

*он знает, что скоро забудется сном. Потому что сон – больше не отвле-
ченное понятие, а вполне материальная вещь, древнейший вид транспорта,
неспешно влекущий его из субботы в воскресенье. Он придвигается к Роза-
линде, ощущая ее тепло, ее запах и под нежным шелком пижамы – милые
очертания знакомого тела. Не открывая глаз, целует ее в затылок. Его
последняя мысль, перед тем как заснуть: и так будет всегда. И еще одна:
нет ничего, кроме этого. И наконец, тихо, почти неслышно, издалека: день
окончен (И. Макьюэн, «Суббота»).*

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CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND LITERARY REPRESENTATION: POLITICS AND AESTHETICS

April 4, 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., which turned out to be a climactic event in the history of the Civil Rights movement in the USA and aroused a wave of all kinds of responses throughout the world. This date drew the line between different factions in the US Civil Rights movement that demonstrated not only the need to rise against racial oppression and discrimination through legal means but also brought about violent militant actions that spread across the country. The question of civil rights in the USA became an integral part of the global struggle for black self-determination and in a certain way contributed to the collapse of the colonial system.

The civil rights movement, which was complemented with the anti-war movement that had intensified by the end of the 1960s and the second wave of feminism, gained momentum by 1968. It was the most important stage of the struggle for equality and human rights in US history. In spite of the steps taken by the Congress and the US administration in 1954, 1957, 1960 and 1964, however significant they might have been, the problem of white–black relations was not solved, and the protests against various forms of discrimination began to get out of control: racial equality was still an illusion. It seemed that when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Law in 1965 it would ease the tension. The people who were involved in US home policy had underestimated the depth of the abyss. Prof. Howard Zinn claims that the black revolution of the 1960s came as “a surprise to those without that deep memory of slavery, that everyday presence of humiliation, registered in poetry, the music, the occasional outbursts of anger, the more frequent sullen silences. Part of that memory was of words uttered, laws passed, decisions made, which turned out to be meaningless” (H. Zinn, 1995). The assassination of black leaders such as Malcolm X and especially of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had always called non-violence, was the last drop that sparked a huge wave of protests and led to mass race riots in the black ghettos throughout the whole country.

King’s message of love and non-violence was not heard by both the white racists who were determined to show the blacks their “inferior” place in society

and disillusioned radical blacks who demanded militant actions to stop terror, assassinations, bomb explosions and police brutality. According to T.E. Vadney, riots took place in over a hundred cities, “with the greatest trouble in the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C. Fifty people died throughout the country and over 20,000 were arrested at the time of the King’s riots. The groups most affected by unemployment, teenagers and young adults, usually took the lead” (M. Train, 2000). Black Panthers (Black Panther Party for Self-Defense), a militant organization that called for social justice, took upon itself the defense of the black population from everyday violence. It directly challenged capitalist exploitation and, attracted more and more young black people while their dead leader and spokesman Malcolm X became an iconic figure.

Like any other movements, it had its ups and downs, but in the minds of millions of people all over the world the civil rights movement will be always associated with the black revolution that radically changed the socio-political situation in the USA. “Yet, a new black consciousness had been born and was still alive”, says Prof. Howard Zinn (H. Zinn, 1995).

The role of writers and people of art was of great importance as their books and political activism aroused strong feelings for or against the struggle for civil rights. They were divided in their stand – James Baldwin and the so-called “integrationists”, on the one hand, and Amiri Baraka (LeRoy Jones) representing radical black cultural nationalism – on the other. Segregation, Jim Crow laws, unemployment, the misery of life in the black ghettos, police brutality in relation to blacks and difficulties of getting a social uplift led to the growth of ideas of black separatism and use of force in an effort to change the situation. Millions of blacks began to support the militants who promised an easy solution to the difficult problem. On his part, for years Martin Luther King, Jr. had been trying to unite all the people fighting against racism and discrimination in all walks of life involving broad categories of the population, both white and black.

The political heat had reached such a pitch that it inevitably led to the growth of the political value of literature and its radicalization undermining stereotypes and challenging the tradition reflected in the literary canon. African American writing could not but serve political ends voicing the protest and the rebellious spirit of the 1960s more adamantly than any other branch of US literature.

The dramatic events found their expression in literature by either participants in the events (like Alice Walker, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, etc.) or by younger writers who look back and try to reflect on what was going on in the 1950s–60s (“Dreamer” by Charles Johnson that deals with the last period of Martin Luther King’s life, or “Grant Park” by Leonard Pitts, Jr.). However, interpretation of the stormy years depended on the author’s point of view and was not necessarily truthful offering an alternative possibility of the developments. The distance in time allowed to present an alternate past that could have taken place but for various reasons but did not go the way it could.

In his 1999 novel “Dreamer” Charles Johnson deals with the last period of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life showing the complexities of people’s response to his

stand on the race issue when lots of blacks rejected his appeal to peace and love. According to him, it was the only way to save the USA from the racial apocalypse. The writer plays with the figure of King's Doppelganger Chaym Smith who is presented as King's mirror image but who is, as a matter of fact, his opponent. Smith is his stand-in but he does not understand the great leader. His aggression, violence, bitterness and lack of hope in the transformation of society disagree with the intentions of King who, however, sees that his message of love and non-violence does not affect a great number of black Americans. Johnson delved into the very essence of division among African Americans concerning methods of the struggle against race discrimination. Even people in his entourage are not united, and Johnson's King feels it and wants to change the situation in favor of non-violent ways of achieving true equality. In the debate about the strategy concerning the struggle, one of his close associates Mathew Bishop quotes "King, who warned, "There are some who are color-consumed and they see a kind of mystique in being colored and anything uncolored is condemned". And even more importantly, "We shall have to create leaders who embody virtues we can respect" (Ch. Johnson, 1998). As the novel moves towards the tragedy in Memphis, King is shown as more and more concerned about the practicability of his concept of non-violence and love. In the long run, though, he is the one who contributed greatly to the changes in the atmosphere of society, Amy, his associate, says bitterly, "The Way of agapic love with its bottomless demands, had proven too hard for this nation. Hatred and competition were easier. Exalting the ethnic ego proved far less challenging than King's belief in the beloved community. We loved violence – verbal and physical – too dearly. Our collective spirit, the *Geist* of our era, had slain him as surely as the assassin's bullet that cut him down. We were all Cainites. And deserved cursed. Did we not kill the best in ourselves when we killed King?" (Ch. Johnson, 1998). In his novel Johnson philosophizes on the main issues of the political divide of the time drawing on King's speeches and actions and analyzing them from two opposite perspectives – for and against. His King turns out to be a dramatic historical figure with his strengths and weaknesses, illusions and disappointments, seeking for Truth. Today, 50 years after his tragic death, it becomes clear that without his mission, the USA would have been different.

James Baldwin was sure that "Whoever debases others is debasing himself" (J. Baldwin, 1963). The writer was often called a prophet, and this statement of his made in the early 1960s was true then and will always be true. Commenting on what was happening all around him he was also sending a message to the whole world. The civil rights movement raised the consciousness of millions of people all over the world and brought about tremendous changes in all walks of life, and literature did reflect these changes in prose, poetry, drama and essays written not only by people of color but all those who believes that "these truths" are "self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness".