

『영미연구』

제59집 (2023): 3-20

<http://doi.org/10.25093/ibas.2023.59.3>

Utopian Vision and Its Double: An Allegorical Portrait of Black Life in Hurston's One-act Play *Mr. Frog**

Jungman Park
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

[Abstract]

Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist and a woman writer participating in the African American literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. A prolific and versatile writer, she wrote a number of plays, and, in particular, devoted herself to creating 'black folk comedy' as a form of 'the new and the real Negro theatre' that honestly showed the language and daily life of black people in South Florida. This study focuses on Hurston's one-act play *Mr. Frog* as an example of black folk comedy. A fable story, the short dramatic skit represents the utopian model of coexistence and symbiotic community by portraying the lives of animals. On the other hand, this utopia created on stage is a space that does not exist in reality, so in return, it indirectly suggests 'other' picture hidden behind the surface, namely, the portrait of contemporary black people in South Florida living the harsh reality of racism. In the play, the utopian vision is presented as 'double' and this

* This work was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2023.

writing strategy meets the nature and effects of an allegorical narrative deriving from the correlation of surface text and the hidden meaning or subtext. This study concludes that *Mr. Frog*, through the fable story of animals, dramatizes the ‘double’ of the utopian vision that diverges into the ideal community for coexistence and the reality of black life, thereby suggesting a model for allegorical playwriting.

Key Words: Zora Neale Hurston, *Mr. Frog*, utopian vision, double, allegory

I.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) is an anthropologist and female writer who represents the African American literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement in the 1920s. Her novels greatly influenced later black female writers, including Toni Morrison (1931-2019) and Alice Walker (1944-). For example, Alice Walker emphasized that Hurston was a great inspiration for her literary world, calling Hurston the “mother” of African American literature and Hurston’s literature as “mother’s literary garden” (Walker 2005). The title of Walker’s 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, was her tribute to Hurston. Robert E. Hemenway’s 1977 book, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, illuminates Hurston’s life as a folklorist and anthropologist as well as a novelist. This literary biography is considered “a starting point of Hurston scholars” (Pondrom 182). Afterwards, Hurston’s novels as well as other literary works, including short stories and folklores, began to be explored in earnest among scholars and general readers, and around 1983, she was widely recognized as one of the most prolific and versatile African American writers in the twentieth century (Holt 1).

Although relatively unknown to the general readership and even to academia, Hurston also wrote a number of plays and dramatic sketches for the stage. In a letter dated April 12, 1928, to Langston Hughes, a comrade in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston expressed her aspirations for creating “the new, the real Negro art” that would honestly show the daily life of black people in black language, and that, above all, would be built on “the folk tales, however short, with the abrupt angularity and naivete of the primitive ‘bama nigger” (Kaplan 116). As her expression ‘the real Negro art’ suggests, Hurston saw the strong connection between ‘authenticity’ and ‘Negroness’ in the theatrical temperament that penetrates the blood and life of black people. For her, plays and theatres were the perfect literary or artistic vessel for capturing the true black person. For this reason, it must have been a natural or predestined sequence that the records of black lives in the South, which she collected herself as an anthropologist, were fully utilized in her later playwriting work. Hurston’s insight into the functional relationship between black life and theatrical temperament is clearly reaffirmed in her 1934 essay entitled “Characteristics of Negro Expression.”

Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out.
(“Characteristics” 31)

Hurston’s aspiration for playwriting in the letter was also the moment when a new genre of black literature, the so-called ‘black folk comedy’ was born. At that time, black characters in American literature were subject to the traditions of ‘tragic mulatto’ and ‘black minstrelsy’ created by white writers, and as a result, they could not escape from the two fates: tragic death and stereotypical caricature. By contrast, Hurston’s creation of black folk comedy was to be “a really new departure in the

[African American] drama” (Gates 9) in the sense of breaking away from the practice of following the white literary tradition.

Hurston’s ambition to create black folk comedy was conceived from her childhood experiences in Eatonville, Florida. Born in Alabama in 1891, Hurston moved with her family to Eatonville when she was 3 years old. She spent her childhood here until 1904 when she left the village at the age of 13 to realize bigger dreams. Eatonville was the first all-black community in the United States, and its residents were all excellent storytellers and masters of jokes, as frequently recalled and portrayed later in Hurston’s anthropological essays and literary works. Hurston grew up listening to folktales, legends, songs, and everyday mouth-to-mouth stories told by Eatonville people. Hurston’s childhood experience with them became the source of her unique narrative strategies of comedy and life affirmation, which are summarized as “shrewd oratorical skill” and “folksy humor” and “folkways” (Peters xiv; Neal 160).

This study focuses on Hurston’s one-act play *Mr. Frog* as an example of black folk comedy. This short dramatic skit represents the utopian model of coexistence and symbiotic community by portraying the lives of animals as a fable story. On the other hand, this utopia created on stage is a space that does not exist in reality, so in return, indirectly suggests ‘other’ picture hidden behind the surface, namely, a portrait of contemporary black people in South Florida living the harsh reality of racism. In the play, the utopian vision is presented as ‘double’ and this writing strategy meets the nature and effects of an allegorical narrative driving from the correlation of surface text and the hidden meaning or subtext. This study explores the dynamics in which the utopian vision diverges into a double meaning in the play in relation to the allegorical narrative and writing.

II.

On October 29, 1930, Hurston submitted the typescript of *Cold Keener*, a collection of musical revues, to the Library of Congress for copyright. Since then, the typescript had been forgotten and neglected in the storage for unclassified documents for 67 years. In the summer of 1997, 37 years after Hurston's death, the typescript was accidentally discovered by a librarian of the Congress Library, and first announced its existence to the world. What was discovered at that time was the typescripts of full-length and short musical comedies, plays, and skits that Hurston submitted for copyright from 1925 to 1944, and *Cold Keener* was among them. *Cold Keener* consists of 9 skits depicting the lives of African American folks. In order of listing, they are "The Filling Station", "Cock Robin", "Heaven", "Mr. Frog", "Lenox Avenue", "The House That Jack Built", "Bahamas", "Railroad Camp", and "Jook". These skits present a "vibrant and wide-ranging collage of contemporary black life" across the American South and North, rural and urban, real and virtual worlds (Eisen 67).¹⁾

The fourth of the nine skits in *Cold Keener* is *Mr. Frog*. This comic piece dramatizes the lives of animals as main characters and presents a series of events leading to the protagonist Mr. Frog's marriage proposal, wedding ceremony, and banquet. While the time of the play is not specified, the place is set in "a Florida swamp" (34). The stage setting creates the atmosphere of a primeval forest, seemingly untouched by humans. Meanwhile, the pine tree in the center of the stage is described as "a girl dancer" (34), which makes a surrealistic picture that blurs the boundary between the human world and the non-human world. Consequently, in the synergy with the above-mentioned 'unspecified time setting,' this stage picture has the effect of brushing out the Florida swamp as a space free from dichotomy and

hierarchy between humans and animals.

Water is seen through the cypress and magnolia and pine trees. Spanish moss hangs from the trees. There is a large hollow log at left near the entrance. A long-leaf pine is down stage center. A huge toadstool is near footlights at extreme right. The lake in the back glints through all this. The pine tree is a girl dancer. Several bird-nests are seen in the tree tops. One large tree near center down stage has a large hollow. (66; emphasis is mine)

As the curtain rises, the stage is at sunset and the mentioned pine tree or ‘girl dancer’ is motionless. With the music, the tree begins to sway and the motion gradually increases. Then the South Wind, the West Wind, the East Wind, and the North Wind appear from all sides of the stage in turn, and they dance in harmony with the pine tree in the center stage. The dance of the four winds intensifies, and, influenced by it, the dance of the pine tree becomes violent. The feast of dance created by ‘human tree’ and ‘human winds’ up-scales the surrealistic trans-boundary dynamics, from human-animal relationship to human-nature relationship level, and as a result, the aforementioned non-binary and non-hierarchical horizon also expands.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle proclaimed the aesthetics of imitation as a common principle of all arts created by humans, including literature, and at the same time defined ‘human action’ as the object of imitation. As the subject and object of art, this anthropocentrism would become the tradition and maxim of literature that continued through the centuries to realism in the modern era. On the other hand, the stage sets and environment in the play *Mr. Frog* suggest “a quasi-surrealistic collage” that characterizes “the inhuman core of mimesis” which is a peculiar practice found in the black culture of the American South including Florida (Biers 77). On this stage, Hurston demonstrates the mechanism by which meaning is formed in the “networks

of texts and performances by human and nonhuman agents” (Barad 2003; qtd. Biers 72). In this respect, the stage picture of the play breaks away from Aristotle’s anthropocentric mimetic aesthetics, suggesting a new perspective on text interpretation that “challenge the traditional humanistic project” (Biers 72) and an alternative socio-cultural insight that “hermeneutics is not a privilege of humans, but, so to speak, a property of the world itself” (Latour 245).

While the dance of the winds and the pine tree reaches its climax for about a minute, the sun finally sets, and the four winds return to their places on either side of the stage. In the dark, hundreds of fireflies and marsh gas swarm over the scene. After 30 seconds of silence, a big frog enters upstage, jumps up onto the toad stool mushroom, sit down and look around. The swamp area seen by the frog presents a tableau of the seemingly ‘food chain’ ecosystem.

The voice of an alligator booms from the water. An owl hoots, a chorus of frogs, birds, beetles, flies, a snake, all enter from different points and take places among the trees and bushes. A huge buzzard takes his seat on the hollow log. There is a working door in the log. (67)

The stage sets and picture apparently visualize the hierarchical order of food chain with alligators and buzzards as top predators of water and land, respectively. This hierarchical relationship between predator and prey, eater and eaten, is schemed as a sequential connection of ‘flies/beetles → frog/rat → snake → alligator/buzzard’. However, it soon turns out that this expectation of the food chain was a speculation stemming from human prejudice. In fact, the animals living in the swamp form a community of peaceful coexistence and symbiosis, and this point will be proven through a series of stage actions that follow. Swamp animals focus all their attention on the marriage proposal of their neighbor Mr. Frog, and wish and celebrate his

successful and happy marriage with one mind.

The frog sitting on the mushroom breaks the silence and sings “Mister Frog went courtin’ he did ride” (67), followed by a chorus of frogs. In the midst of this, the main character of the lyrics, Mr. Frog appears on stage “riding a tortoise” and “dressed in green satin or velvet, white vest, sword, spurs and boots” (67). From then on, the play follows a sequence in which the frog on the mushroom sings the upcoming dramatic action, the neighboring animals respond to it in chorus, and finally Mr. Frog executes the predicted dramatic action. The tortoise carrying Mr. Frog arrives at the door of the hollow log where Miss Mousie lives. This is the same log on which the huge buzzard was sitting in the previous stage description. According to the common sense about the food chain ecosystem, the buzzard perched on the log is considered to be the behavior of a predator waiting for mice, its prey, to come out. Besides, this is the best hunting place where it can get another prey, frog, as a bonus. However, Mr. Frog does not care about the buzzard’s presence and approaches Miss Mousie’s house without the slightest caution. By the time Mr. Frog reaches his destination, all the animals of the swamp, including birds, join him in the chorus, and the buzzard is no exception. Together, they hope for and encourage Mr. Frog’s successful marriage proposal. The choral scene, created by all the swamp residents with a unified voice, presents a tableau for a community of peaceful coexistence and symbiosis, not a food chain diagram.

Arriving at Miss Mousie’s house, Mr. Frog knocks on the door of the hollow log. It opens cautiously, and Miss Mousie shyly peeks out her face. When the frog on the mushroom leads the singing “And he took Miss Mousie on his knee” (68) and the neighboring animals respond in chorus, Mr. Frog takes Miss Mousie on his knee and says “Miss Mousie won’t you marry me?” (68). Miss Mousie, still shy, wittily put offs accepting the proposal, saying “Not without my pa’s consent, would

I marry the president” (68). Soon Old Man Rat enters. He expresses mixed emotions by laughing and crying to “see his daughter be a bride” (69) and then readily consents to the marriage.

The wedding ceremony follows quickly. The wedding hall is the large hollow of an old oak tree at the center downstage. Guests gather around the old oak tree. The first guest is Mr. Bee with a guitar. While he plays the instrument, the bridal couple proceed to the hollow of the oak tree and take their places. Then Reverend Buzzard performs the ceremony. The Reverend is the same buzzard who was sitting on the hollow of Miss Mousie’s log. This scene reaffirms that the impression of buzzard as a top predator in the food chain and, therefore, a threat to lower animals is nothing more than human prejudice. At this point, the image of the buzzard sitting on Miss Mousie’s log is rather imprinted and recalled as a guardian angel that protects her family. And at this moment when the wedding is being held, the Reverend Buzzard bears witness to the wishes of all the swamp community to celebrate the bridal couple and their happiness in life.

Reverend Buzzard: *(to groom)* Do you take Miss Mousie to be your wife?

Chorus: Unhunh, unhunh.

(Bride and groom nod assent in time to the music.)

Groom: Yes, I take this woman to be my wife, to love her and kiss her for all my life.

Chorus: Unhunh, unhunh.

(Old Man Rat tries to cry. Reverend Buzzard kisses the bride. They step away from the altar and seat themselves. General noise of congratulation in various ways--according to the species.) (70-1)

At the wedding banquet, Mrs. Snake enters and hands out slices of wedding cake “decorated with fireflies” to each guest, and Mr. Bug passes “whisky jug” (71) to the

guests. The banquet scene also nullifies general knowledge and prejudice about the food chain relationship. In the food chain system, snakes are predators of frogs and mice, whereas here in the swamp community Mrs. Snake celebrates the frog and mouse couple's new life and shares food with neighboring animals who join in the celebration. Insects, such as bugs, are prey of frogs and mice in the food chain, but in the swamp community here, frogs and mice are not objects to be wary of to Mr. Bug, but neighbors who share joy. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the appearance and fate of Mr. Tick as a wedding guest. He comes in as the last guest at the wedding banquet and eats out everything he can find, until he gets sick and lies flat on his back on the floor of the wedding party. In response, Doctor Fly is sent for in hurry. Doctor diagnoses that Mr. Tick will die soon and Mr. Tick is dragged offstage into the bushes.

Frog: And the next come is was Mr. Tick.

Chorus: Unhunh, unhunh.

(Enter Mr. Tick and start gobbling everything in sight.)

Frog: And de next come in was Mr. Tick, et so much till it made him sick.

Chorus: Unhunh, unhunh.

(Mr. Tick is flat on his back in the center of the wedding party.)

Frog: And then they sent for Doctor Fly.

Chorus: Unhunh, unhunh.

(Enter Dr. Fly.)

Frog: And then they sent for Doctor Fly, said Mr. Tick, yu sho will die.

Chorus: Unhunh, unhunh.

(Mr. Tick is dragged out by his hind legs into the bushes out of sight.) (72)

Mr. Tick is at the bottom of the food chain hierarchy, and even other insects like bugs and flies are his predators. However, in the swamp community, Mr. Bug

provides food for Mr. Tick, and Mr. Fly takes care of Mr. Tick's health and life. Besides, Mr. Tick is the best glutton at the wedding banquet, and truly the top predator in the ecosystem of the swamp community since he only takes and eats without giving anything to others. Mr. Tick is a 'happy' being who eats food provided by his neighbors – predators in the food chain – until he dies, or ends his life at the peak of the pleasure of eating. His death has nothing to do with death as the lowest prey in the food chain hierarchy. His death is the result of his own choice and will, so it is a happy death. After the wedding banquet, the bridal couple, Mr. Frog and his wife Miss Mousie, ride on the tortoise and go on a honeymoon. All the swamp residents in unison throw rice behind the newlyweds. And the play ends.

III.

Mr. Frog takes animals as main characters and Florida swamp as its setting. The play unfolds a festive atmosphere and energy of the animal community centered around the wedding of a frog and a mouse. Various species of animals in the swamp appearing as guests consistently wish and celebrate the newly married couple and their happiness with one mind.

This fable-like picture suggests a community situation of peaceful coexistence and symbiosis, contrary to the hierarchical order of the food chain ecosystem. As seen in the 'human pine tree' device on the stage that the 'girl dancer' embodies, the play creates a surreal environment or space that blurs the dichotomy between humans and animals. Consequently, the story of swamp animals realized on stage magically overlaps or transforms into the story of 'real people' in the South Florida community. In addition, the unspecified temporal background of the play is effectively replaced

by the specific present point of time, 1930, when the play was written. The peaceful coexistence and symbiotic relationship of the animal world idealized in the play ‘ironically’ expresses human aspirations and desires for what is lacking in human reality. Conversely, this play shows the essence of magical realism in which the aforementioned utopian community model absent in human reality become possible in the imaginary space of the animal world. For the members of the human world, this dramatization of fable story suggests the wisdom of coexistence to overcome discrimination and polarization while acknowledging differences in race, religion, and language. Thus, the play presents a slice of life in the idealized animal world as an alternative to real condition that makes human life difficult due to political, economic, social, cultural, and class reasons. Meanwhile, the slice of life in the ideal animal world on the stage simultaneously testifies to the slice of life in the bleak and dark human reality.

Considering that *Mr. Frog* was written during the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro era in the 1920s, the play’s fable-like space captures the writer’s self-consciousness and attitude toward racial issues and implications. In this respect, the play as a fable story indirectly and implicitly breaks the common knowledge of hierarchical order, represented by the food chain and the law of jungle, and the resulting human prejudice against racism. The fable-like space of the play instead expresses the hope for an ideal American society as a peaceful coexistence and symbiotic community. However, at the same time, the play awakens us to a harsh awareness that the above fable-like picture should be nothing more than a virtually impossible utopian vision. At the end of the play, leaving behind the ideal community built on the stage, black audiences of the time will eventually return to the bleak reality where the evil of racism awaits. The utopia and the reality of black life face each other in created world of the play, and in this way *Mr. Frog*, one-act

dramatization of animal world, portrays a double vision of African American life in the South.

As mentioned earlier and reiterated here, *Mr. Frog*, with talking animals as the main characters, takes a form of a typical fable. A fable also refers to a short and simple allegory. As a literary device or form, an allegory is a narrative or visual representation in which a particular character, place, or event can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, usually of moral and political implications. Writers and narrators use figurative narrative or visualization of characters, places, and events to convey the hidden or complex ideas behind them in a way that is comprehensible to or readily apparent to readers and viewers. Etymologically coming from both Greek *allos* (another, different) and *agoreuro* (to speak in public), 'allegory' means "other-speaking" (Copeland and Struck 2) or "description of one thing under the image of another" (Liddell and Scott 68). Thus, in both composing and interpreting, allegory is understood as a way of writing, narrative and representation that has a 'double' meaning of what is on the surface and what is hidden behind. Here converges the pair of double meaning of the utopian vision which is presented by the play as a fable-like picture and an allegorical story, respectively. The utopian vision and its double, either individually or collectively, cross and blur the delicate boundary between animals and humans, ideals and reality.

After all, the nature of allegorical interpretation lies primarily in recognizing that behind the surface meaning of a text is encoded an 'other' sense that often seems unrelated or even indicates the exact opposite, and then decodes the hidden meaning. After that, we encounter the secondary but ultimate nature of allegorical interpretation. It is to bring the correlation of the text's superficial and the hidden meanings into the context of reality, and to define, explicate, and identify the correlative meaning driven from "its intimate relationship with its historical

complement” (Copeland and Struck 2).

Hurston’s one-act play *Mr. Frog* dramatizes the utopian ideal of coexistence and symbiotic community in the form of a fable story, while ‘circumventively’ portraying a slice of African American life in the South facing the harsh reality of racism as the subtext or ‘double’ of the utopian vision. Likewise, this play portrays the ‘double’ picture of the utopian vision that diverges into the surface text and the hidden meaning or subtext, thereby suggesting a model for allegorical playwriting.

Notes

- 1) It is not clear what the title ‘Cole Keener’ means, and why Hurston chose the title (Biers 76). However, according to some scholars, the meaning of the title is inferred to be “abrupt change of setting, mood, and language” (Speisman 41) or “a motley assortment of things” (Cole and Mitchell 75).

Works Cited

- Barad, Karen. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2003, pp. 801-31.
- Biers, Katherine. "Practices of Enchantment: The Theatre of Zora Neale Hurston." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2015, pp. 67-82.
- Cayer, Jennifer A. "Roll yo'hips—don't roll yo' eyes: Angularity and Embodied Spectatorship in Zora Neale Hurston's Play, *Cold Keener*." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 60, 2008, pp. 37-69.
- Cole, Jean Lee, and Charles Mitchell. "Introduction to *Cold Keener*." *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*, edited by Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, Rutgers UP, 2008, pp. 75-6.
- Copeland, Rita, and Peter T. Struck. Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, edited by Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck, Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 1-14.
- Eisen, Kurt. "Theatrical Ethnography and Modernist Primitivism in Eugene O'Neill and Zora Neale Hurston." *South Central Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2008, pp. 56-73.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "A Tragedy of Negro Life." *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*. Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Harper Perennial, 1991, pp. 5-24.
- Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. U of Illinois P, 1997.
- Holt, Elvin. *Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Race: A Study of Selected Nonfictional Works*. 1983. U of Kentucky, PhD. Dissertation.

- Hurston, Zora Neale. "Mr. Frog." *From Luababa to Polk County: Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress*, edited by Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell, Apprentice House, 2005, pp. 66-73.
- _____. "Characteristics of Negro Expression." *African American Liteary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier, New York UP, 2000, pp. 31-44.
- Kaplan, Carla, editor. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*. Anchor Books, 2003.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford UP, 1843.
- Neal, Larry. "A Profile: Zora Neale Hurston." *Southern Exposure*, vol. 1, 1974, pp. 160-8.
- Peters, Pearlie Mae Fisher. *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Fiction, Folklore, and Drama*. Garland, 1998.
- Pondrom, Cyrena N. "The Role of Myth in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *American Literature*, vol. 58, 1986, pp. 182-202.
- Speisman, Barbara. "From *Spears* to *The Great Day*: Zora Neale Hurston's Vision of a Real Negro Theatre." *Southern Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1998, pp. 34-46.
- Walker, Alice. "Finding a World that I Thought Was Lost: Zora Neale Hurston and the People She Looked at Very Hard and Loved Very Much." Barnard College, 3 October, 2003, lecture, *The Scholar & Feminist Online*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2005. http://sfonline.barnard.edu/hurston/walker_01.htm.

국문초록

유토피아적 비전과 그 이중성: 조라 닐 허스튼의 단막극 『개구리씨』에 나타난 흑인 삶에 대한 알레고리적 초상

박 정 만

단독 / 한국외국어대학교

조라 닐 허스튼은 1920년대 할렘 르네상스로 알려진 미국의 흑인 문예 운동을 대표하는 인류학자이자 여류작가다. 다재다능한 작가였던 그녀는 다수의 희곡도 집필했으며, 특히 흑인의 언어와 일상을 진솔하게 보여주는 ‘새롭고 참된 흑인 연극’의 형식으로서 ‘흑인 포크 드라마’ 창출에 전착했다. 본 연구는 허스튼이 생산한 흑인 포크 코미디의 한 사례로 단막극 『개구리씨』에 주목하고자 한다. 이 극은 플로리다 늪지대를 배경으로 이곳에 사는 동물들의 삶을 한 편의 우화 형식으로 그려내면서 공존과 공생 커뮤니티의 유토피아적 모델을 가시화한다. 한편, 상기한 이상향은 현실에 존재하지 않는 공간이기에 반대급부로 그 피상적 이면에 숨겨진 다른 그림, 즉 당대 인종주의의 엄혹한 현실을 살아가는 미국 남부 플로리다 흑인의 삶에 대한 초상을 우회적으로 제시한다. 극에서 유토피아적 비전은 ‘이중’의 의미로 제시되는데, 이러한 글쓰기 전략은 표면적 텍스트와 숨겨진 의미 혹은 서브텍스트 사이의 상관성에서 추동하는 알레고리 내러티브의 속성 및 효과와 맞닿는다. 이에 착안하여 본 연구는 이 극에서 허스튼은 평화로운 공존·공생 커뮤니티에 대한 우화적 이상향과 인종차별로 점철된 당대의 엄혹한 현실의 ‘이중 의미’를 극화함으로써 알레고리적 극작의 전범을 제시하고 있음을 밝히고자 한다.

주제어: 조라 닐 허스튼, 『개구리씨』, 유토피아적 비전, 이중성, 알레고리

논문접수일: 2023.09.24

심사완료일: 2023.10.10

게재확정일: 2023.10.12

이름: 박정만

소속: 한국외국어대학교 영어통번역학부 교수

이메일: jungmany@gmail.com