

The Exploration of Racism in *Darktown* by Thomas Mullen

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Abstract

The paper explores the theme of racism in Thomas Mullen's *Darktown*, focuses on the experiences of the first Black police officers in 1948 Atlanta. The novel presents the harsh realities of racial discrimination, police brutality, segregation, and institutional racism during the post-war period in America. Through the characters of Lucius Boggs and Tommy Smith, Mullen portrays the struggles faced by African Americans within a society controlled by white supremacy and Jim Crow laws. The paper examines how racism operates through social institutions, particularly the police department, and how it affects identity, justice, and human relationships. It also highlights themes of resistance, courage, and the gradual hope for social change. By combining historical realism with crime fiction, *Dark Town* serves as a powerful critique of racial injustice and reflects the continuing relevance of racism in modern society.

Keywords: Racism, Discrimination, Supremacy, Realism, Resistance

Racism has remained one of the most significant social and political issues in American history and literature. Literary works often portray the harsh realities of racial discrimination and social inequality to expose injustice and encourage social awareness. *Dark Town* by Thomas Mullen is a historical crime novel set in 1948 Atlanta during the era of racial segregation and Jim Crow laws. The novel revolves around the lives of the first Black police officers appointed in Atlanta and their struggles against institutional racism, police

corruption, and social discrimination. Through powerful characterization and realistic historical settings, Mullen presents the deeply rooted racial tensions that dominated American society during the post-war period.

The novel explores how racism affects not only Black citizens but also Black officers who are expected to enforce laws in a system designed to oppress them. By presenting discrimination within the police department, the justice system, and society at large, Mullen exposes the hypocrisy and brutality of racial prejudice. The novel also reflects the early stages of the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for equality in America. This paper examines the exploration of racism in *Darktown* through institutional discrimination, police brutality, social segregation, identity conflict, and resistance against oppression.

The setting of *Darktown* plays a crucial role in portraying racism. Atlanta in 1948 was deeply divided by racial segregation. African Americans were denied equal rights and opportunities despite their contributions during World War II. The novel is inspired by the historical event of Atlanta hiring its first Black police officers. However, these officers were not treated equally within the department. They were not allowed to arrest white citizens, drive police vehicles, or enter the police headquarters freely.

Thomas Mullen carefully reconstructs the atmosphere of post-war America to show how racism functioned as a social system rather than an individual attitude. Jim Crow laws enforced segregation in schools, transport, public places, and employment. The Black community lived under constant fear of violence and humiliation. The title “*Darktown*” itself symbolizes the racial segregation of Black neighborhoods and the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans.

The historical setting strengthens the realism of the novel and allows readers to understand the difficulties faced by African Americans during that period. Mullen demonstrates that racism was deeply embedded in legal institutions and social practices.

One of the major themes in *Darktown* is institutional racism. The Black police officers, Lucius Boggs and Tommy Smith, become symbols of both progress and oppression. Although they are officially employed by the police department, they are denied authority and respect. White officers openly insult and humiliate them. They are treated as inferior despite wearing the same uniform.

The novel clearly illustrates that racism operates through institutions. The Black officers are restricted to Black neighborhoods and are forbidden from arresting white suspects. Even within the department, they are isolated from white officers. These restrictions reveal how the system itself supports racial inequality.

The white officers in the novel represent different attitudes toward racism. Officers like Dunlow embody violent racism and abuse their power to terrorize Black citizens. On the other hand, characters like Rakestraw show moral conflict and gradual awareness of injustice. Through these contrasting characters, Mullen highlights the complexity of racial relations in America. The police department becomes a symbol of white supremacy where Black officers must constantly prove their worth. Their struggle reflects the larger fight of African Americans seeking equality in institutions controlled by whites.

Another important aspect of racism in the novel is police brutality. Violence against Black people is presented as a normal part of society. White officers use fear, intimidation, and physical abuse to maintain racial control. Black citizens are denied justice because the legal system protects white authority. The murder investigation in the novel exposes the unequal value placed on Black lives. When a young Black woman is murdered, many white officers show little concern. Her death is treated as insignificant because of her race. Boggs and Smith attempt to seek justice despite facing threats from their own colleagues. This demonstrates how racism corrupts justice and prevents truth from emerging.

Mullen also connects the violence of the past with modern racial issues. Critics have noted that the themes of police violence and racial injustice in *Darktown* remain relevant in contemporary America, especially in discussions surrounding racial profiling and movements for racial equality. The novel suggests that racism survives through violence and fear. Police brutality becomes a tool used to preserve social hierarchy and silence marginalized communities.

Social segregation is another central theme in *Darktown*. African Americans are separated from white society physically, socially, and economically. The Black community experiences poverty, poor living conditions, and limited opportunities. Segregation creates psychological trauma and reinforces feelings of inferiority among Black citizens. The Black officers struggle with identity conflict because they belong to both the oppressed community and the police force. Many African Americans distrust them because they represent an institution associated with white oppression. At the same time, white officers refuse to accept them as equals. This places Boggs and Smith in a difficult position between two worlds.

Lucius Boggs, in particular, experiences internal conflict regarding race, duty, and masculinity. As an educated Black man from a respected family, he wants dignity and justice. However, the racist environment constantly reminds him of his limited freedom. Tommy Smith, meanwhile, adopts a more cautious and practical approach to survival. Through these characters, Mullen portrays how racism damages personal identity and human relationships. The characters are forced to adapt to a society where racial discrimination determines social value.

Despite the oppressive environment, *Darktown* also presents themes of resistance and hope. Boggs and Smith refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice. Their determination to solve the murder case symbolizes resistance against racism and corruption. They risk their careers and lives to seek truth and justice. The novel also reflects the beginning

of social transformation in America. The appointment of Black officers, though limited and symbolic, marks an important historical step toward integration. Mullen suggests that change begins through courage and persistence.

Some white characters in the novel gradually recognize the cruelty of racism. This indicates the possibility of interracial understanding and social reform. Although the novel does not provide a completely optimistic ending, it emphasizes the importance of challenging injustice. The resistance portrayed in the novel foreshadows the larger Civil Rights Movement that would emerge in the following decades. Through individual acts of bravery, Mullen highlights the human desire for equality and dignity.

Thomas Mullen uses multiple perspectives and realistic dialogue to create a vivid representation of racism. The shifting viewpoints allow readers to understand the thoughts and prejudices of different characters. This technique deepens the emotional impact of the novel. Symbolism is also significant in *Darktown*. The segregated neighborhoods symbolize social exclusion, while the police uniform symbolizes both authority and limitation for Black officers. Darkness itself becomes a metaphor for fear, violence, and hidden injustice.

Mullen combines elements of crime fiction and historical realism to expose social issues. The murder mystery is not merely a suspenseful plot but a means to reveal institutional corruption and racial inequality. Critics have described the novel as a police procedural that challenges traditional ideas of justice by exposing the racist foundations of law enforcement. *Darktown* is a powerful exploration of racism in post-war America. Through the experiences of Atlanta's first Black police officers, Thomas Mullen exposes the cruelty of institutional racism, police brutality, segregation, and social injustice. The novel reveals how racism operates not only through personal prejudice but also through laws, institutions, and cultural attitudes.

By blending historical realism with crime fiction, Mullen creates a compelling narrative that remains relevant in contemporary discussions about racial discrimination and police violence. The struggles of Boggs and Smith represent the broader struggle of African Americans for dignity, equality, and justice. Although the novel portrays a society dominated by hatred and oppression, it also highlights resistance, courage, and hope for social change. Ultimately, *Darktown* serves as both a historical reminder and a social critique. It encourages readers to reflect on the continuing impact of racism and the importance of fighting against injustice in all forms.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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