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Challenging Progress: Mob Violence and Punishing Identities in Modernist-Era American Fiction

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CHALLENGING PROGRESS: MOB VIOLENCE AND PUNISHING IDENTITIES IN

MODERNIST-ERA AMERICAN FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Challenging Progress: Mob Violence and Punishing Identities in Modernist-Era
         American Fiction

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        This study examines manifestations of mob violence in Modernist-era United

States fiction, showing the ways in which mob violence is used as a literary trope to

examine issues of racial, gender, national, and class identity. The first half of the

twentieth century is full of mob violence in the U. S., from racially-motivated lynchings

to violent confrontations resulting from labor unrest. In spite of the historical

significance of this violence in the U. S., few attempts have been made to theorize mob

and crowd behavior and their relationship to individual identity, especially in literary

studies.

        In many ways, Modernist-era U. S. fiction provides important theorization of mob

violence. The writers and works discussed here consistently use mob violence to show

the ways in which such violence is used to define and enforce individual identity in the

United States at this time. James Weldon Johnson, William Faulkner, Richard Wright,

Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck depict

numerous subjects suffering due to mob violence, violence faced because these subjects

have transgressed against dominant notions of race, gender, class, and nationality. In

doing so, these writers undermine the myth of progress in the U. S. at the time. This

undermining of U. S. political, economic, and social systems shows these writers

engaging with these issues in ways that have often been ignored, in part because many of

these writers use Modernist-favored literary aesthetics. Especially important is the way that racially-motivated lynching, and the representation of such lynching in African-American literature and culture, becomes a noteworthy focus of canonical, white Modernist-era fiction.

This study makes an important connection between Modernist-era U. S. fiction and the prevalence of mob violence found during the period. These works provide significant contextualization and theorization of mob violence in the country, and display a cultural shift away from the myth of progress. By the end of the first half of the century, writers such as Faulkner and Steinbeck also begin to represent a post-Depression ideological shift, a shift away from depictions of individuals as subjected to mob violence to depictions of groups, such as sharecroppers and strikers, having their identities forcibly defined by powerful individuals.