Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 188

Volume 188

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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Contents

Frantz Fanon
1925-1961

Martinican essayist.

The following entry provides an overview of Fanon's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC,* Volume 74.

INTRODUCTION

Frantz Fanon, a controversial political essayist born in Martinique, is best known for his influential theories on colonialism and racism in the Third World. Diana Fuss has characterized Fanon as "one of the most important twentieth-century writers working at the intersection of anti-imperial politics and psychoanalytic theory." Fanon was inspired by his personal experiences with racism, as well as his training as a psychiatrist, to write essays that explore the problems associated with oppression and to promote social revolution among colonized nations. His most notable works, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952; *Black Skin, White Masks*) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961; *The Wretched of the Earth*), emphasize the damaging effects of colonialism on both the oppressors and the oppressed. These and other writings by Fanon helped shape the political landscape of the Third World during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In his famous 1987 essay, "'What Does the Black Man Want?'" Homi Bhabha observed that "remembering Fanon is a process of intense discovery and disorientation. Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of the history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity, that Fanon reveals with greater profundity and poetry than any other writer."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Fanon was born July 20, 1925, on the French-controlled island of Martinique and spent his childhood in Fort-de-France, the nation's capitol. He was one of eight children born to Félix Casimir Fanon, a customs service inspector, and Eléanore Médélice Fanon, a shop owner. Fanon's parents were considered upper middle-class and part of the island's emerging Black bourgeoisie. He began reading classical French literature at the Bibliothèque Schoelcher and continued his studies at the Lycée Schoelcher until the school closed with the outbreak of World War II. Racial tensions increased when Martinique came under Vichy command during the war. In 1939 Fanon was sent to school in Le François, Martinique, where his uncle was a teacher. He returned to the Lycée Schoelcher in 1941 and studied under the poet, Aimé Césaire. Under Césaire's tutelage, Fanon was first exposed to the philosophy of "negritude," a movement founded by Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor that emphasized the power and beauty of Black culture. Fanon joined the French army in the early 1940s, but he was soon disillusioned by the racism he encountered and lost faith in the Allied cause. He finished school upon returning to Martinique and assisted in Césaire's campaign to become mayor of Fort-de-France.

In 1947 Fanon moved to France and studied psychiatry at the University of Lyon. In May of 1951 his essay "L'expérience vécue du noir" ("The Lived Experience of the Black") was published in the journal *Esprit.* The essay was later included as a chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952. In the early 1950s Fanon moved to French-controlled Algeria and served as the psychiatric director of the Blida-Joinville Hospital. When the Algerian War began soon after, Fanon joined the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), an organization seeking independence from France. He was exiled from Algeria in 1957 for his support of the revolution, and he settled in Tunisia. Fanon continued to write and publish essays that protested French colonialism. In 1959 *L'An V de la révolution algérienne* (*A Dying Colonialism*) was published. The next year Fanon was diagnosed with leukemia. The following spring he underwent treatments in the Soviet Union before returning to Tunisia. Fanon spent the next few weeks working on his next collection of essays, *The Wretched of the Earth.* Shortly before the book was published, he suffered from a relapse and agreed to travel to the United States for treatment. He arrived in Washington, D.C., on October 3, 1961, but was detained in a hotel for several days before being admitted to the National Institute of Health in Maryland for treatment. Fanon died of complications from pneumonia on December 6, 1961. He was buried in Algeria according to his wishes. Some of his previously uncollected work was compiled and published posthumously in 1964 as *Pour la révolution africaine* (*Toward the African Revolution*).

MAJOR WORKS

Fanon's influential first book, *Black Skin, White Masks,* examines the psychological effects of racism and correlates colonialism with mental and sexual dysfunction in both Black and white social groups. The book's opening essay establishes the fundamental impact of language on Black identity. In particular, Fanon analyzes the phenomenon in which indigenous people within a colonized society reject their authentic language and cultural identity and adopt the language of the dominating culture. Subsequent essays discuss the complex attitudes and motivations that govern interracial relationships between genders. The book also addresses traditional theories regarding the causes of colonization and establishes a connection between economics and racism. Another essay, "L'expérience vécue du noir," considers various issues relating to the Black experience within white culture, including objectification and marginalization. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon studies self-hatred among Blacks and the societal structures that generate and perpetuate negative attitudes toward Black culture. To illustrate and address the book's themes, he draws from his personal experiences with racism, as well as from philosophy and literature, particularly the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In *A Dying Colonialism,* Fanon is concerned with the factors leading up to the Algerian War, as well as the oppressed nation's development of a national consciousness. The essays provide an examination of the effect of colonization and revolution on various aspects of life. In an often-cited essay titled "L'Algérie se dévoile," or "Algeria Unveiled," Fanon discusses the cultural tension surrounding the haîk, or veil, traditionally worn by women in Algerian culture. From a European perspective, the veil represents female subjugation; however, in Fanon's view, the colonizer's attempt to "liberate" Algerian women has devalued their cultural system of beliefs. Fanon also explores the ways in which Algerians used the haîk in subtle acts of rebellion. In another essay, "La famille algérienne," or "The Algerian Family," he analyzes changes in family dynamics and the revolution's effect on traditional societal and familial roles. In "'Ici la voix de l'Algérie . . . ,'" or "'This Is the Voice of Algeria . . . ,'" Fanon chronicles the use of radio as a tool for revolution. In "Médecine et colonialisme," or "Medicine and Colonialism," he charts the changing attitudes regarding traditional medicine within a colonized society. Although *A Dying Colonialism* was not as successful as Fanon's other works, its idealist vision of revolution affected many of its readers.

In *The Wretched of the Earth,* Fanon revisits themes of racism and colonialism and exposes the exploitation of Third World culture and resources by Western nations. The book promotes social revolution and asserts that it cannot be successfully executed by the working class or the intellectual elite, but only by the poor, or the "wretched of the earth," who are untainted by Western materialism. In the controversial essay "De la violence," or "Concerning Violence," Fanon advocates violence within revolution. He argues that the use of violence against an oppressor is necessary for liberation, and further posits that it can have cathartic, restorative, and unifying effects on the oppressed. In later essays, such as "Grandeur et faiblesses de la spontanéité" ("Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness") and "Mésaventures de la conscience nationale" ("The Pitfalls of National Consciousness"), Fanon also discusses the challenges faced by a decolonized nation. He warns that in a newly liberated country the national bourgeoisie will often imitate the colonizing bourgeoisie, which may result in further exploitation and discord within the nation. The negative effects of assimilation and exoticism are also important themes in the book. In the final essay, "Guerre coloniale et troubles mentaux," or "Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders," Fanon cites various case studies that connect colonial oppression with mental pathologies. Since its publication in 1961, *The Wretched of the Earth* has influenced several liberation groups, including the Black Liberation Army and the Black Panthers.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

During his lifetime Fanon was a controversial figure. His writings in support of the FLN and the liberation of Algeria from French occupation were praised by fellow revolutionaries and sympathetic critics. At the same time, however, they were censored by the French government, and they contributed to his expulsion from Algeria in 1957. As Fanon's reputation as a revolutionary theorist grew, he became the target of a number of assassination attempts by French Algerian settlers. He was also one of the persons most wanted by the French secret police. It wasn't until after his death in 1961 that Fanon received serious critical study as an international political thinker. During the 1960s and early 1970s commentators began debating the importance of his political thought, grappling especially with his revolutionary Marxism and his views on violence. As Anthony C. Alessandrini has written, Fanon became known as the "prophet of violence," and his work significantly influenced the Black consciousness movement, including the Black Panther Party, in the United States and around the world. While his early books, such as *Black Skin, White Masks,* were relatively well known, it was *The Wretched of the Earth,* that established Fanon's international reputation as a leading political theorist. Most critics considered *The Wretched of the Earth* a visionary work, describing it as "the Bible of the Black Revolution." At the same time, Fanon had his detractors, many of whom rejected his concept of violence as the only

means of overthrowing colonial oppression. As Robyn Dane has asserted, "Nearly everyone has difficulty with Fanon's views on violence; indeed, this is what keeps him from being considered a 'serious polemicist' and why many cast him as malevolent."

In recent years, criticism of Fanon's work has been linked to such wide-ranging fields as postmodernism, Marxism, essentialism, phenomenology, and gender studies. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Fanon "has now been reinstated as a global theorist, and not simply by those engaged in Third World or subaltern studies." While feminist scholars have criticized Fanon as being misogynistic, masculinist, and homophobic, post-colonialist critics, on the other hand, laud him as a visionary—a man who "worked for the destruction of the colonial system as the crucial step toward peace and love," in the words of Richard C. Onwuanibe. While there is ongoing debate between the different theoretical camps of the significance of his contributions, Frantz Fanon is remembered today as a radical thinker, a humanist, and a sympathetic spokesman for the oppressed people of the world. As Dane has proclaimed, "It is no exaggeration to say that Fanon was and still is instrumental in saving lives. . . . For those concerned with the utility of visionaries, Fanon's vision, as a mirror, never stops reflecting. The mirror turns lamp when it illuminates ethical truth for all humankind."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Peau noire, masques blancs [*Black Skin, White Masks*] (essays) 1952

L'An V de la révolution algérienne [*A Dying Colonialism*] (essays) 1959; also published as *Sociologie d'une révolution (L'An V de la révolution algérienne),* 1966

Les damnés de la terre [*The Wretched of the Earth*] (essays) 1961

Pour la révolution africaine: Ecrits politiques [*Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*] (essays) 1964

CRITICISM

Chester J. Fontenot, Jr. (essay date 1979)

SOURCE: Fontenot, Chester J., Jr. "We Wear the Mask." In *Frantz Fanon: Language as the God Gone Astray in the Flesh,* pp. 37-44. Lincoln, Neb.: The University at Lincoln, 1979.

[*In the following essay, Fontenot examines the role of paradox in Fanon's works, asserting that he used the device to further his arguments about colonialism, violence, and national identity.*]

In ***The Wretched of the Earth*** Fanon abandons the analytic psychological perspective and writes as if he were part of the revolution he has created in his book. This shift in language has confused all but a few of his critics, and has led most to conclude that he should not have done so. Fanon's critics often argue that since the purpose of writing a book like ***The Wretched of the Earth*** is to analyze a historical occurrence, his shift in language misleads the reader into thinking that Fanon is recording the events of a revolution which he observed. His importance is that he claims a privileged position from which to write about this revolution.

This is similar to the debate about the validity of the Christian gospels. The disciples claimed special expertise in writing them since they were first-hand observers to the events they wrote about. Biblical scholars have questioned one of the gospel's validity—that of Mark—since they believe that he might not have written as a first-hand observer, but as one who consciously constructed a fiction from previously written sources, namely the other gospels.

These allegations move both Fanon's book and Mark's gospel from historical records to fictions and threaten to undermine the validity of each's claim to authority. But there is another side to this debate. Let us assume that Fanon consciously wrote as if he was part of a revolution similar to the way Mark allegedly created a fictional account of Jesus' life. ***The Wretched of the Earth*** would become a vehicle through which Fanon attempted to move the reader to action by involving him or her in a revolution through the act of reading. Fanon's voice would be that of the Third World, of the colonized. And through his voice, the inhabitants of the Third World would witness the creation of their society.

Fanon intentionally misleads the reader into accepting the revolution he writes about as an actual historical occurrence, writing as if he is a part of it. He writes as an Algerian, as a member of a people undergoing a revolution, who hope to set up a society free of class and race distinctions. This perspective is significantly different from that in ***Black Skin, White Masks.*** There Fanon speaks as an Algerian and a Frenchman, as evidenced by his self-critical chapters on **"The Negro and Language"** and **"The Man of Color and the White Woman."** He is torn between his initial aspirations to be part of French society and his later rejection of French culture and embracement of African culture. In ***The Wretched of the Earth*** he resolves this tension by discussing the French as "they" and "them," and the Algerians as "we" and "us." He divides the world into the colonizer and the colonized, and joins the latter, since he believes that it is the colonized, specifically the

lumpenproletariat, who will be directly responsible for the downfall of colonialism. Fanon identifies himself with the downtrodden, the peasants and outcasts of society, who are "like a horde of rats; you may kick them and throw stones at them, but despite your efforts they'll go on gnawing at the roots of the tree."[1] Fanon places the entire revolution in the hands of these "classless idlers" who have no stake in the colonial system. Not having benefitted from it, they want nothing short of its complete destruction and the creation of a new society where they will be able to determine their own destiny.

But the initial acts of spontaneous violence the lumpenproletariat initiates while it is still mainly a peasant class only serve to awaken the potential nation to the possibility of revolution. The natives initially commit mindless acts of violence against the colonialists, and lose because the latter have more resources. The natives retreat to the hills and begin guerilla warfare. This stage in the revolution eventually leads to the frustration and embarrassment of the colonialists. The settlers, armed with the most sophisticated machinery and weapons, are faced with the might of the majority of the natives, whom they cannot even see. Using this confusion to their advantage, the lumpenproletariat strikes at the colonial régime in an attempt to bring it to its knees.

When Fanon reaches this point in his analysis, he becomes part of the struggle, a character in his own story. This is similar to how Trotsky wrote about the Russian revolution: he wrote about the lives of everyone involved, including himself, leading one to believe that he, as a writer, was both outside and part of history. Fanon achieves this end in a different manner. Trotsky uses the vantage point of an objective narrator, while Fanon shifts his language from "they" and "them" to "we" and "us" when discussing the lumpenproletariat. For example, consider the following apposite description by Fanon of the guerilla warfare conducted by the National Angolan army's leader, Holden Roberto.

> The fact is that in guerilla warfare the struggle no longer concerns the place where you are, but the place where you are going. Each fighter carries his warring country between his bare toes. The national army of liberation is not an army which engages once and for all with the enemy; it is rather an army which goes from village to village, falling back on the forests, and dancing for joy when in the valley below there comes into view the white column of dust that the enemy columns kick up. The tribes go into action, and the various groups move about, changing their ground. The people of the north move toward the west; the people of the plains go up into the mountains. There is absolutely no strategically privileged position. The enemy thinks he is pursuing us; but we always manage to harry his rearguard, striking back at him at the very moment when he thinks he has annihilated us. From now on, it is we who pursue him; in spite of all his technical advantages and his superior artillery power the enemy gives the impression that he is floundering and getting bogged down. And as for us, we sing, we go on singing.
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> [pp. 134-35]

We should notice specifically Fanon's shift in language from "you" to "us." For example, consider the change in tone from "in guerilla warfare the struggle no longer concerns the place where *you* are going," to "the enemy thinks he is pursuing *us* but *we* always manage to harry his rearguard, striking back at him at the very moment when he thinks he has annihilated *us*." Here, it is important to consider of what revolution was Fanon a part, and where the events described in the preceding passage occurred. Fanon was never part of the Algerian revolution; he gave medical attention to Algerian rebels, but never became part of the armed struggle, nor saw the violence of which he speaks. Through his language, he is simply attempting to create a revolution. He uses "us," "we," and "him," implying that he identifies with the cause of revolution and is a participant in the struggle.

It appears to me that Fanon consciously changes his style in this manner; he is fully aware of what he is doing. His intention is to involve the reader in the revolution he has created, thus making a path leading to the new society. The resulting problem is that the path is not always clear, and when Fanon becomes part of the revolution, his vision becomes blurred. He cannot maintain sufficient distance from the phenomena which he is describing. In short, the form begins to dictate the vision. Instead of an analysis of the problems incurred in waging a revolution, we get a vision of a revolution which has never occurred except in Fanon's mind. The painstaking detail into which Fanon goes to describe the revolution eventually works against his intention, and one is more inclined to try to verify the events which Fanon describes than to participate in the aesthetic experience he offers. In this way, the duality in Fanon between being myth-maker and political scientist misleads the reader into thinking that Fanon is the latter when he is actually the former. In other words, instead of seeing Fanon's structure as open, one is tempted to consider it as a "closed existence," which has been the major problem in the criticism written on Fanon, as discussed below in Chapter 4.

Moreover, since Fanon's vision of the Third World is presented and developed through a critique of the colonial social condition, and since the forming of the new order is dependent on revolution, our picture of this positive zone is also blurred. We know what the society will not look like, but we do not know what it will look like. Here, Fanon provides a series of warnings against the national middle class which eventually takes the place of the colonialists. The biggest problem is that the middle class in a third world country has no economic

power, is underdeveloped, and is dependent on the colonial power. The national middle class does not change its means of production; it remains a small farmer for Europe, specializing in unfinished products. Without economic independence, the new society is doomed from its inception and becomes a mirror of the colonial power, this time under the guise of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism, according to Fanon, eventually leads to the downfall of the new society, as it creates the same kind of problems present during colonialism. Specifically, tribalism emerges and almost single-handedly leads to the decline of the new nation. The colonialists, realizing that this is occurring, use the separate movements to regain a foothold in the country. Further, religious tensions contribute significantly to the problems the new society faces.

The solution, which Fanon offers to "heal" the wounds inflicted on the new society by the one-party system the nationalist bourgeoisie institutes, is simply to dissolve the entire nationalist group. The government of the new society must come "from the bottom up." It must be a revolutionary government which rejects stasis. The roadblocks which the nationalist bourgeoisie constructs against total liberation, "Utopia," can only be dismantled "through the upward thrust of the people, and under the leadership of the people, that is to say, in defiance of the interests of the bourgeoisie" (p. 176).

Under neo-colonialism, the nationalist party begins to work against the people, seeking to send them "back to the caves" and forsaking its oath to serve the masses. It promotes the myth of free and open competition to give the impression that everyone has an equal chance to "get a piece of the pie" and that the strongest will get the most. This policy eventually leads to the destruction of the new society because the country people flock to the cities and suburbs in the hope of securing enough capital to buy themselves a place in society. This causes a national crisis in the new society, spearheaded by the failure of the national political party to educate the masses. On this point, Fanon notes that

> to educate the masses politically does not mean, cannot mean, making a political speech. What it means is to try, relentlessly and passionately, to teach the masses that everything depends on them; that if we stagnate it is their responsibility, and that if we go forward it is due to them too, that there is no such thing as a demiurge, that there is no famous man who will take responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the hands of the people.
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> [p. 137]

The failure of the leaders to educate the masses opens the door to cultural decadence, and the hope of developing a national, self-sustaining culture dwindles. Neo-colonialism is more of a threat to national culture than colonialism, for neo-colonialism, while presenting itself as a panacea, is actually more vicious than colonialism. It seeks to destroy traditional culture and tries to turn the direction of the new society entirely toward the colonial power.

At this point, Fanon's vision becomes blurred again, for he not only becomes part of his own myth, but also locates himself within his structure. He declares:

> if you think that you can manage a country without letting the people interfere, if you think that the people upset the game by their mere presence, whether they slow it down or whether by their natural ignorance they sabotage it, then you must have no hesitation: you must keep the people out. Now, it so happens that when the people are invited to partake in the management of the country, they do not slow the movement down but on the contrary they speed it up. We Algerians have had the occasion and the good fortune during the course of this war to handle a fair number of questions. In certain country districts, the politico-military leaders of the revolution found themselves in fact confronted with situations which called for radical solutions.
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> [p. 189]

It appears that Fanon considers himself to be Algerian, and furthermore, a member of the lumpenproletariat. One might wonder why he does not identify himself with the leaders of the revolution. After all, this would seem to be more natural place for him since he was part of the educated élite who had been awakened to the call for revolution by the spontaneous violence of the peasantry. Yet this same group of leaders, as earlier discussed, is finally the class which lays the cornerstone of neo-colonialism. Once the colonialists are expelled from the native society, the nationalist leaders take over the government. In Marxist epistemology, one might call this the dictatorship of the nationalist leaders. But for Fanon, a dictatorship by any class is still a dictatorship, and it poses a peculiar problem for the newly liberated nation.

It is from this vantage point that Fanon writes in ***The Wretched of the Earth,*** and in this way we can better understand that his criticisms of the national bourgeoisie, native intellectuals, and artists, are finally criticisms of himself. This has led his critics to conclude that he is doing little more than generalizing about his own experiences and trying to apply his analysis to black people as a group. As previously stated, the predicament in which Fanon finds himself by becoming part of his own myth is that the reader may conclude that he is fantasizing about a revolution that never really occurred, making his work useless; or the reader may conclude that Fanon was actually part of a revolution. Fanon thus allows the means of reducing his work to being "closed," and singling out his theory of violence as the primary concern, as many of his critics have done.