Review of Killers of the Dream

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Lillian Smith’s provocative social commentary, *Killers of the Dream* examines the history of the New South through the lens of the psychoanalytical model of Freudian analysis in order to explain the outbreak of racism and segregation following the Civil War, and the subsequent dismantlement of slavery. After identifying and treating the many symptoms, Smith proceeds to diagnose the root causes of the South’s illness. Initially taking a seat on the bench and psychoanalyzing herself, she then juxtaposes her case study upon the wider population of rich-white elites in the South that represented her personal knowledge and experiences. Since analyzing one’s experiences in early childhood constitutes an essential part of psychoanalysis, Smith contends the child-rearing practices transpiring in the households of white-elite Southerners directly conditioned their children’s primal being (id) into their self-aware ego, through the use of pleasure and pain. This allowed the lessons learned in childhood to reinforce the future generation’s superego. The maelstrom that ensued permitted a highly racist, segregated, and class stratified society; sustained Jim Crow acts as a viable painkiller for bottled up anger; caused the South to swallow a heavy dose of hypocrisy; and prescribed the same pill to its offspring, that over time, overdosed.

In retrospective terms, those reading Smith’s work in the 1940s must have considered an investigation of the New South that transposed the then cutting-edge advent of Freudian analysis into her conclusions quite provocative and controversial.
Whereas, today’s readers instead find some of the inferences and deductions rather presumptuous and victim to stereotype, particularly regarding Southern blacks and poor whites. Yet, psychoanalysis by definition contains elements of historical analysis and relies on the use of case studies in an attempt to uncover an underlying causality of an issue, usually a traumatic event from early childhood, by talking through it.

After the death of slavery, hierarchical social tensions birthed segregation as their heir to maintain the South’s longstanding traditions. Segregation needed to be carefully nurtured, and Jim Crow spread through the implicit influxes of racism and racial superiority. The esoteric nature of the racial agenda in the South reprogrammed the minds of its children and ensured adherence to the code. It also laid the foundation for future generation’s indoctrination and allegiance in a highly racist society where fear of punishment and consequences reigned supreme and eternal.

Using the language of psychoanalysis, Smith contends that segregation existed as a rigid set of rules that sought to restructure the racist hierarchy in the South after its defeat in the Civil War. Both blacks and whites had to learn how to behave in socially accepted manners, conducive to the regions of ego and the stifled and restrained id. However, the stifling of one’s Id and libido often manifested itself in a moment of weakness, sin, and lack of self-discipline; as a result, society and the superego either punished the taboo or accommodated it.

Smith identifies herself as a white child of Southern affluence that essentially nursed at the breast of two different mothers, one white and the other black. Described as anal, strict, and distant, the white mother kept to her spot on the pedestal, to which the white father had placed her and turned her to ice—frigid. Smith thus found love and
understanding in the black mother that she portrayed as earthly and warm. Yet, the day came when she had to close the door on her loving black mother as the experience evolved into a disease—a malady that caused massive cognitive dissonance within herself; one that she believed every white child reared similar to her endured.

The South instilled firm ideologies via local churches and various social constructs based on tainted and racist ethics to warp the Super Ego of the young to ensure the social, political, and economic sanctity of white supremacy for future generations. As the New South’s offspring matured, the fire and brimstone sermons delivered at churches increasingly tangled the minds of the children that simultaneously experienced the lure of temptation and sin. The consequence of a distorted superego and reprogramed ego caused the white progenies to feel extreme guilt for even simply fantasizing about desires and sexuality that many people today consider human nature. The stifling and censorship of the future generation’s primeval id bred great frustration and pent-up anger within themselves. Seeking an outlet to vent anger and appease their unwarranted guilt from a fraught youth, the eventually matured offspring engaged in various taboos such as interracial sex with black women, lynching blacks, or physically beating people that inappropriately violated racial boundaries.

The cathartic and almost religious experience of lynching created a channel for poor whites to exercise and maintain their control over another race, class, and gender of people due to their perceived “currency of whiteness” or racial superiority. However, poor whites themselves belonged to a lowly socioeconomic group. As Smith reasons, the pressure of the hierarchical South to transcend class barriers allowed white elites to strike a deal with poor whites to ensure the elites maintained their wealth, power, and influence.
over society. This allowed the poor whites to have an outlet for their rage, as demonstrated: “You boss the nigger, and I’ll boss the money. How about it?” (176)

Smith reveals that the South cruelly inflicted this plague of ignorance and prejudice upon itself and its children. Illustrating the Freudian pleasure versus pain principles, Smith described how the black women constantly remained in the peripheral vision of the white father who put the white mother on a pedestal and turned her to stone—in a sense killing her off. Availing himself to a brief moment in the life of a libertine, the white father became torn and rife with guilt after having sex with the black mother and falling prey to the backyard temptress. As the father’s life falls to conflict and shame, his id tells him sex feels good, but his conscience tells him he will go to hell for the sins he has committed against his wife, the Holy Ghost, and the racist South.

Therefore, what happens when society defines something as natural as sex to be abnormal and sinful?

The relationship between the two mothers and their interactions regarding the white father and the white child explains why the infusion of power into sexuality created such a mess that became the entirety of the New South vibe—a world of contradictions. This paradigm explains why so many in the era emerged as individuals with difficulty maintaining healthy relationships with their loved ones and lovers. The whole experience of the black mother disappearing remained buried in Smith’s memory for the entirety of her childhood, and not until some thirty years later did she notice the rotten foundation her child rearing had settled upon. Therefore, Smith had either blocked or falsified the memories of this experience and future events caused them to resurface in her mind. The
line between myth and memory is a thin one, and society’s tendency to block out less-agreeable experiences remains a powerful force to this day.

Giving credence to the contradictory and censoring nature of Southern society in one’s early childhood, Smith highlights the paradoxical nature of the lessons every white Southern elite had to learn growing up: “Our first lesson about God made the deepest impression on us. We were told He loved us, and then we were told that He would burn us in everlasting flames of hell if we displeased Him” (85). She later describes this notion, “As the years passed, God became the mighty protagonist of ambivalence although we had not heard the word” (85). Accepting that church and religion meant everything in Smith’s realm, we better understand how the Calvinistic flavor of religion exploited by white Southerners developed into more of a social construction, as she explains, “Church was our town—come together not to kneel in worship but to see each other…To children, church was more interesting than school” (100).

Feeling torn and unsure about how to navigate an environment where rules and regulations governing everything from masturbation to segregation apparently hailed from god and parents—the purveyors of punishment and discipline; Smith outlines how she learned to focus her erotic desires and infantile sexuality. Conditioned from birth to contain her instinctual feelings that composed the id, society taught her how to focus erotic behavior on certain parts of her body. Freudian psychoanalysis refers to infants as beings that are “polymorphous perverse” and thus lack a developed conscience and ego, as they only understand their bodies as sources of physical pleasure temples. Society molds and conditions these infants as they develop and grow older to segregate their primal sexual nature from the realm of society—depriving them of their former pleasures.
and intimacies. These children lived in a world where body parts were arbitrarily segregated and the death of intimacy increased the feeling of separation that defined segregation. Therefore, the framework was laid in the children’s minds—the propensity to view whole peoples as forbidden or inferior bodies they should additionally quarantine.

With its white-elite offspring taught through punishment and contradictory inhibitions imposed upon themselves, Southern society spread support for Jim Crow segregation by imposing regulations and rigid social constructions upon one’s body during the formative period of child development. Sowing the seeds of Jim Crow in the uncorrupted minds of the white youth, the crops later were harvested and bore the plump fruit of segregation. Thus segregation fully spread to parts of the body as Smith expounds: “Our second lesson had to do with the body…‘the body itself is a Thing of Shame and you must never show its nakedness to anyone except to the doctor when you are sick’…‘It is God’s holy temple and must never be desecrated by pleasures—except the few properly introduced to you—through pain’ ” (87).

If one breached adherence to this dogma, parents, society, and god would punish the individual for sin as the author affirms, “Weak with fear, we told ourselves that when you break the rule you ‘should be punished’ by Him or your parents” (87). The offspring of the white southern elite absorbed and learned the many lessons handed down to them by god, their parents, and society. In most cases they lived the rest of their life never questioning either. Because of this devotion to piety and to avoid punishment, the South drank a very poisonous concoction when race, sex, and religion were combined to blend
the cocktail. Smith seeks to lance this tumor of southern prejudice and intolerance rooted in racism from the tradition.

By discussing the various methods in which children of the white Southern elite learned and absorbed the many unwritten rules of the Jim Crow south, Smith contends the constructs imposed upon the youth later served to subvert and suppress gender, race, and sexual equality in the New South. Bridging Smith’s connection between god, sex, and religion in the South as emanating from white-elite parent’s devotion to religion and local traditions, lays the source for explaining the creation of such a fundamentally sick society—where segregation and racism became paramount to sustaining its very existence. Yet, trying to determine why so many white Southerners supported a segregated society through either intentional or unintentional means, the reader must realize, “it is impossible to understand these pitiful delusions of grandeur, clung to by millions of impoverished, ignorant, lonely, confused people unless one is willing to look for not ‘one cause’ but a series of causes and effects spiraling back through the centuries” (166).

Though she speaks from the perspective of the white-affluent observer, if all child rearing practices were the same for people of her similar background, one might hypothesize that certain resultant behaviors would arise that mimicked her voyage from naivety to experience and knowledge—innocence to reality. However, Smith projects her views and experiences over groups of individuals that did not have an upbringing similar to her own, such as poor whites and poor blacks. In Smith’s attempt to extrapolate her case study to encompass a wider range of individuals, she lands on uneasy footing only when discussing other divisions of society that did not constitute her own. Sticking to
Smith’s dominant psychoanalytic explanation of how the South got so incredibly sick in regards to the institution of segregation, she herself breaks a taboo by explaining the hypocrisies of the old verities and decrying racism through the lens of psychology. Nonetheless, the result is Smith’s successful technique for explaining human behavior, and the rationale for indoctrinating white-elite Southern youth into the cancerous body of the New South. Smith’s arsenal of flak and fodder attack the moral, social, and economic hypocrisies of segregation, gender prejudice, and the repression of innate sexuality in the New South through her precise targeting of the barriers that confined all people in the South to a life of wastefulness, paradoxes, and contradictions.

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About the author
Eric is from Fort Myers, Florida and currently a history major at Armstrong. He hopes to pursue a career in the Intelligence Community or Office of Foreign Service. After retiring from his government ambitions, he hopes to settle back down in Florida to teach history.