent to her own grandson. Behind the harshness and indifference is the deeper maternal love, full of helplessness and perseverance. Dilsey is an ideal image of black maids in Faulkner's story. Her prototype is Faulkner's own old black maid named Caroline. She represents the Job in *Bible*, a faithful servant of God, and is known for piety and patience. The image of Dilsey reflects Faulkner's "deliberate or unintentional desire to replace the cruel slavery with such a harmonious master-servant relationship rather than abolishing slavery itself"(Xiao, 1992, p.40). Faulkner was born into a family of aristocrats in the South. Although he has expressed great indignation against slavery, he does not want to change the social pattern of the supreme whites and docile blacks. It can be concluded that limitations of Faulkner on racial issues have led to the fact that although she has devoted her life to the white master, Dilsey still does not gain respect and recognition till the end.

Compared with Dilsey, the image of Miranda in *Mama Day* is stronger and freer. Miranda not only guards her family but also the entire Willows Springs. She has gained respect and recognition from the black community and George who represents the white culture. Miranda can not only use her hands to wash and cook, but also heal the wounded, and even possess the supernatural magic power to control lightning.

George lives in a white community and grows up in an orphanage established by white people. He has lost traditions of black people and learned and practiced the rational values of the white society. When George comes to Willow Springs after marriage with Cocoa, his values collide with the traditions of black people violently. He cannot understand the way of life, entertainment, mourning and medical treatment of the people here. He always tries to solve all the problems that he encounters with scientific and ideal knowledge. Miranda masters the efficacy of herbal medicine through practice. She interacts directly with nature with her own hands, builds bridges connected to the outside world in accordance with natural changes, and accepts the reality destroyed by natural forces. She inherits and continues the traditions of black people with her heart and feelings, and meanwhile, she also absorbs medical science knowledge from the outside world to treat patients. Therefore, Miranda is open-minded. It is a local traditional festival to wander about at night while carrying candles by hands. On one night of the festival, all the black people at the Willow Springs are walking on the streets with candles in their hands, and the crowd is like a winding and bright dragon. Later, some young people are influenced by the outside world on the other side of the bridge (mainly referring to the white society) and begin to buy some novel gifts to replace hand-made items. They even drive cars instead of walking. They sometimes use car lights to dazzle people while cursing others. Miranda adopts a tolerant attitude towards it. As long as the original intention of the festival remains unchanged, the form can change with the development of the times. Her tolerance offers greater flexibility to the way of inheritance system, highlighting the vigorous vitality of the black cultural tradition. After Cocoa is poisoned, Miranda understands that George does not trust her treatment. She suggests that Dr. Buzzard first explain her method to George, and finally cooperates with George to build a bridge of life for Cocoa. "The joining hands of Miranda and George mean interdependence and harmony. Ecological harmony requires the joining hands of man and nature; interracial harmony the joining hands of whites and blacks; harmony between different genders the joining hands of men and women"(Lin, 2013,p.52). Compared with Dilsey, Miranda is closer to nature, and her image is more comprehensive and independent.

In addition, Miranda has closer cooperation and interaction with other black people in the community in Willows Springs, while Dilsey of the Compson family is relatively estranged from other black residents in the town. There are several reasons. First of all, Miranda is proficient in herbal medicine and is a woman respected by everyone in Willow Springs. In the Miranda family, her grandmother Safra is the founder of Willow Springs. It is said that she can communicate with God and use magic to control the power of nature such as lightning. At the same time, Miranda is also the midwife of the town. She is over eighty years old, and most of the residents in the town come to the world through her hands. Almost every resident that is born will thrive through her hands. Secondly, Miranda and her sister Abigail have supported each other and shared their joys and sorrows all their lives. As a sister, Abigail has never been jealous of Miranda's magic and medical skills, and Miranda's love for Cocoa is more than or equal to that for Abigail. In order to cure Cocoa of disease, Miranda tries her best to save Cocoa's life and established a deep sisterhood with Abigail. Although both black women and white women suffer gender discrimination from men, the difference is that black women also suffer racial discrimination from the entire white group. Under such dual discrimination and oppression, the solidarity and sisterhood between black women are even more precious. In Willows Springs, everybody has to share their gifts with others during the annual festival. It does not matter whether gifts are expensive or cheap. They can be everything, as long as they are the fruits of labor, and they are given to people in need. This is not only a kind of admiration for labor, but also a manifestation of the fraternity spirit of solidarity and mutual assistance.

Finally, when Cocoa is seriously ill, Dr. Buzzard asks George, "Do you think you are the only one in town willing to save Cocoa with your life? We all are willing to" (Naylor, 1988, p.292). This is a test of the unity and gratitude of residents of the Willow Springs. It also proves the importance of Miranda in the town. The men in the town work together to repair the bridge to help George save Cocoa, which embodies the close brotherhood

between the black men.

The ties between Dilsey and other black residents in the area are relatively distant. Dilsey has dedicated her life to the Compson family. She is the surrogate mother of the younger generation of the Compson family. She has replaced the role of indifferent and self-pitied Mrs. Compson to fulfill the duty as a mother: taking care, accompanying and protecting the children and granddaughter little Quentin of the Compson family. The interactions between Dilsey and other black residents in the town are mainly going to church on Sundays, but they rarely communicate with each other. Compared with Miranda, in *The Sound and the Fury*, there is no content related to the history of the Dilsey family. The presence of the history of black people has been weakened, and the profound cultural traditions of black people has not been reproduced.

## V. Social and Historical Reasons for Such Differences

Based on the analysis of the similarities and differences between the two black female characters in this article, it is not difficult to conclude that Faulkner and Naylor have varied attitudes towards black women and their historical and cultural traditions. Faulkner was born in a prominent aristocratic family in the South, and the ambivalence of love and hatred for the South runs through his works throughout his life. In his masterpieces, black people are usually marginalized, but those roles are also critical to white characters. In the process of the declining of the Compson family, "Black people such as Dilsey, Luster, etc., are like trained nurses who frequently enter and exit the ward without contracting diseases" (Weinstein, 1992, p.48). Faulkner's view of race is limited. The ideal image of black woman Dilsey in his work is loyal to the white master, and her destiny is controlled by the white master. Behind this limited view is the deep-rooted crime of slavery. Slavery has existed in the South for more than two hundred years. It is the core of the southern tradition. The economy, political system, value ethics, social customs and habits of the South are all inseparable from slavery. As slaves, the black people do not possess personality, so they have not entered the southern society. Gloria Naylor is a famous American writer in the late twentieth century. Thanks to the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, the social status of blacks has undergone great changes. Whether it is in politics, education, or economic status, the social status of blacks has been greatly improved. As a black female writer, Naylor pays more attention to the life and destiny of black women and writes about black women with greater freedom and determination. Miranda is loyal to her own feelings and beliefs. She is in control of her own destiny, which highlights the care and hope that Naylor, as a black female writer, has placed on the independence of black women.

To a large extent, Miranda created by Naylor is the extension and development of Dilsey by Faulkner. This development and transformation have benefited from the development of feminism. Naylor writes novels in the period when the feminist movement moves from the second stage, highlighting female characteristics and advocating body writing, and transits to the third stage, advocating transgender writing and pursuing inter-sex harmony. In *Mama Day*, there are many descriptions of the female body of Polis, Cocoa and Ruby. At the same time, the traditional duality such as nature and culture, collective and individual, male and female, black and white, reality and magic, death and new life has been dispelled, highlighting the harmonious prospect of multicultural coexistence. "Willow Springs brings readers into a supernatural world, where people's understanding is rooted in mystery and it deeply rooted in people's hearts. It is not enough to perceive this world with thoughts. Thoughts are inferior to feelings" (Whitt, 1999, p.16). Naylor has used every event in the town of Willow Springs to prove to readers that magic power is commonplace for everyone in Willow Springs. As Naylor says in an interview, "In *Mama Day*, I want to write what I believe in. I believe in the power of love and the power of magic. Sometimes I think the two are the one" (Carabi, 2002, p.74). The magic that Naylor refers to

means the discovery of human potentials. When people can truly face their own hearts, they can create miracles.

In the period when Faulkner writes novels, the feminist movement is in its early stage, with white women as the main participants demanding equal rights to political participation, equal employment, and equal education. As for the black women, although *The Emancipation Proclamation* has been promulgated for nearly half a century, many black men in the southern hinterlands have not yet been free, and the freedom of black women is still an elusive desire. However, in such a social background with serious racial discrimination, Faulkner has created a relatively positive image of black women Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, which reflects his thinking on race and gender issues and his attention and recognition of black women. When dealing with race and gender issues, it can be said that Naylor has inherited and developed Faulkner's views on black women. Unlike Faulkner, in *Mama Day*, Naylor narrates the long history of cultural traditions of black people and vibrant life as a black woman, highlighting the harmonious relationship and vision between men and women, between blacks and whites, between sensibility and rationality and between civilization and nature.

## VI. Conclusion

By comparing the similarities and differences between the images of black women in the two novel of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Mama Day*, it can be concluded that the image of black women created by Faulkner is limited. Faulkner lives and writes in the era of the abolitionist movement and the First World War. The contradiction between the rapid social changes and the deep-rooted slavery in the South is the historical reason that causes such limitation. On the contrary, Naylor writes in the era of the rapid economic development of the U.S. and remarkable achievements in the civil rights movement and feminism. At that time, black female writers began to switch the literary creation from "written by others" to "writing by themselves", trying to recover and awaken those familiar but suppressed languages, knowledge and sounds through literary practices. Therefore, *Miranda* by Naylor is the extension and development of *Dilsey* by Faulkner. It represents a more comprehensive image of black women in American literature.

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