

Can White Writers Create Black Girl Magic?: Considering Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza Harris (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and William Faulkner's Dilsey Gibson (*The Sound and the Fury*)

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The term "Black Girl Magic" has slipped into our literary vocabulary. The term refers to Black female characters in literary works by writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker who challenge the dehumanizing elements of Black female existence. Can white writers create Black Girl Magic? This essay suggests that they can, offering as examples Eliza Harris in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Dilsey Gibson in William Faulkner's 1929 novel *The Sound and the Fury*.

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Introduction

About ten years ago, Ca Shawn Thompson began employing the term Black Girl Magic to define Black Women empowerment. The term had been used in popular culture (fashion and entertainment, for example) for a few years, but Thompson turned it into a political term, using it to describe Black women who challenge dehumanizing elements of Black womanhood (Jones). The qualities of Black Girl Magic came to include community building, challenging and rejecting dehumanization, highlighting the lives of Black girls and women, and restoring to them what is often violently or forcefully taken away by a dominating society (Jordan-Zachary and Harris 6). Soon literary critics and readers began identifying examples of Black Girl Magic in the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and other Black women writers.

White authors also create Black female characters. Are white writers, female or male, capable of creating Black female characters who display Black Girl Magic? To answer this question, consider two of the most prominent Black female characters in literary works by white American authors: Eliza Harris in Harriet Beecher Stowe's important 1852 antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Dilsey Gibson in William Faulkner's 1929 novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. Do these two female characters display the qualities of Black Girl Magic as Ca Shawn Thompson defined it?

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Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza Harris

Eliza Harris is a slave on the Shelby plantation in Kentucky. She is non-legally married to George Harris, enslaved on a neighboring plantation. They have a five-year-old son, Harry, who lives with his mother on the Shelby plantation. The slaves on the Shelby plantation are relatively well-treated—housed and fed, given reasonable work assignments, not beaten. But as Stowe's novel opens, Mr. Shelby runs into debt, and he sees the need to sell some of his slaves to obtain money to satisfy his debtors. He agrees to sell Uncle Tom and young Harry Harris.

Until this point in her life, Eliza had accommodated herself to her life in slavery. When she hears that her husband George is planning to flee his plantation and head for freedom in Canada (because he is being ordered by his master to marry a slave woman on his own plantation), she tells him, "I always thought that I must obey my master and mistress, or I couldn't be a good Christian" (Stowe, 1994, p. 14). Obedience to one's superiors is indeed a Christian virtue. When Eliza learns, however, that her son Harry is being included in the Uncle Tom sale, she can no longer remain a good, obedient slave; she must escape with her son. Eliza is reticent to leave a home where she has been well-treated, but "maternal love" (Stowe, 1994, p. 43) drives her to leave the only home she knew and head for freedom: the state of Ohio, where slavery was illegal. Eliza bundles her son and some basic belongings and heads toward Ohio, which will require crossing the Ohio River. As she marches on foot toward the river, holding Harry, the boy asks her if he may sleep. Yes, Eliza replies, and when he asks his mother if she will protect him while he naps, Eliza replies, "Yes, *sure!*" "in a voice that startled herself for it seemed to her to come from a spirit within, that was no part of her" (Stowe, 1994, p. 44). This episode is, perhaps, the first magical moment of the novel: a spirit deep within Eliza that pushes her toward freedom.

Eliza and Harry's escape from slave chasers is one of the more dramatic episodes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As the mother and son head toward the Ohio River, they are pursued by slave chasers eager to return her to the Shelby plantation and earn reward money. To achieve freedom, mother and son must cross the river without the benefit of any flotation device. As Eliza runs toward the river holding her son, slave chasers within sight, "her feet to her scarce seemed to touch, and a moment brought her to the water's edge" (Stowe, 1994, p. 52). They cross the river hopping from one ice floe to another. When they reach the Ohio side, a man there says, "Yer a brave gal, now, whoever ye ar!" He adds, "I like grit, wherever I see it" (Stowe, 1994, p. 52). Eliza certainly displayed grit escaping her pursuers, but a little more than grit was necessary for her to outrun her pursuers and cross a flowing river on ice floes holding her young boy. She needed magic; Eliza displayed that key element in Black Girl Magic: restoring what is often violently or forcefully taken away, in this case her and her son's freedom. When Mr. Shelby hears that Eliza and Harry have escaped to Ohio, he calls it a miracle: "Crossing on floating ice isn't so easily done" (Stowe, 1994, p. 63). A miracle might be considered a form of magic. On the Ohio side of the river, Eliza and her son come upon the sympathetic Mr. and Mrs. Bird. When they ask her about her escape from Kentucky, Eliza replies, "... and how I got across, I don't know" (Stowe, 1994, p. 73). Her escape defies physical possibilities; a certain magic was necessary for it to occur.

Some of the males in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* lack magic. George Harris, Eliza's husband, also escapes from his plantation, initially unbeknownst to Eliza and Harry. But George does not rely on magic to gain his freedom. When someone asks him how he intends to achieve his freedom, George opens his overcoat and reveals two

pistols and a knife. He will rely on weapons rather than magic to achieve and defend his freedom. Uncle Tom rejects opportunities to escape and dies a slave.

Magically, perhaps, Eliza, George, and their son Harry reunite in a Quaker village in the free state of Ohio. Quakers were antislavery and abolitionists, and those in Ohio often sheltered fugitive slaves seeking their freedom. After a short stay at the Quaker settlement, the Harris family eventually embarks for Canada, where slavery is illegal and where there existed no Fugitive Slave Law that forced the return of runaway slaves to southern slaveowners. They become free people forever, and perhaps a certain degree of magic was necessary to make their freedom possible, as documented by a white novelist, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Stowe's family, the Beechers, were strong proponents of what became known as American first-wave feminism, a mid-nineteenth-century movement advocating civil and economic rights for American women (see Hedrick, 1994, pp. 353-379). That Stowe would endow a female character like Eliza Harris with extraordinary strengths is consistent with Stowe's belief in the strength, fortitude, and intelligence of women. Eliza Harris is, indeed, a Black Magic Woman.

William Faulkner's Dilsey Gibson

Like Eliza Harris, Dilsey Gibson, in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, endured slavery. She did not escape from her owners but became free when the Civil War ended and all slaves became free. The Gibsons chose not to join the great migration of former slaves to the North in the wake of the Civil War; they remained on the Compson plantation where they had been slaves, lived in the old slave quarters, and worked for the Compsons for very modest pay.

The Compson family personifies the Old South. In the antebellum days, they owned a large cotton plantation in Mississippi, worked by many slaves. When the Civil War and slavery ended, however, the Compsons lost their plantation wealth; it was gone with the wind. Pieces of their land have been sold off to pay debts. The present-day Compson family—the novel is set in the 1920s—is fragmented and dysfunctional. One son, Quentin, committed suicide; another son, Benjamin, is mentally challenged; their sister, Candace (Caddy), has been ostracized from the family after having a child out of wedlock. Mrs. Compson is a weak mother figure.

The first three sections of *The Sound and the Fury* are narrated by the Compson sons: Benjamin, Quentin, and Jason. An omniscient narrator presents the novel's final section, which focuses mainly on Dilsey as she prepares for Easter Sunday church service. Dilsey appears in the novel's first three chapters, narrated by the Compson sons, mainly as a background figure. An omniscient narrator records the novel's final chapter in which Dilsey appears as a major figure. In the chapter, Dilsey completes her morning chores, like cooking breakfast, then heads to church for the Easter Sunday service.

In her book *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context*, Thadious Davis states that the Black characters in Faulkner's fiction generally remain in the background of the plot, and Black characters are often types. *The Sound and the Fury* is a breakthrough. In this novel Faulkner "accents the social actuality of the Negro's place and role in the white southerner's world. He escapes the tyranny of stereotypes by acknowledging, as no earlier novelist had, the humanity of individual black people within the family and the church—the major institutions affecting their lives." Rather than behaving as stock background characters in a novel about a white

southern family, “the Gibsons project a vital creativity, an inventiveness in looking at life and a spiritedness in confronting it all” (Davis, 1983, pp. 69-70).

As the Compsons continue to disintegrate—granddaughter Quentin has run off with a man visiting Jefferson to participate in a traveling show—Dilsey holds steady. She dresses for church, which Davis states, gives her “a majestic presence” (Faulkner, 2014, p. 104). The clocks in the Compson home are off, but Dilsey knows that it is eight o’clock when the clock chimes five times. She prepares her family for the church service and makes sure that the Compson home is in order on Easter Sunday. At church, Dilsey sits “bolt upright” in her pew and prays for the Compsons (Faulkner, 2014, p. 194). Davis states that “Dilsey’s experience on Easter morning emerges as singularly profound in the midst of the guilt-ridden, self-centered world of the Compsons” (Davis, 1983, p. 108).

Not all critics agree with Davis’s assessment of Dilsey’s character. Diane Roberts, in her book *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*, accuses Faulkner of creating, in *The Sound and the Fury*, “a white text [that] congratulates a black woman for colluding in a structure that imprisons her in a narrow definition of possibilities.” After all is said and done, Dilsey is just a mammy (Roberts, 1994, p. 66). Contrary to Roberts, Olga Vickery argues that Dilsey has an inner strength that has helped her survive in a white-dominated world and offer a “passive and irrational resistance” that Jason is unable to counter (Vickery, 1964, p. 47). She confronts life with “courage and dignity in which there is no room for passivity and pessimism” (Vickery, 1964, p. 48).

In an Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*, first published in *The Portable Faulkner*, seventeen years after the novel was published, Faulkner provides brief histories of the Compson characters and briefer histories of the Gibson family members. Faulkner offers only two words on Dilsey: “The endured” (Faulkner, 2014, p. 271). Yes, Dilsey has endured, with dignity and decency. She survived slavery and the post-Civil War Jim Crow South. She has raised her family and cared for the Compsons and their home. She certainly has not performed the kind of dramatic magic that Stowe’s Eliza Harris demonstrated as she escaped from the clutches of slavery. But if, as suggested earlier, the qualities of Black Girl Magic came to include community building, challenging and rejecting dehumanization, highlighting the lives of Black girls and women, and restoring to them what is often violently or forcefully taken away by a dominating society, perhaps Dilsey has displayed a degree of Black Girl Magic. She has built a community for her family in the ruins of the Old South. She certainly has rejected dehumanization. There is not yet a civil rights movement in the South for her to join—Rosa Parks was just a teenager at the time of the setting of *The Sound and the Fury*—but Dilsey has stood up for herself and her family members, rejecting, if not defeating, the dehumanization of Black people in the post-Civil War Jim Crow South.

The novel’s appendix provides an interesting piece of information about Dilsey’s daughter, Frony: “She married a pullman porter and went to St. Louis to live and later moved to Memphis to make a home for her mother since Dilsey refused to go further than that” (Faulkner, 2014, p. 271). The Pullman Porters played an important role in United States labor and civil rights history. A very high percentage of Pullman Porters were Black. In 1894 (before the events of *The Sound and the Fury*) they engaged in one of the more important strikes in American labor history. In 1925, shortly before the events of the novel, the Pullman Porters formed a labor union: Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, led by A. Philip Randolph, the first Black person to head an American labor union. Thirty years before the start of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, the Pullman Porters were fighting for the rights and well-being of Black workers. Frony married one of those Pullman Porters, suggesting her investment in the movement to gain equal treatment for Black workers during the Jim Crow era.

Perhaps Frony inherited by example some of her mother's strength and fortitude, some of her magic, prompting her to join her life to a man fighting for the rights of Black workers.

Some Faulkner critics and biographers suggest that the model for Dilsey, was Faulkner's own mammy, Caroline Barr, born a Faulkner slave in 1840. She remained with the Faulkners after emancipation and died in 1940. Faulkner honors Mammy Callie by dedicating his book *Go Down, Moses* to her: "To Mammy, Caroline Barr, Mississippi [1840-1940] Who was born to slavery and also gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love" (np). Perhaps Faulkner saw some magic in Mammy Callie and recreated her as Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury*.

So to answer the question, Can white writers create Black Girl Magic. Perhaps they can. Eliza Harris and Dilsey Gibson, created by white authors, display strength, courage, and tenacity. Perhaps those are elements of Black Girl Magic.

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