

Plague and Racism Reflected in John Edgar Wideman's Short Story Entitled "Fever"

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Abstract

Several deadly plagues occur many times around the world with uncountable victims. "Fever" is a short story written by John Edgar Wideman based on a real lethal plague called yellow fever striking Philadelphia in 1793. In this short story, Wideman also fictitiously referred to two real personages, a white doctor and a black helper. The focus of this paper is to analyze the different perspectives on the mortal plague and the issue of racism coloring the fight against the deadly plague. The main concept used to support the analysis is the comprehensive concept concerning racism. A combination of relevant research methods are applied. The library research is used to collect relevant data, the qualitative method is applied for the general analysis, and the contextual research method is for the literary analysis supported by the concept of racism. The result indicates that while fighting against the mortal plague, called yellow fever, which needs all the sources and means to combat it, the practice of racism still pervades leading the main black character question his role in helping the white doctor.

Keywords: Philadelphia, racism, yellow fever

Introduction

In the world, humans fight against contagious diseases from time to time. Humans' survival is the proof of their ability to overcome or tame the lethal diseases threatening their life. Based on a true event, the yellow fever that stroke Philadelphia in 1793 (Powell, 1793), John Edgar Wideman wrote a short story entitled "Fever". Wideman, born 1941, is an African American writer who is well known for "his intricate literary style in novels about the experiences of African American men in contemporary urban America" (Tikkanen, 2022). Wideman's "intricate literary style" in his short story entitled "Fever" can be seen in his using many points of views, many narrators, unchronological sequence, and reference to real personages (Kenan, 1990). However, all of those interesting points are not the focus of this paper. The aim of this paper is to analyze two fictional characters in the short story, the white doctor and the black helper, to dig out the various perspectives in the effort to combat the mortal diseases and the thick color of racism in the effort to face the lethal yellow fever. Since the two important fictional characters are based on real personages, a brief touch on these two personages, as well as the outbreak of the yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1793 are conducted, supported by the application of the concept of racism.

Literature Review

According to J.H. Powell in his book *Bring Out Your Dead. The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia*, in 1793 Philadelphia, a big city which "had the most prominent doctors in the New

World” suffered a plague, later known as yellow fever with horrible symptoms, such as “violent fevers, yellow skin, and black vomit (from intestinal hemorrhages), and often died within a few days” (Powell, 1793: ix-x). Powell in the same book also mentioned the name of Rush and Allen, real personages that are fictitiously developed by Wideman in his short story entitled “Fever”. According to Powell, the white personage is “Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), the great American doctor ... passionately believed in the cure he developed early in the epidemic-radical bloodletting and strong purging with toxic mercuric powders and other substances” (Powell, 1793: x-xi). The black personage who was then appeared in “Fever” is Richard Allen, a former slave who was then asked to “nursed the sick ... buried the dead by night ... worked under appalling conditions, some for no pay” because Rush “Mistakenly believing that blacks were immune to yellow fever” (Powell, 1793: xi).

In talking about racism which colors the short story entitled “Fever”, several related issues such as race and slavery are briefly touched. Takezawa gave the previously believed definition of race as follows: “the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences” (Britannica.com, no date). Even this outdated definition of race “was not invented until the eighteenth century” (Fredrickson, 2002: 52-53). The inadequacy of the previous definition of the term race is realized by Glasgow, et al, in their statement that “race has been hard to define” (2019: 18), thus Smedley stated that “Race should be analyzed as a social/cultural reality that exists in a realm independent of biological or genetic variations” (2007: 1). The term race and the demand for its definition emerges during the era of slavery to refer the Africans or the black people forced to be the slaves for the white people. Richard Hellie defined slavery as follows: “condition in which one human being was owned by another. A slave was considered by law as property, or chattel, and was deprived of most of the rights ordinarily held by free persons” (Britannica.com, no date).

The idea of race and the practice of slavery inevitably lead to the operation of racism. According to Fredrickson, the emergence of the term racism is “in the 1930s” (2002: 5). Further, Fredrickson stated that: “The term “racism” is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or “people” toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes” (Fredrickson, 2002: 1). Thus, the essence of racism is the hostility directed towards the race considered inferior or lower. This is what Walker called “Old-fashioned racism” with the following characteristics: “blunt, hostile, segregationist, and supremacist” (Walker, 2001: 26). Feagin stated that “Today, as in the past, systemic racism encompasses a broad range of white-racist dimensions: the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in this society” (2006: 2). Systemic racism is more subtle but unfortunately it spreads more, infiltrating many life dimensions. Franklin added that “race and class fuse to define a single pariah group” (1997: 141). In racism, race and class becomes an oppressive duo cornering the lower class, commonly blacks, to become the cornered powerless group.

Methodology

Research methods are applied to support the analysis of the literary work. In this analysis, a combination of relevant research methods are used. To collect relevant data, library research method is used supported by close reading technique. In general, the analysis is done using qualitative research method. For the literary analysis, a combination of the textual research method and contextual research method is used. The textual research method focusses on the character, conflict, and setting. The contextual research method deals with the context surrounding the literary work, which is in line with Beard’s opinion: “Texts are produced by authors who live in the political and

social world of their time, and we gain a better understanding of their works by taking these contexts into account” (2004: 3). Thus, the context of the short story entitled “Fever” that become the aim of this paper is about plague and racism.

Findings and Discussion

The detailed analysis on John Edgar Wideman’s short story entitled “Fever” yields interrelated findings. It does not only narrate the contagious disease in an alarming tone, but it also portrays starkly the practice of racism in it. Besides containing symbols that must be contemplated, the analysis also shows an unanswerable self-questioning of the male black character about himself and his involvement in the effort to survive the outbreak. To discuss the above-mentioned findings, the discussion is divided into several sections: about the contagious disease, the racism, the symbols, and the self-questioning. Most of the sections contain sub-sections.

The Horror of the Deathly Plague

In this section, the focus is on the deathly plague referring to the yellow fever striking Philadelphia in 1793. It will discuss the horrible condition of the plague and the effort of the doctor to overcome the plague.

Alarming Condition during the Plague

In the short story entitled “Fever”, the plague is never called yellow fever. It is addressed as fever, sickness, or pestilence. Thus, it can be assumed that at the time of the lethal outbreak described in the short story, in 1793, even the doctors are at a loss about this outbreak. Except for the horrible symptoms and victims, they do not know the cause or the right treatment. This will be discussed further. Although the setting of time is mentioned explicitly enough: “the long hot dry summer of ‘93” (Wideman, 1990: 128), the short story does not mention the location or setting of place directly. Several names of locations are referred, such as “Water Street”, “Bush Hill”, and “Potter’s Field” which are supposed in Philadelphia. The city of Philadelphia itself is mentioned near the end of the short story when the plague finally subsides (Wideman, 1990: 160).

During the confusion and terror of the outbreak, most of the inhabitants act in basic survival mode; namely, running away from the location of danger:

Most who were able, fled. The rich to their rural retreats, others to relatives and friends in the countryside or neighboring towns. Some simply left with no fixed destination ... Busy streets deserted, commerce halted, members of families shunning one another, the sick abandoned to suffer and die alone. Fear ruled (Wideman, 1990: 129).

For the rich, the effort to escape is well-arranged, while for the poor they just flee without a definite destination. The fright of the plague not only makes one family member suspect another but also makes the business world collapsed. Another impact is the abandonment of the sick and the dead. Thus, the plague produces a comprehensive negative impact to the inhabitants.

Although not everyone has the similar level of pain, the general symptoms of the plague is described as follows:

They were taken with a chill, a headache, a sick stomach, with pains in their limbs and back, this was the way the sickness in general began, but all were not affected alike ... what confirmed us in the opinion of a person being smitten was the colour of their eyes ... Jaundiced eyes (Wideman, 1990: 129, 149).

The outstanding sign of the victims of the plague is the yellow color of the eyes. It can be deduced that this color of the eyes of the sufferers that leads to the naming of this plague as “yellow fever”. The ferocity of the plague, alluding to the inefficiency of the treatment, is reflected in the following quotation: “We were losing, clearly losing the fight. One day in mid-September fifty-seven were buried before noon” (Wideman, 1990: 139). The large number of the victims in half a day implies the hopelessness of those living in that city.

Doctor's Treatment

One of the doctors that is persistent in handling the plague is Dr. Rush. He is a white person who works night and day to treat the fever victims. His treatment is described by Allen, a black person who helps Dr. Rush to treat and bury the dead:

the good doctors of the College of Physicians who would bleed us, purge us, quarantine, plunge us in icy baths, starve us, feed us elixirs of bark and wine, sprinkle us with gunpowder, drown us in vinegar according to the dictates of their various healing sciences (Wideman, 1990: 132).

Allen silently disagrees with this kind of treatment but he cannot do anything since he is just a black helper. The treatment held by Dr. Rush is very extreme and no wonder it is not successful, however Dr. Rush is so sure about his extreme treatment. The opposition from other doctor disagreeing with his extreme treatment method of “purging and bleeding patients already in a drastically weakened state” is totally ignored by Dr. Rush (Wideman, 1990: 148).

However, the doctors are still curious about the cause of the plague. Their strong conviction about the possible cause of the plague leads the doctors to do extreme action: “The doctors believe they can find the secret of the fever in the victims’s dead bodies. They cut, saw, extract, weigh, measure” (Wideman, 1990: 145). Based on their belief that they can find the cause inside the bodies of the victim, they dissect and analyze the inside parts of human body. Of course, this action is not successful because the cause is from the outside, as hinted by the following illustration: “She enters him and draws his blood up into her belly. When she’s full, she pauses, dreamy, heavy ... Listens to the whine of her wings ...” (Wideman, 1990: 130). The description refers to a female mosquito drinking human blood. Yet the doctors are narrated that they still do not know that the culprit behind the deadly contagious outbreak is a small insect, a female mosquito later known as *Aedes aegypti* (Wideman, 1990: 130).

Racism during the Plague

The fight against the outbreak does not end the latent racism. The racist treatment to the blacks is mostly represented by Allen, the main male black character. The following quotation shows the racist rule that he has to follow if he does not want to get trouble: “knew how to find doorways where he was welcome, wooden steps down to a cobbled terrace overlooking the water where his shot foot must never trespass” (Wideman, 1990: 134). Separate living space must be obeyed and blacks are not allowed to enter the white living space. This racist separation is strengthened in the following

quotation: “... those environs of the city we were forbidden to inhabit” (Wideman, 1990: 141). White and blacks must not live side by side. Racial hierarchy supports this practice. The cruelty of racism is further carried out by the whites as represented by the following quotation: “... to say to the blacks they’ve left behind, *thou shalt not pass*” (Wideman, 1990: 139). There is no intention from the whites to help the blacks or to make their lives better because the whites does not want to live side by side with the blacks in an equal situation.

In Allen’s words the life of the blacks is described as follows: “in this quarters of hovels, beneath these wooden sheds leaning shoulder to shoulder were cellars and caves dug into earth, poorer men’s dwellings under these houses of the poor ...” (Wideman, 1990: 134). The blacks live poorly in a poor surrounding with poor facilities. Their uninhabitable dwellings clearly represent the blacks’ marginalized position in every dimension of life. Allen portrays the unfair relationship between whites and blacks during the plague as follows: “I nursed those who hated me, deserted the ones I loved, who loved me” (Wideman, 1990: 141). The blacks are always in a defeated position. Allen for example, he is unwanted by the whites but he is ordered by the white doctor to help the sick whites who underestimate him, and for that he has to sacrifice his personal interests. Actually, when the white doctors are still in confusion about the plague since it is a new phenomenon for them, for Allen, the black male helper, it is not a new thing: “Yet I have seen this fever before, and though I can prescribe no cure, I could tell stories of other visitations, how it came and stayed and left us. The progress of the disaster, its several stages, its horrors and mitigations” (Wideman, 1990: 131). He already has a personal experience with the plague among his black community. He does not know how to cure it but he knows that after certain period, the plague will end mysteriously. However, no white doctors have ever asked him about the plague since he is considered as nobody.

Racism about the Source of the Plague

Not knowing the causes of the deadly plague and being gripped by intense fear and confusion, the whites easily accuse the blacks as the carriers of the plague. This is reflected in the following racial accusation: “They say the rat’s-nest ship from Santo Domingo brought the fever” (Wideman, 1990: 131). There is no proof underlying this racial accusation. Moreover, the culprit of the plague is not rats, it turns out to be a certain type of female mosquitoes called *Aedes aegypti*. Allen deeply feels the racism behind the unfounded accusation, as can be seen from his words: “First they blamed us, called the sickness Barbados fever, a contagion from those blood-soaked islands, brought to these shores by refugees from the fighting in Santo Domingo” (Wideman, 1990: 140). However, he and other blacks are helpless against this accusation. Being blacks, they are the target for every mishap befallen to the whites:

We were not welcome anywhere. A dark skin was seen not only as a badge of shame for its wearer. Now we were evil incarnate, the mask of long agony and violent death. Black servant were discharged. The draymen, carters, barbers, caterers, oyster sellers, street vendors could find no custom (Wideman, 1990: 140).

Not only are they being unfairly marginalized in every sector of life due to their race, but they are also the first who get the impact of the unfair accusation. Losing their jobs is one of the unjust consequences that must be endured by the blacks.

Blaming others blindly for the misfortune indicates that the whites feel that they are victims, that the lowly others are the culprit. Besides blacks, the whites also accuse faraway people

mostly not known by white Americans: "... to lay blame on others for the killing fever, pointed their fingers at foreigners and called it Palatine fever, a pestilence imported from those low countries in Europe" (Wideman, 1990: 141). The illogical accusation, again shows how unfair the whites when facing calamity. Blaming others is their first weapon to clean themselves from any responsibility. "I", or Allen, the black male helper, has his own opinion about the cause of the plague: "Fever descends when the waters that connect us are clogged with filth. When our seas are garbage ... Our bodies void infected fluids" (Wideman, 1990: 132). Without blaming others specifically, he thinks that everyone is responsible for the emergence of the fever because people tend to make the seas dirty by throwing rubbish carelessly. Filthy waters are the source of the sickness. The observant Allen also has a thoughtful opinion about the emergence of the deadly fever: "Fever grows in the secret places of our hearts, planted there when one of us decided to sell one of us to another" (Wideman, 1990: 133). Referring to slavery in which humans considered belong to the low level of species are classified as cattle that can be traded and owned, Allen thinks that the whites' inhuman treatment to blacks is the root of the emergence of the plague.

Racism in Ordering the African-American to Help the Sick and the Death

Whites' racist attitude to the blacks is also in the form of ordering the blacks or African-Americans to endanger their lives to help the whites who are sick or death. No whites wants to do that job because they are so afraid with the deadly plague with painful effects that has no cure yet. The blacks have no power to refuse since they are judged as nobody. Allen is the male black who is appointed as a helper without his consent. His being chosen is based on a false assumption that blacks are immune from the plague. Allen feels how unfair this task for him in particular and for the blacks in general: "We were proclaimed carriers of the fever and treated as pariahs, but when it became expedient to command our services to nurse the sick and bury the dead, the previous allegations were no longer mentioned. Urged on by desperate counsellors, the mayor granted us a blessed immunity. We were ordered to save the city" (Wideman, 1990: 141). There is an unfair double standard to the blacks. Even though at first they are strongly accused as the culprit of the plague and treated as outcasts, when the whites do not wants to take care of other whites who are sick or death, they are ordered to handle the risky job since the plague is so contagious.

Maybe this incorrect assumption is based on the whites' ignorance that blacks are basically as vulnerable as the whites or maybe even more than that since they are poor and live in an unhealthy environment: "... the fever dealt with us severely. Among the city's poor and destitute the fever's ravages were most deadly and we are always the poorest of the poor" (Wideman, 1990: 141). Even though Allen has suffered the plague before, it does not automatically mean that he is immune: "True, I have survived other visitations of the fever, but while it prowls this city, I'm in jeopardy again as you are, because I claim no immunity, no magic" (Wideman, 1990: 133). In other words, Allen is like other people, blacks or whites, who can become the victims of the deadly plague. Allen feels entrapped in an unfair scheme designed by the whites for their own sake. This double standard scheme forces Allen to leave his black community who is vulnerable on the face of the plague.

The Plague as Symbols

The plague described in the short story entitled "Fever" written by John Edgar Wideman can be interpreted to have certain deep meaning. What the plague symbolizes will be discussed in this section.

Symbol of the Relation between Whites and Non-Whites

The deadly plague with painful symptoms can be interpreted as the unhealthy, diseased relationship between the whites and the blacks. Started by the slavery with its inhuman practices to the blacks, the relationship between the whites and the blacks is never harmonious since it is always tainted with prejudices, racial remarks/accusations, and other underestimating forms of verbal or nonverbal practices. Such kinds of relationship is like a plague for the blacks since they have to experience painful and condescending situation without possible chances to escape from it. However, like the whites who incorrectly believe that the blacks are immune by the plague, the whites also seem to close their eyes that the blacks suffers a lot from the unfair treatment. This undeniable situation has been discussed in the previous sections.

Symbol of the Dirty Water

The plague described in “Fever” can be interpreted as symbolizing the wretchedness of the environment, especially the bodies of water, due to humans’ careless actions of throwing rubbish and garbage to any bodies of water all the time. In Allen’s opinion that has been discussed previously, the dirty water is considered as the source place for the plague. Although his opinion is not completely true but it gives a hint that ignored and polluted nature will eventually shows reactions and retaliation to careless humans. Allen, the male black character is more insightful than the whites who think they are much more superior. Plague indeed is a disease, however as thinking humans, the hidden message behind the outbreak must be probed to learn to be better humans in the relationship with the nature.

Symbol of the Absolute Power over Whites and Blacks

The raging plague in the short story entitled “Fever” can also be interpreted as a symbol of the absolute power over whites and blacks. It is a neutral power that knows no racial hierarchy so poor blacks or wealthy whites all become the objects to its prey. Allen’s words indicate the mysterious way of the plague in looking for its victims: “I wondered for the thousandth time why some were stricken, some not” (Wideman, 1990: 145). So, there are no clear rules to be afflicted by the disease. Even a whole big family of wealthy whites die a painful death due to the plague in their big and luxurious house but the old black maid who nurses the family and refuses to leave her master’s house does not get infected with that deadly disease (Wideman, 1990: 150). So, the plague is indiscriminate to get the victims. No race, class, and gender can have privileges to avoid the deadly plague as long as the cause is not known and the cure is not found yet.

Self-Questioning of the Character “I”

All that happen around him, directly or not related to him, make Allen, the male black character who is observant, starts to question himself. His contemplating questions will be discussed one by one. Referring to the death of the whole wealthy big white family while sparing the old black maid, Allen at first question the old black maid’s reason to keep staying in the plagued house serving the dying white family (Wideman, 1990: 150). Unable to answer the question, Allen begins to question his own existence:

... here I was followi
 ng in the train of Rush and his assistants, a functionary, a lackey, insulted daily by those I risked

my life to heal.

Why did I not fly? Why was I not dancing in the streets, celebrating God's judgment on this wicked city? (Wideman, 1990: 150).

He critically questions his being an obedient helper of Dr. Rush without any personal profit for him. Not only that, he also puts his own life in hazard not to help his own black community but to help the whites who always offend him and his action to help them. He is also wondering why he does not feel happy with the misery befalling the whites in the city that is very cruel to the blacks.

Unable to find the answers to his questions, Allen imagines the critical comments of other people to what he is doing now, basically as a black man helping white people:

So why do you follow him like a loyal puppy, you confounded black fool? ... Who forces you to accompany that madman Rush on his murderous tours? He kills a hundred for every one he helps with his lamebrain, nonsensical, unnatural, Sangrado cures? Why do you tuck your monkey tail between your legs and skip after that butcher? Are you his shadow, a mindless, spineless black puddle of slime with no will of its own? (Wideman, 1990: 151).

Allen is picturing himself called as a "black fool" who willingly becomes Dr. Rush's helper. What is worse is because Dr. Rush's treatment to the plague victims is inconsequential. His method of treatment is based on his intuitive which is not acknowledged scientifically as can be seen from the strong disagreement from other doctors (Wideman, 1990: 148). It turns out that Dr. Rush's method is not only not successful, but it also hastens the death of the plague victims. That is why it is called "Sangrado" in which the dictionary meaning is "one who pretends to a knowledge of medicine" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sangrado>). Considering the illogical action of Dr. Rush, Allen, from other people's perspective can be judged as a total idiot who never uses his mind to think, a black robot who is foolishly obedient to his white master, a sadistic white doctor pretending to do medical treatment.

Allen's decision to keep doing what he is doing now also generates harsh criticism from an infected white:

You say you do not return to your family because you don't want to infect them. Perhaps, your fear is well-founded. But perhaps it also masks greater fear. Can you imagine yourself, Allen, as other than you are? A free man with no charlatan Rush to blame. The weight of your life in your hands (Wideman, 1990: 155).

This no name infected white person straight forwardly dismantles Allen's noble excuse. He is very doubtful of Allen's reason to stay away from his family during the raging plague. This no name white person who finally dies presents a striking thought that will stir further contemplation on Allen. This dying white man announces that Allen, the male black character, is not ready to take full self-responsibility of his action. That is why he prefers to follow without any questions his "master/leader", Dr. Rush, so that he can hide behind the white doctor for anything that happens to other humans or to himself. Allen, as a black person who is usually under whites' orders or is always in marginalized position, according to the dying white man, will never be ready to take full responsibility about his own life and other blacks'. This insightful criticism from the white man may give the nuance of underestimating Allen's ability to take full responsibility of his own existence. However, taking into consideration Allen's self-questioning, this harsh criticism is not totally

incorrect. Conditioning the blacks always under whites' orders will eventually erase the ability of the blacks to control or take responsibility of their own lives.

Concluding Remarks

Although the short story entitled "Fever" written by John Edgar Wideman is based on a real plague called yellow fever that stroke Philadelphia in 1793, it must be remembered that it is a fiction or a creative invention. Indeed, the two important characters refer to two real personages, however they have been creatively constructed in the short story. Thus, the discussion is guided by the thought that its object of discussion is a fiction in the form of short story.

The analysis yields several findings as follows. First, even during the raging outbreak that kills not only whites but also blacks, racism still occurs in the form of racial accusation and racist order. The deadly plague does not make whites and blacks work together hand in hand to fight against the raging plague. The whites still position themselves as superior in whatever situation. Second, the deadly plague can be interpreted as symbols. It symbolizes the abusive treatment of whites to blacks, the reaction of the uncared environment, and the absolute power even over the superior whites. The last, it gives insightful meaning about the impact of conditioning the blacks always under the orders of the superior whites. It makes the blacks unable to take control of and responsibility on their own lives. In short, the short story entitled "Fever" written by John Edgar Wideman has various rich meanings that are skillfully constructed by the author.

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