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The “Problem” of Race in Griggs’ *Imperium in Imperio*

Sutton E Griggs self published his first novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, in 1899. This novel is considered Griggs’ most famous novel, and is also considered by some as one of the earliest examples of widely-read African American protest literature. The meaning behind the novel, as based on the political ideologies of the characters, has been a ongoing critical conversation for a long time. While many critics argue that Belton’s ideology, that of either a militant or an accommodationist, directly represents Griggs’ own thought, it can be argued that the juxtaposition between the points of view of the two main characters Bernard and Belton, as well as the meaning behind the insertion of tertiary character Berl Trout into the narrative, makes Griggs’ own ideas about what the solution is to America’s “race problem” more apparent.

Some critics have argued that the two main characters, Bernard and Belton, ultimately do not truly have opposing ideologies. Robert A. Bone, one of the earlier critics of Griggs’ novel, views Griggs as “toy[ing] with a solution to the race problem which is both revolutionary and separatist” (33). He argues that even though Belton eventually rejects the idea of seizing Texas as a black separatist nation, “the symbolic drama being enacted is clear enough,” and it shows that Griggs believes strongly in “Negro nationalism” and supports a revolutionary and separatist ideology (Bone, 33). He, alongside some other critics, argues that, though Bernard supports a violent approach that Belton eventually decides against, that this is mostly just a difference in

approach to the same goal; Belton seeks a “more moderate, and more realistic approach,” despite the pull towards radical militancy, just as Bone argues is true of Griggs (Bone, 33).

Other critics have argued that Belton’s ideology, and by extension that of Sutton Griggs himself, is not truly militant, but is not truly accommodationist either. Robert Fleming, for example, argues that those who call Belton, and by extension Griggs, militant are focusing on the last third of the book, rather than the story as a whole. He also argues that those that call Griggs an accommodationist of white racism are incorrect, as Griggs speaks against racism in a multitude of ways and using many different tactics, such as the use of humor to mock the white “master” race, and the use of fear to persuade white Americans to give black Americans their rights in order to avoid a violent uprising like that proposed by the Imperium. Similarly, Nowatzki argues in “Sublime Patriots” that Belton exists in the novel as a subversion of two of the strongest and most commonly used stereotypes of black men in the era in which Griggs lived, “the submissive childlike Sambo and the violent, lawless beast” (61). Belton uses logic and rhetoric to make his point that the men of the Imperium should hope for God to end racial oppression, but that they should be prepared to take their freedom by force if that becomes necessary. Nowatzki argues that Belton is emulating the masculinity and rhetoric of white “patriots” like Patrick Henry, who were often slaveholders, while at the same time encouraging the other black men of the Imperium to resist the oppression of such figures. He even quotes Henry directly, saying “Give me liberty or give me death,”

in his speech to the Imperium. While these arguments are interesting, they do not tell the whole story about the ideology of this novel.

Opposing these ideas, many other critics have argued that Belton's ideology is really more so that of an accommodationist, rather than a militant or even somewhere in between. For example, Briggs argues that Belton takes a much more passive approach to the issue of racism, although he does not call this ideology accommodationism. He argues that Belton represents the "New Negro" figure which emerged in the South in the late 19th century. The "New Negro" is a figure that represents a specific strategy of resistance for mitigating racial conflict with white southerners. He argues that Belton has an optimistic view that "a period of renewal is imminent in the South if the New Negro understands how to utilize the tools of protest and resistance he has developed," and that this is a perspective that he shares with Sutton Griggs (Briggs 168). He also argues that this optimistic view is what keeps Belton from siding with the Imperium. Briggs also says that, before leaving the Imperium, Belton's attempt to appeal to the Imperium is an argument that the real solution to racism is to "pull the veil from the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon," so that they may see "the New Negro standing before him humbly, but firmly demanding every right granted him by his maker and wrested from him by man" (Briggs 169). This view, which Briggs argues is shared by the main character of the novel and its author, is one of an accommodationist. The issue of racism according to this argument is not one of active racial prejudice and hate, but passive ignorance of the worthiness of African Americans on the part of white Americans. This again comes to the final conclusion of earlier critics like Robert Bone who argued that, no matter how

militant he personally viewed aspects of *Imperium in Imperio* to be, Bone felt that Griggs was ultimately “an old-fashioned Southerner” who relied on “quality white folks” for his solution to the race problem (34).

These perspectives on the ideologies of the novel’s main characters have been the views of many critics of *Imperium in Imperio*. However, arguably, the most important aspect is not these ideologies as they exist independently, but on how they clash against and are juxtaposed by each other. As Coleman states in “Crafting an Imperium in Imperio”, Griggs “brings the militant separatist voice of Bernard Belgraves into violent contact with the conservative assimilationist voice of Belton Piedmont,” in order to demonstrate that there is not “one right or wrong position or approach” for black Americans to take when it came to racial issues (34). This juxtaposition, however, is not truly meant to make both ideas seem equally valid. As Coleman also argues Griggs “offers up the militant response as a possibility, not an ultimatum or even an eventuality,” and that rather than being posed as a legitimate alternative choice for people to use in their day-to-day lives, militant or radical responses serve as a backdrop for Griggs’ “more conservative ideas.” (34). However, while Coleman argues that only Bernard’s more militant ideas are not truly intended to be liveable alternatives, in some instances in the novel it appears that Griggs does not think that either character has a fully workable approach to living as a black person in America.

While the ideologies of both characters have been taken at face value by many critics, Griggs at times interrupts the narrative of the novel to interject an opposing position to those taken by the main characters, or to imply that the characters are

incorrect. For example, Mr. King, the man who gives Belton the scholarship that allows him to go to college, decides to do so after having what he viewed as a prophetic dream. In this dream, he sees swine eating acorns from a forest of oaks. The hogs “ate so many that they burst open, and from their carcasses fresh oaks sprang and grew,” which he interprets as being about African Americans as represented by the swine that become oaks, white Americans as represented by the original oaks, and the “doctrine of human liberty”, represented by the acorns (37). While Mr. King believes that African Americans should be given equal rights, his justification is an extremely racially prejudiced one. He believes that before the “Anglo-Saxon” taught the “negro” about human liberty, black people were not worthy of human rights and were equivalent to swine; he also argues that “the negro should not be over boastful,” since they were only taught “the dignity of man and value and the true character of liberty,” by white people (37). This is very clearly an extremely racist position, believing that black people were less than human. However, when he meets Belton and gives him the check for his tuition, he tells him that among white people there are “two widely separated classes,” that the worst class has “ a good side” to their character, and that he wants him to “always seek for and appeal to that nature” (38). This appeal should fail; he is arguing that it is only the “worst class” of white people who believe racist ideas about African Americans, yet he hold these views himself. He is also arguing that racism is just the ignorance of white people about the humanity of black people, that not every white person holds these views, and that it is Belton’s job to show those that are simply ignorant the truth about black people. However, the narrator of the novel argues that

“this is one of the keys to his future life,” and implores the reader to “remember it” (39).

This seems to cast a shadow over Belton’s accommodationist views. If he takes to heart the argument of a racist white man about how to deal with racists, does he truly have a liveable approach to dealing with racism? This is especially apparent in the fact that, after college, Belton experiences many racist acts done to him by white people who are not ignorant of his humanity, but who actively work to dehumanize him. This kind of insertion of the narrator, Griggs himself, into the narrative and against the views of the main character disrupts the idea that Griggs views Belton’s approach to life in a racist society as correct.

The inclusion of Berl Trout into the narrative of the novel further disrupts the idea that Griggs believes that either Bernard’s or Belton’s approach of responding to a racist society is correct. Berl Trout’s character is an interesting one. He is imposed into the novel as a kind of framing device, alongside Sutton Griggs himself. He is introduced at the beginning of the novel as being the source for all of the information within the novel. However, the reader is being told the story by Sutton Griggs, not Trout. Trout is invisible within the main story of the novel. We are only introduced to him through his opening letter, and only hear from him again in the last page of the novel, where he further explains his fate. He is not the narrator of the story, and he is not really a character within the story. His main function seems to be as a framing device to give the reader a further understanding of what is happening in the novel. His first introduction is not through his “own” words, but through those of Sutton Griggs (who plays as a character within his own novel). He describes both Trout and the Imperium in positive terms and

explains why he will be telling the story, not Trout himself. Then, we get Trout's introduction of himself. He foreshadows the eventual failure of the Imperium before the reader is even introduced to it, showing that the organization itself is not the most important aspect of this story, but how it comes to be, and how it eventually fails. In this introduction, he also paradoxically denounces himself as a traitor and pronounces himself a patriot. He also reveals to us that he is "doomed to die."

This introduction is extremely important as it sets up the connection between Belton, Bernard, and Berl. In her article, "Double Leadership, Double Trouble", Adenike Davidson discusses the relationship between these characters and W.E.B DuBois' concept of double consciousness. Double consciousness is the idea that being a black person in a racist country like the United States requires the creation of a double consciousness; one that is black, and one that is American. No one can exist as both at one time, as being black seems to be antithetical to being what is truly considered an American. This, according to Davidson, is taken to its extremely literal conclusion in *Imperium in Imperio*. She argues that, rather than racial uplift being a unifier for the conscious as is argued by DuBois, in Griggs' novel racial uplift requires "the repression... of the other self" (132). Belton dies, because in order to stay true to his American-ness or his ideals about what liberty should be, he has to kill off his "blackness", causing the Imperium to turn against him and murder him. Bernard sees racial uplift is most effective with the public, but is never seen as acceptable to his father who is a politician, a figure in the public eye. Therefore he decides to kill of the American within himself, which ultimately leads to his misery at the end of the novel.

Trout, however, is an interesting figure within Davidson's framework. He will not reconcile his two halves, attempting to save - or condemn - both. In the end, he participates in the execution of Belton, his friend and someone he considers a patriot, but also ends up betraying the Imperium. He destroys the "blackness" and the American-ness within himself, and is doomed to die for it.

This connection between Berl, Belton, and Bernard serves to contradict most of the ongoing critical conversation surrounding the meaning of this novel. Ultimately, it does not serve as an argument for any single ideological approach to surviving in racist American society as a black person; in the end no approach ends in success or happiness for anyone. Belton stays true to his political ideals about liberty, human dignity, and passive resistance; he remains a patriot, but he still dies brutally, at the hands of friends. Bernard survives, at least as far as the reader is told, but he is miserable. Almost everyone he cares about is dead, like the love of his life Viola, and his closest friend Belton. He never lives up to the hopes of his father, who sent him to school in order to make him a powerful political figure that he would deem acceptable. He becomes extremely violent and unhinged, and is unable to even cry at Belton's death. Berl, as we know from the beginning of the novel from our introduction to him, is doomed to die as well. Unlike Bernard and Belton, he does not choose a strict path. He tries to walk a middle road between the ideologies of these two men, but still he ends up dead. This shows Griggs' real argument; there is not "correct" path to take in a racist society. The "race problem" is not something that can be solved by individual political

choice, it is a deeply ingrained societal issue, that will require not just the work of black Americans.

The subtitle of *Imperium in Imperio*, “A Study of the Negro Race Problem”, is revealing when it comes to the deeper meaning of this novel. The novel is intended as a kind of case study of the system of oppression against black people that exists in the United States. Over many decades, many critics have interpreted what Griggs’ viewed as the solution to this “race problem” in a multitude of ways. Some view him as a militant separatist who believes that there is no peaceful solution to racism. Some view him as a white accommodationist who thinks that black Americans should accommodate the racism of white Americans and hope that they will someday see their humanity. Others, still, view him as somewhere in between. They interpret his political views as being represented by Belton, the main character of the novel, as though Belton is a stand-in for Griggs himself. They ignore the potential opposition to Belton’s ideology as represented by the other characters of the novel. When all three are fully considered and compared by their reaction to the racial discrimination they experience and their approaches to ending the racism of the society in which they live, much more is revealed about Griggs’ view of this “race problem.” When the fates of all of these characters, Bernard, Belton, and Berl, are compared, it is revealed that, in Griggs’ view, there is no truly correct approach that an African American can take to end racism; individual decisions are not the issue here, but the dominance of racism as an ideology within their world. Even the “quality white folks,” those that are not a part of Mr. King’s idea of the “worst class” of white Americans, hold the idea that black Americans are

inferior. The teachers at Belton's college initially refuse to eat with the one black professor that teaches there. Mr. King offers Belton a scholarship solely because of his racist ideology and fear of a black man, like Belton, who has a strong concept of liberty. Every white character throughout the novel participates in the racist system that harms and traps people like Belton, as well as Bernard and Berl. Therefore there is nothing that these individual men can do to escape the racist system in which they live. Ultimately, all that these men can decide is what circumstances under which they will die, and if they will die with their ideals intact. All they have a choice over, is whether they will kill off their blackness, or their American-ness.

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