

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE CENTRAL THEMES  
IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM PAULKNER

A THESIS


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By

Robert L. Dorsch

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Approved for the Major Department

Green D. Wyrick

Approved for the Graduate Council

James C. Boyle

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## PREFACE

A great number of critics have stated or implied in their studies of William Faulkner that there seem to be certain themes central to all of the best works. In most instances the critics have been content to point to these qualities which are not stated, but are implicit in the work; but seldom is the attempt made to isolate these themes in order to establish their relationship to the total effect of the work.

In the speech Faulkner made when accepting the Nobel Prize, he stated the qualities which he said he felt were necessary in good writing. Because there has been frequent mention of an apparent discrepancy between the speech and the work, this study has been undertaken in order to equate the themes stated in the Nobel Prize speech with the themes implicit in the work of William Faulkner.

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Kansas State Teachers College  
Emporia, Kansas  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

On December 10, 1950, William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize for 1949 and made a speech in which he outlined the duties of a writer. Since that time critics have noted everything in the speech from an outright refutation of the author's earlier works to a trite parroting of the idealistic aims of literature. Some critics have gone so far as to divide Faulkner's work into two parts: before and after the Nobel Prize.

Some analysts of Faulkner's work have attempted to show that he became aware of the duties of a writer only after having received the prize and that the new awareness stifled his natural ability. Others indicate that Faulkner underwent some sort of psychological change which permitted him to see mankind in a different light than he had before. But one finds little effort to apply the themes from Faulkner's speech to the work done before and after the speech. It seems that the general consensus was that anything written after the speech would be an attempt to live up to the stated position, and anything before existed as the work of a separate individual.

This thesis will attempt to show that the themes expressed in the Nobel Prize acceptance speech were consistent with those in the major works of Faulkner prior to



1949 and were further developed by him in his work after that year. It is probable that the apparent discrepancy between Faulkner's speech and his earlier work lies not in a change in Faulkner, but in a misinterpretation of the earlier works.

An effort to re-evaluate the work of Faulkner in the light of his position as stated in his Nobel Prize speech is necessary to ascertain whether Faulkner was consistent in his values or gave lip-service to goals to which he did not subscribe. If literature is to be of value, it is necessary to establish the honesty of its creators in their attempt to transfer their values to their work.

Four of Faulkner's most important works have been selected as representing his various approaches to a statement of a basic theme. Three novels, The Sound and the Fury, Light in August, and A Fable, and one short story, "The Bear," have been selected for interpretation. Each of the works under consideration has been chosen for reasons of contrast and range of approach to the central theme. The Sound and the Fury was chosen primarily because its literary importance demands that it be included, but it was also included because the unusual narrative technique makes it subject to varied and possibly incorrect interpretation. Light in August is included because many critics have viewed it as Faulkner's first and most important pronouncement on

the subject of organized religion. The last of the three novels is Faulkner's only significant work to be published after his acceptance of the Nobel Prize, and for this reason it must be included if a connection between the work of the two periods is to be made. The story of "The Bear," as it is presented in revised form in Go Down Moses, has its place in the attempt at re-evaluation because it presents the central theme in a wilderness setting and thereby establishes the themes apart from social and economic considerations, but the themes are then applied to these considerations.

The important points from the Nobel Prize speech which will be shown to exist in the above mentioned works may best be illustrated by the following excerpt from the speech:

. . . the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

He must learn them again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed--love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of the glands.



Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood alone and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure; that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory to his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

It may be seen from this quotation that Faulkner has placed primary importance upon a belief in two things: "the old universal truths," and the fact that man "has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." And it is also evident that Faulkner believes it is the writer's duty to demonstrate these qualities through the medium of his work.

Faulkner has chosen to illustrate the qualities to which he has attributed major importance through the development of two central themes: belief and understanding. These two themes may be equated with the two most important qualities mentioned in his speech. These are the qualities of enduring and prevailing. One may identify these themes as the belief in man's power to continue his existence and

his understanding of the heights which man may achieve in prevailing over himself. Faulkner demonstrates in his work that man, if he has a strong enough belief in something, will endure; but it is the quality of understanding which must be added or superimposed upon belief which will eventually make man prevail. The quality of belief raises man above the status of an animal, but it is the addition of understanding which raises man above himself and demonstrates his immortality by proof of soul.

Faulkner does not say in his work that all of man's belief is good, nor is its result always just; he does indicate, however, that belief is the quality which marks a man's actions as consequential. Even belief leavened with understanding does not necessarily imply justness or goodness, but it does make man significant. When man is able to understand that he is neither perfect nor damned, but has a responsibility for his actions and to his beliefs, he rises above himself and will, by his thoughts and actions, prevail.

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the themes of belief and understanding are central to the work of Faulkner as represented in the selected works listed above. It is natural that one theme will be more strongly felt in a single work, but both are implicit in the total effect of the work.



Because the basic assumption of this thesis is in opposition to the bulk of critical writing on the subject, the author has found it necessary to depend almost entirely upon the primary sources for support and has been able to use secondary sources primarily as statements which present opposing positions.

The usual themes of social criticism, the wilderness, the mythology of the South, have, for the most part, been by-passed in this paper as being means to an end, rather than ends in themselves. Although these traditional themes are present in Faulkner, it is the contention of this writer that they are techniques and settings for a more comprehensive view of man, rather than final statements in themselves.

Because the controlling idea of this thesis lies in the assumption that the central themes in Faulkner's work have not been affected by chronology, the arrangement of the works has not been dependent upon date of publication, but upon an attempt to present the ideas in a manner which will be most logical and understandable.

Each of the works under consideration in this thesis represents a different approach to the presentation of the themes central to Faulkner's work, but the method of analysis used will be similar for each. An attempt will be made to interpret each major character in each work to show how

Faulkner uses his characters to express his central themes. Greater space will be given to the interpretation of Light in August in order to establish the meaning and significance of terms to be used throughout the thesis.



## CHAPTER II

### LIGHT IN AUGUST

Light in August, considered by some critics to be Faulkner's greatest work, has been variously interpreted as social document of the new South, a tirade against conventional Christianity, and a delineation of redeeming innocence. While it is true that one may find all of these themes in the novel, it is also true that none of them may be applied to all of the characters and events in the novel. The social documentation theory would not explain the presence of the Reverend Gail Hightower or Old Doc Hines and his wife. The character of Miss Joanne Burden does not lend itself to the idea of a rejection of Christianity, and neither she nor Lucas Burch have any touch of redeeming innocence.

It would seem, then, that these themes are not so much central to the meaning of the book as they are means of establishing that which is of primary importance. For this reason, it may be well to explore the application of these interpretations to establish their relative importance and find a place for them in the overall themes of belief and understanding which this thesis will attempt to establish as central to the novel.

There is probably as little evidence in support of the theory of social documentation in Light in August as there is in any of Faulkner's work. There is no rage against the condition of any one class of society in the novel, nor is there any evidence that the novel's problems arise from the oppression of one class by another. The lack of overt mention of particular sociological problems does not completely rule out the sociological implications, but the point should be made that the social problems are legacies of the region's past, as they are in the bulk of Faulkner's creation; and the problems are reacted to not by typical members of particular segments of society, but by individuals with the strength and weaknesses found only in the single character.

It is Faulkner's great reliance upon the past which has seemed to mislead some critics in their view of his work. Although Faulkner does place much emphasis on the past, he uses it as a means to an end; he finds in the past all of the general background for creating a Southern myth, as the myth is used by an author such as James Joyce. But it is the action of the individual within the bounds of the myth that is Faulkner's primary object.

Again, the theme of redeeming innocence finds little application beyond the characters of Lena Grove and Byron Bunch. While it is true that these two seemingly innocent



characters can be viewed as the basis for a faith in man, it is not their innocence alone which brings them into focus; nor are they contrasted with the lack of innocence in the other characters in the novel. In fact, a stronger case can be made for the concept that it is the loss of innocence and the resulting awareness of evil which are their major contributions to the meaning of the novel.

It is certain that Faulkner was much concerned with the theme of Christianity in Light in August. The Christian symbolism found throughout the novel could not be accidental. This symbolism is best seen in the character of Joe Christmas, whose fate was really determined on Christmas Day, and in whose life one may find several parallels to the life of Christ. But most of the leading characters in the novel symbolize some facet of the story of Christ, but this symbolism does not readily adapt itself to a theory of a rejection of traditional or conventional Christianity as such. But if the symbols of Christianity are present, they must be examined in order to discover the method by which the author uses the story and beliefs of Christ to develop the central theme of the novel.

Although most readers of Light in August will immediately find some sort of Christian symbolism at work, this symbolism remains at worst obscure, and at best, ambiguous, in a single reading. A more intensive study becomes

necessary if one is to follow its tangled threads and establish its significance to Faulkner's central theme.

The themes Faulkner has made central to his work are belief and understanding, and these themes are expressed in Light in August. It is not the person or idea presented symbolically which is important in the novel; it is the presence or absence of these qualities in the persons or ideas which decides their worth. One could sum up Faulkner's argument by saying that it is not important whether Christ was a Jew or a half-breed American, but it is important that he had a strong belief and a great understanding which he demonstrated through his actions.

The symbolism in Light in August is ambiguous, but the very ambiguity adds to the complexity of meaning in the novel. As one critic has said, "We believed in the reality of Christmas and then in his symbolic value, feeling that more was suggested than was easily apparent."<sup>1</sup> But the critic does not apply this significant fact in interpreting the novel. This suggestion of something beyond what is actually stated is the very thing that lends importance to the symbolism and makes a more complete understanding of it necessary. Yet Faulkner's use of Christian symbols has been

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Malin, William Faulkner: An Interpretation (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 70.

passed over by some critics as being unimportant. For example, one critic says:

Although it seems indisputable to me that some sort of connection was in Faulkner's mind at one point or another, I cannot believe that there is much profit... in exploring the matter very deeply or in using it to interpret the novel.<sup>2</sup>

The critic made the statement on the grounds that Faulkner's symbolism is not consistent throughout the novel, and he explains the lack by saying "Faulkner is a writer who is not always the master of his own consciousness.... He is inclined to forget his symbolism or, perhaps more often, to give it up as a poor idea or a bad job."<sup>3</sup> It is somewhat difficult to believe that a writer who has created and populated an entire county and has outlined its history for several hundred years would be forced to give up his symbolic meaning as "a bad job." A much more logical assumption would be that Faulkner has purposefully made the symbolism somewhat ambiguous because he was dealing not with the conventional concepts of Christianity, but with symbols which would suggest the relationship between Christianity and his central themes of belief and understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Rovere, Introduction to Light in August (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.



The symbolism in Light in August, though often ambiguous and sometimes totally obscure, is present in all parts of the novel. It is not a blanket laid over the entire work; it is more nearly comparable to the central fibre of the entire piece. It appears and disappears, but it is never completely absent.

The greatest difficulty in following the symbolism is caused by a shifting of symbolic value from one character to another as the novel progresses. And it is this shifting which causes the characters to stand out as individuals in their own time and place, rather than as symbols fixed in the past.

The central figure of Joe Christmas remains as the symbol of Christ or the ideals of Christ, but the characters with which he is associated take on various symbolic meanings depending on their proximity to the central figure. The Virgin Mother is first introduced in the character of Lena Grove, but as the early life of Christmas is outlined, it is Milly, the real mother of Christmas, who is most literally the Virgin. The father is never actually seen by anyone other than her, and his physical existence is demonstrated only by the fathering of the child. Later in the novel, Lena Grove again takes the place of the Virgin. Mrs. Hines, the grandmother of Christmas, sees Lena Grove as her daughter and sees Lena's child as her own grandson. At

the same time she believes that Christmas, her real grandson, is the father of the child. All of which puts Christmas in the position of being the father, the son, and, by juxtaposition with the original father, the unseen spirit or Holy Ghost. And it is Christmas, symbolic of everything in man beyond his physical being, who is contrasted by Grimm, the symbol of disbelief, in an attempt to destroy his power. Grimm succeeds in destroying Christmas' physical power, but fails to destroy his belief and what he stands for because Grimm cannot comprehend the significance of that belief.

In addition to the symbolic representations of Christ and the Virgin, one also finds representations of Judas, the Old Testament God, and the Roman militarist in the persons of Lucas Burch, the Reverend Hightower and Percy Grimm respectively. The symbolism of Burch and Grimm is constant and not of major importance; they function only as catalysts in the movement of the story, not as central characters. They represent the earth, the physical background against which the philosophical positions are displayed. But in Hightower one again finds a changing and ambiguous symbol. Hightower is the "God" to whom man first directs his faith, but after the arrival of Christmas and the characters brought into focus by his presence, Hightower loses his control over any other significant characters in the novel.

Although Hightower's direct influence seems to wane, he is the one to whom Christmas turns when the rest of mankind is about to crucify him. Hightower's first thoughts would indicate that he is about to forsake his symbolic son as is shown when he refuses to testify that Christmas was with him on the night of the murder.

'It's not because I cant, dont dare to,' he says; 'it's because I wont! I wont! do you hear?' . . . Suddenly his voice rises higher yet. 'Get out!' he screams. 'Get out of my house! Get out of my house!'<sup>4</sup>

Although this passage would seem to show that Hightower completely refutes Christmas (Christmas finally turns to him as his last source of aid), Hightower supports him by saying: "'Men! Listen to me. He was here that night. He was with me the night of the murder. I swear to God--'"<sup>5</sup> The effect of this statement upon the hearers must have had an impact similar to that when "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom"<sup>6</sup> when Christ died on the cross. Although stated in completely different terms, the reaction of Grimm, as a product of the South, shows the great impact of Hightower's statement upon him:

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<sup>4</sup> William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 342.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 406.

<sup>6</sup> St. Mark 15:38.



'Jesus Christ!' Grimm cried, his young voice clear and outraged like that of a young priest. 'Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellow-bellied son of a bitch?'

The shock displayed by Grimm, although expressed differently from that which was probably felt by the observers of Christ's death, had a similar origin: the overpowering recognition of the power of the action of a single individual.

Here again one finds that the emphasis is on the importance of actions of the individual as he is presented in the novel, rather than of the person or idea of which the character is symbolic. The symbolism adds scope to the meaning of the novel and permits a broader interpretation of the themes in the novel.

After seeing that Christian symbolism is present throughout the novel and not just a vague connection with it, one might be inclined to look upon Light in August as simply an unusual retelling of the story of the life of Christ. But the fact remains that the characters, although having symbolic value, first and last impress themselves upon the reader as individuals in a particular society. These individuals have the strengths and weaknesses not of the persons or ideas which they represent, but of men and

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7 Light in August, p. 406.

women. They are examples of man's powers and faults, not of his philosophy.

The symbols, though readily observed, are admittedly not used in a conventional pattern. Christ is symbolically portrayed by an illegitimate half-breed. The Virgin is the mother, in both representations, of an illegitimate son. And the Old Testament God displays power by bringing the new son into the world. These are not by any means typical representations of Biblical characters.

But the themes presented in Light in August are the themes extolled by Christ before they were formalized by theologians. In this much the novel might be said to be a rejection of conventional Christianity; or as one critic has written, "The real issue was that of a society which was devoutly, almost rigidly religious in name, and had in truth renounced the inner spirit of all religions."<sup>8</sup> These two opposing views, then, may easily be taken toward the novel. First, a rejection of religion; and second, a condemnation of a society which has rejected true religion. But the very fact that these opposing views come so readily to the reader causes one to be very cautious in accepting either.

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<sup>8</sup> Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns from Rebellion to Conformity (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. 99.

A more logical interpretation of Light in August would be that Faulkner has used the symbols of Christianity to outline his own theme without making any final comment upon the values of the single religion of Christianity. This interpretation would also do much to explain the ambiguity of the symbolism in the novel. If Faulkner were taking a stand for or against Christianity, he would be more apt to use clearly defined symbols and apply constant values to them; but the shifting of symbolism and changing of values of the symbolic characters would indicate that Faulkner is concerned with man's qualities as he exists now, and not with his recorded philosophical and theological positions.

The remainder of this chapter will be given over to an explanation of Light in August in terms of the themes which have been set forth as central to Faulkner's work. The characters will no longer be referred to in their symbolic positions, but as they exist as individuals in a society and as they and their actions illustrate the themes under consideration.

Faulkner seems to have created contrasting characters who, because of the relative presence of belief and understanding, demonstrate the power of the essential qualities. To be of any importance in the novel a character must have some quality of belief or understanding; and by extension, it is only those members of humanity, those who have some



part of one of these qualities, who are of importance to mankind. Faulkner does not say that the belief must be in something which is traditionally considered to be good, nor must the understanding be complete to bring the character into prominence. In this way Faulkner permits the presence of both good and evil, and he is better able to contrast the two.

In Light in August each major character has a belief in something, and the contribution of the character depends upon the strength and object of that belief. Doc Hines has a strong belief in the presence of evil in the world; Lena Grove has an equal belief in good. Lucas Burch has a belief in his own comfort; Byron Burch in the welfare and importance of others. Joanna Burden has a false belief in her purpose in life and an undercurrent of belief in personal satisfaction; Mrs. Hines has first a belief in the ideals of her husband and later in the continuation of mankind. By this pairing of characters one is able to see the contrasting positions which Faulkner has created. In each case the belief has enabled the character to make some contribution to the movement of the story, and an examination of the final position of each character will permit the reader to evaluate the strength and justification of the belief. The positions of Hightower and Christmas have not been defined because they are archetypes and because the quality of

understanding becomes much more important in these two characters.

The belief of Doc Hines in the eternal and powerful presence of evil is apparent in all of his speech. Although he conceives of himself as the instrument of God, it is his belief in the presence of evil that motivates all of his actions. The following passage indicates reliance of Doc Hines upon evil as his single source of motivation:

The old man interrupts again, with that startling suddenness. But he does not shout this time; his voice now is calm and logical as Byron's own. He talks clearly, just a little jerkily: "Yes. Old Doc Hines took him. God give old Doc Hines his chance and so old Doc Hines give God His chance too. So out of the mouths of little children God used his will. The children hollering Nigger! Nigger! at him in the hearing of God and man both, showing God's will. And old Doc Hines said to God, 'But that aint enough. Them children call one another worse than nigger,' and God said, 'You wait and you watch, because I aint got the time to waste neither with this world's sluttishness and bitchery. I have put the mark on him and now I am going to put the knowledge. And I have set you there to watch and guard My will. It will be yours to tend to it and oversee.'" His voice ceases; his tone drops not at all. His voice just stops, exactly like when a needle is lifted from a phonograph record by the hand of someone who is not listening to the record.<sup>9</sup>

Hines has nothing to go on when his tirade against evil is ended. He believes in evil, but he has no understanding of what evil is or of the fact that he may also contain evil in himself. He cannot accept both good and evil in a single

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9 Light in August, p. 325.



individual. As a result of his misdirected belief and total lack of understanding, Hines is seen at the end of the novel as a defeated and psychologically impotent character.

In direct contrast to Doc Hines, Lena Grove has an unbounded faith in the essential goodness of man. This belief is noted both in her own speech and actions and in the thought of others with whom she comes in contact. Lena tells Mrs. Armstid, who by helping her is actually providing further grounds for her belief, of her trust in Lucas Burch:

"I dont reckon I need any promise from Lucas. It just happened unfortunate so, that he had to go away. His plans just never worked out right for him to come back for me like he aimed to. I reckon me and him didn't need to make word promises."<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Armstid's acceptance of her belief is shown when he thinks, "She'll walk the public country without shame because she knows that folks, menfolks, will take care of her."<sup>11</sup>

One might argue that Lena's belief is proved to be unrealistic because of Lucas' desertion, but it is the belief that carries her forward; and when she gains more understanding of the evil existing in man along with good, she continues to advance and becomes a more positive force in her world. By the last chapter of the novel one finds Lena

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

Grove continuing to expand her sphere of influence and being the primary influence on the life of Byron Bunch.

Lucas Burch may be said to have a belief in what he does for his own gain. He is always sure that his actions, for his own comfort or advantage, are just and necessary. He cannot understand that the wants and rights of others might be contrary to that which he believes to be best. Burch makes only two significant actions in the novel: the seduction of Lena Grove and the betrayal of Joe Christmas. Both actions are the result of his belief in his own pleasure. The seduction of Lena is a gratification of the senses without any understanding of the responsibility of the action, and the betrayal of Christmas is motivated entirely by his desire for the one thousand dollar reward for the capture of the murderer of Joanna Burden. Burch views this last action as a positive assertion of his belief in his own comfort, and he is quite sure that he must guard against a similar policy in all others. Burch's belief is shown in his words to the sheriff when he says, "I know who done it and when I get my reward, I'll tell."<sup>12</sup> The fact that others are aware of Burch's belief is demonstrated when the sheriff says, "I reckon as long as that thousand dollars is where he can smell it, you couldn't run him away from

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

here."<sup>13</sup> But the falseness of the belief is also recognized in the sheriff's answer to a deputy who says, "'If he dont get that thousand dollars, I reckon he will just die.' 'I reckon he wont,' the sheriff says."<sup>14</sup>

At the novel's end Burch runs away from Jefferson, symbolically pursued by Lena, and fails to collect his reward. But he retains his belief and has no more understanding than he had in the beginning. It is therefore, probable, that Burch will continue to act significantly but will continue to fail.

Byron Bunch is the complete opposite of Lucas Burch because he believes in good for others rather than his own. But Bunch's belief is at first untempered with understanding, nor is it put into any usable form. In fact, Bunch becomes a significant individual only after centering his belief on Lena Grove. He had believed in Hightower to some extent, but he could not really understand Hightower. After he becomes aware of Lena, whom he could understand, his actions become meaningful and positive. This change in belief may be equated with man's change from belief in the Old Testament God to belief in the more understandable teachings of the New Testament. The basic belief remains

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13 Ibid., p. 258.

14 Ibid., p. 259.



the same, but man is more able to conceive of the New Testament God as being a part of his world.

The real strength of Byron Bunch comes from the understanding with which he leavens his belief. He is able to see that all is not as it should be in the world even while he believes in the presence of good. This understanding is illustrated early in the novel when Bunch reflects on the rumors which have spread about Hightower:

But Byron believed that even the ones who said this did not believe it. He believed that the town had had the habit of saying things about the disgraced minister which they did not believe themselves for too long a time to break themselves of it. 'Because always,' he thinks, 'when anything gets to be a habit, it always gets to be a good distance away from the truth and fact.'<sup>15</sup>

The last statement is a significant comment on belief which is no longer present in spirit, but only in habit of outward appearance. The power, or lack of power, of this type of belief will be further commented upon in connection with Joanna Burden and Hightower.

At first thought, Joanna Burden appears to be of major importance to the movement and action of the characters in Light in August. But if one closely examines her character and contribution to the novel, one will find that she is not so important as an individual as she is as a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

symbol. It is not the fact that Joanna Burden is a psychologically warped character which makes her important; it is that she represents to Christmas everything against which he has rebelled. Joanna Burden professes a belief in the equality of the race which Christmas feels has left a taint in his blood, but she must continually remind herself of the belief or lose it. Her belief is inherited; it has become a belief of habit of the same nature as the beliefs which Byron Bunch understands to be false. Her attempts to act upon the principles of this false belief are never carried out, and they result in her murder by Joe Christmas. Underlying the false belief which she professes is an actual belief in the physical and mental excitement she finds in Christmas. Her failure to understand the falseness of her professed belief and accept that which is really a part of her character causes her to become the symbol of all such false beliefs in the eyes of Christmas. It is not the actions of Joanna Burden which culminate in the destruction; it is the lack of any valid belief which may be designated as the cause.

The belief of Mrs. Hines falls into two parts as does that of Joanna Burden, but whereas Miss Burden did not discard the habit of a false belief and admit her real belief, Mrs. Hines takes the step which brings her into focus as a significant individual.

The first belief of Mrs. Hines is the conventional belief of a wife in her husband. She accepts Doc Hines' belief in the overpowering presence of evil and his belief that he was an agent of God. This point is illustrated when she says:

"And so sometimes I would think how the devil had conquered God. Because we found out Milly was going to have a child and Eupheus started out to find a doctor that would fix it. I believed that he would find one, and sometimes I thought it would be better so . . ."16

After Milly's death in childbirth, Mrs. Hines loses her belief in Doc Hines and her value as an active individual is completely lost. With her loss of belief she loses her capability of meaningful action. Her complete withdrawal from significance may be seen in the passage in which two men bring Doc Hines home after he attacked Christmas.

They knew that it was his wife because she came out of the house where he was known to live. One of the men, though a resident of the town, had never seen her before.17

When Mrs. Hines realizes that Joe Christmas is her grandson, she gains a new belief. Now her belief is in the persistence and continuation of mankind. From this point forward she again becomes an individual capable of action. Although her belief is strangely intermingled with the idea that

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16 Ibid., p. 330.

17 Ibid., p. 303.



Lena's child is her grandson, her belief is strong enough to enable her to lead Doc Hines whose belief was proved false by the actions of Christmas.

The above contrasts in characters indicate two facets of Faulkner's use of the theme of belief. First, the character must have a belief in something to be capable of significant action; and second, the object of the belief determines the significance and moral quality of the action.

The result of the addition of the quality of understanding to the quality of belief in a character may best be illustrated by an examination of Joe Christmas and the Reverend Gail Hightower. Both of these characters are central to an intelligent interpretation of Light in August.

Joe Christmas is different from the characters examined thus far in that the source of his belief is given in the novel. Although the original source of Joanna Burden's professed belief is given, there is no satisfactory explanation of the reasons for her loss of the real spirit of that belief. Christmas gains his belief from his grandfather, Doc Hines, and his foster father, McEachern. Hines instilled the belief of evil in him as symbolized by his Negro blood, and McEachern acted as though the presence of evil in Christmas were an accepted fact. McEachern shows this feeling when he is first told the name of the child,

and the effect of McEachern's comment upon Christmas is also shown:

There was one other thing which he was not to remember until later, when memory no longer accepted his (McEachern's) face, accepted the surface of remembering. They were in the matron's office; he standing motionless, not looking at the stranger's eyes which he could feel upon him, waiting for the stranger to say what his eyes were thinking. Then it came: "Christmas. A heathenish name. Sacrilege. I will change that."<sup>18</sup>

McEachern's actions during the time that Christmas is growing up in his home continue to illustrate his belief in the inherent evil in Christmas until Christmas is finally forced to accept the belief. When McEachern gives him a calf, Christmas reacts thus: "Then he looked at it, and it was again too fast and too complete to be thinking: That is not a gift. It is not even a promise: it is a threat . . ."<sup>19</sup> The above statement shows the depth of Christmas' belief in his own evil. He does not even need to think of the reason for the gift; his belief tells him. In Faulkner's words, "Memory believes before knowing remember."<sup>20</sup>

It is his firm belief in his own evil that causes Christmas to act. The belief is so strong that it gives him a feeling of exultation when he commits an act which

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 104.



demonstrates the evil working in him. This feeling is illustrated by Faulkner when he describes Christmas leaving the dance hall after killing McEachern. Christmas is riding away on horseback:

The youth upon its back rode lightly, balanced lightly, leaning well forward, exulting perhaps at that moment as Faustus had, of having put behind now at once and for all the Shall Not, of being free at last of honor and law.

He cried aloud, "I have done it! I have done it! I told them I would!"<sup>21</sup>

Faulkner pictures this exultation again as he describes the pleasure Christmas gains from sleeping with a white woman and then telling her that he is part Negro. The belief is so strong that Christmas is tremendously shocked when he finds that some white women will accept the evil (that is, Negro blood) without any revulsion. He is so shocked to learn that fact that "he was sick after that. He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with black skin."<sup>22</sup>

Christmas could not understand that there were others who partook of and accepted evil as readily as he. He had no understanding of the way in which evil and good could exist in the same world. His actions might be compared with

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

those of a fanatical religious devotee who attempts to purge himself of all evil. The difference was that Christmas attempted to purge himself of all good. Seeing his white blood as good and his Negro blood as evil, he attempted to become all evil.

He would do it deliberately . . . trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark inscrutable thinking and being of Negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial.<sup>23</sup>

It is not until he meets Joanna Burden that Christmas begins to understand his own belief. Until that time he carries his belief as naturally as his body and does not examine its validity. After Christmas fails to destroy Joanna by seducing her and forcing her to partake of the evil which he sees in himself, he begins to understand that his belief has no real validity. Christmas is able to realize that the belief which Joanna Burden professes is false and that she is essentially more evil than he, when he attempts to seduce her in order to force her to partake of his evil and finds that he is actually the one seduced. Then the belief of "knowing" begins to replace the belief of "memory." His belief in his own evil is the factor that enables Christmas to murder Joanna as a retribution for her

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 197.



destruction of that very belief, but his understanding is the factor that enables him to go to Mottstown and permit himself to be captured. He becomes aware of and believes in his understanding as he enters Mottstown in the seat of a slowly moving wagon. Faulkner shows the acceptance of understanding and its implications in the passage which describes Christmas entering Mottstown:

During the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled farther than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. 'And yet I have been farther in these seven days than in all thirty years,' he thinks. 'But I have never got outside the circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo,' he thinks quietly, sitting on the seat, with planted on the dashboard before him the shoes, the black shoes smelling of Negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves.<sup>24</sup>

From this point on Christmas is able to understand and accept the existence of evil and good together. It is this understanding which enables Christmas to make one final futile gesture in which he demonstrates that his earlier belief has been overcome by his present understanding. And it is the same understanding which will not permit him to use the weapon which he carries to protect himself from Percy Grimm.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 296-97.



The Reverend Gail Hightower is another character in Light in August who exhibits a strong belief which is leavened with understanding during the course of the novel. Hightower gains his belief in a manner similar to that in which Christmas gained his. He was greatly influenced by the stories of his grandfather's actions during the Civil War. His belief was that he had ceased to exist even before he was born and therefore had no responsibility to the world in which he found himself. Hightower saw himself as a part of the grandfather, for whom he was named, who died in that all important night in a raid on Jefferson. He expresses his belief thus:

'Its no wonder that I had no father and that I died one night twenty years before I saw the light. And that my only salvation must be to return to the place to die where my life had already ceased before it began.'<sup>25</sup>

This belief causes him to enter a seminary because he believes that the church would understand him; believes "that if ever truth could walk naked without shame or fear, it would be in the seminary."<sup>26</sup> But he realizes that the seminary has no use for his belief. This does not force him to re-examine his belief, but causes him to think that "there are more things in heaven and earth too than

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 418.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 419.

truth."<sup>27</sup> Hightower's belief carries him through the seminary, and it is his reason for marrying the daughter of one of the ministers. He marries because the girl can help him return to Jefferson to find his "only salvation." He is so involved with his single belief that he fails his congregation in Jefferson, but even his failure there is significant because he does not forego his belief, but attempts to explain it to others.

It is also Hightower's belief in his non-existence in his contemporary world that drives his wife to suicide. This belief with its accompanying refutation of responsibility, shuts him off from his wife and forces her to turn to other men. The shock of his wife's suicide is not sufficient to shake him from his belief. His wife showed no evidence of a stronger belief which could make her actions significant to him. And the members of the congregation have nothing other than the belief of habit, which Byron Bunch identified, and this type of belief cannot touch Hightower. He is unaffected by the rumors they spread about him; he does not even react to the beating he suffers when he refuses to leave town. His belief carries him through these meaningless actions until he triumphs over the others by sheer strength of will.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 420.

It is the arrival of Lena Grove that first begins to show an effect on Hightower. Byron Bunch had been close to Hightower for a number of years, but his belief was not yet strong enough to influence Hightower. In fact, Hightower had some measure of control over Bunch. It is the combination of belief in Bunch and Lena and their mutual understanding that brings about the first change in Hightower. When Hightower realizes that the difficult position in which Bunch finds himself as he attempts to aid Lena has no weakening effect on Bunch's belief, he begins to understand the impossibility of his position as a man beyond his society. Hightower does not yield easily to this new influence. He attempts to fight against it, but he finds it to be too powerful. His belief in his ability to disassociate himself from his present world is shown by the selection of a book to read after failing to persuade Bunch to change his course of action.

One wall of the study is lined with books. He pauses before them, seeking, until he finds the one he wants. It is Tennyson. It is dogeared. He has had it ever since the seminary.

• • •  
 Soon the fine galloping language, the gutless swooning full of sapless trees and dehydrated lusts begins to swim smooth and swift and peaceful.

• • •  
 It is like listening in a cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language which he does not even need to understand.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Ibid., p. 278.



But after the birth of Lena's child, at which he acts as a midwife, he begins to understand the futility of his earlier belief. He is made to understand that he must be responsible to others and accept the evil and good as a part of his own life.

The birth of the child brings the final quality of understanding into Hightower's consciousness. His attitude changes; his actions are now positive, and he no longer chooses Tennyson for escape.

He goes to the study. He moves like a man with a purpose now, who for twenty-five years has been doing nothing at all between the time to wake and the time to sleep again. Neither is the book which he now chooses the Tennyson: this time also he chooses food for a man. It is Henry IV.<sup>29</sup>

This final understanding enables Hightower to make the most significant gesture of his entire life. It is an understanding of the power of belief and a compassion for those who cannot achieve the aims of their belief which permits Hightower to attempt to save Christmas from his executioners by telling them that Christmas had been with him the night of the murder.

In the light of the foregoing explanations Faulkner's use of the themes of belief and understanding become evident. Faulkner employs these themes to demonstrate the

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29 Ibid., p. 355.

power of man when he rises above himself. Although Christmas and Hightower die, their actions have a significance far beyond the mere act of living. It is this possibility of significant action upon which Faulkner rests his belief "that man will not merely endure: he will prevail."

CHAPTER III

THE SOUND AND THE FURY

"(Life) is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,"<sup>1</sup> wrote William Shakespeare. William Faulkner demonstrated the truth of the statement and illustrated the reasons for its validity in The Sound and The Fury. Faulkner's attempt to show the reasons for the insignificance of life will be explored in this chapter. It has been demonstrated in the previous chapter that Faulkner makes a delineation between significant and insignificant action and that the themes of belief and understanding are essential to the quality and importance of each action.

In The Sound and The Fury Faulkner outlines a scene from which belief and understanding have virtually been eliminated, and because of this the lives pictured are "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

The first character whose thoughts, or, perhaps more accurately, impressions are presented in the novel is the thirty-three-year-old idiot, Benjy. Benjy hasn't mind enough for belief much less understanding. For this reason he is the culminating symbol of the total absence of the qualities which are essential to significant action. A

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<sup>1</sup> Macbeth, Act V, scene V.



careful study of Benjy's character will indicate the beginnings of a symbolic representation of Christ. Even his age, thirty-three, is the age of Christ at the Crucifixion. Mrs. Compson is definitely no more than the woman who gave birth to Benjy. Dilsey is much more nearly the true mother; she is symbolically the Virgin Mother. Although Benjy hasn't the intelligence to believe, he is capable of love: "(Benjy) loved three things: the pasture . . . his sister Candace, firelight."<sup>2</sup> But of the three things, the two which are subject to the actions of man are taken from him. He is, in effect, forsaken as was Christ on the cross. But he cannot understand his loss and therefore is not capable of any significant action to regain his loss except to moan when he hears golfers shout "caddy," his sister's name. Because of Benjy's incapacity for belief and understanding, Faulkner does no more than suggest that he is symbolic of Christ. Faulkner seems to say that this would be the net result of Christ's life if he had not had belief and understanding.

Slightly more significant is the character of Quentin III because of his more fully developed mind. But even Quentin III cannot be too important because of his

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<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, Appendix to The Sound and The Fury (New York: The New American Library, 1959), p. 15.

preoccupation with himself and his own ideas of honor. He has some sort of belief in the honor of womanhood, but he has no understanding of its real meaning. Quentin III loves that which he knows is doomed, but he does not understand that the doomed love is invalid and can lead nowhere.

Faulkner shows Quentin's love in this passage:

Quentin III. Who loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously (he knew well) only temporarily supported . . . Who loved not the idea of incest which he would not commit but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment . . . But who loved death above all, who loved only death.<sup>3</sup>

Quentin's belief in these doomed concepts permits him to attempt action, but even when he acts, his actions have no real significance to the rest of the family. First, he asserts that he is the father of Caddy's illegitimate child. His assertion is rejected by his father, and his action in this instance is of no importance. Second, he commits suicide after waiting to complete the spring term at Harvard. Even this action is not significant to anyone beyond himself. He has no valid belief and no understanding, and his actions are therefore insignificant.

One critic writes of the importance of Quentin to the primary theme of the novel:

It could well be that in Quentin one finds the central issue of the novel.

The loss of his sister's honor and his own half-conscious desire for incest with her tend to dominate



his mind and to dominate the novel--to have something to do with the decay of the Compson family.<sup>4</sup>

While this statement places more importance on Quentin than the novel allows him, there are points which favor such a stand. Quentin does display signs of the presence of some belief, however invalid. He is:

the twentieth-century hero, the man of sensibility studying his own identity searching for significance in a world that is not sure it believes in any. Nor is Quentin sure himself that he believes in any . . . .<sup>5</sup>

The idea of Quentin's central position breaks down when he is placed opposite the other characters in the novel. Although he is a man searching for a belief, he is not the best example of a lack of belief; that position falls to Benjy. And he is certainly not the character in which the strength of belief is best displayed.

A more suitable view of Quentin's position in the novel would be one of importance equal to that of Benjy and Jason. He is not a symbol of a philosophical position; he is an example of a single phase of the book's central theme.

The third example Faulkner presents of the decaying force of the lack of belief and understanding is Jason Compson. Jason is the complete materialist. He believes in himself and his own self-righteousness; in him there is no

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<sup>4</sup> William Van O'Connor, The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 40.



trace of the sense of honor and family pride evinced by his ancestors. It is on the strength of his belief that Jason continues to move and affect the lives of those around him. The entire third section is given over to an illustration of Jason's belief and its effect upon the rest of the family. Jason's belief permits him to overcome only those who have no belief or less belief. He overcomes Benjy by having him castrated and sending him to an institution; he overcomes his mother who has divorced herself from all reality, and he outlasts Quentin III who is too vague in his belief to be important. But Jason is overcome in turn by Caddy, Dilsey and his niece, Quentin, because of their stronger beliefs.

Caddy believes in her own fate. Faulkner demonstrates this belief when he writes, "Candace. Doomed and knew it, accepted doom without either seeking or fleeing it."<sup>6</sup> Her belief is strong enough to have a final profound effect on Jason. It is actually her belief in her own fate which forces her to allow Jason to swindle her, and it is the loss of the swindled money which most affects Jason. The loss of his own savings can be partially extirpated by naming the crime, but the loss of money which is not legally his cannot be reconciled.

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6 Appendix to The Sound and The Fury, p. 9.

Quentin, the niece, is partly the instrument and partly the operator by which a stronger belief overcomes Jason. She is first the victim of Jason's self-righteousness and last the means by which he is overcome.

But it is Dilsey, with her firm belief in the old codes of honor and decency, who most obviously overcomes Jason. He is afraid of her because of her instinctive knowledge of his thoughts. It is only Dilsey who has any effect on Jason's life until the loss of the money.

Thus far the only theme considered has been the belief or its lack in the novel. It has been shown how Faulkner demonstrates the decaying quality of a lack of belief. But the quality which is more positively demonstrated in The Sound and The Fury is that of understanding. Again Benjy is the best example of the lack of an essential quality. Although Benjy does have the ability to love which might partake of the quality of belief, he has absolutely no understanding. He is able to exist upon his minute particle of belief, but he can never be a contribution to man's ability to prevail. This lack of understanding is also shown by the other characters of the novel. There is no character in the novel who demonstrates an understanding of the possibility of both good and evil being present in himself or another.



Faulkner does no more than suggest an allegory of the life of Christ in the novel because there is nothing more of the qualities which Christ exemplified to carry the allusion further. In the same way Faulkner does no more than suggest the presence of good and evil in a single character. There can be no dramatic presentation of good and evil when the characters are not aware of their own capacities for good and evil--do not understand the difference.

Although Quentin III has a greater capability to comprehend than Benjy, he does not have much more understanding of his own actions. He can vocalize his thoughts, but he cannot understand their significance. His failure to understand his own actions is best shown in the passage in which he recalls the conversation with his father about his assertion of incest:

and i you dont believe i am serious and he i think you are too serious to give me any cause for alarm you wouldnt have felt driven to the expedient of telling me you have committed incest otherwise and i i wasnt lying and he you wanted to sublimate a piece of human folly into a horror and then exorcise it with truth and i it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity and then the sound of it would be as though it had never been and he did you try to make her do it and i i was afraid to i was afraid she might and then it wouldnt have done any good but if i could tell you we did it would have been so and the others wouldnt be so and then the world would roar away  
 . . . .



Quentin tells his father he has committed incest with Caddy because he cannot understand that she has not upheld his idea of honor. He cannot understand that his lie was told to protect his belief in honor, rather than to protect Caddy. He is unable to understand that Caddy is not what he wishes her to be, nor can he see that another's belief can be as important as his although it may not correspond with his.

Mrs. Compson is able to display a belief of habit, similar to that of Hightower's congregation as shown in Chapter I; but she has no realization or understanding of the importance of other people. She does not understand that her belief is not real, nor does she understand that her wishes are not the wishes of others. She has a sort of pride in her inability to understand the evil in others, and she fails to realize that her actions may have results as evil as the results of the actions of others. Her complete lack of understanding is emphasized when she comments on the story Jason tells of lending his car to another man who wanted to follow his sister's husband. Although Jason is actually referring to his own pursuit of Quentin, Mrs. Compson displays her complete failure to understand her granddaughter:

"I suppose woman who stay shut up like I do have no idea what goes on in this town . . . My life has been so different from that. Thank God I don't know about

such wickedness. I don't even want to know about it. I'm not like most people."<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. Compson is similar to Quentin III to the extent that she is unable to understand how another's wishes might be different from hers. Because she does not understand her granddaughter, she feels that Quentin has been left as a judgment upon her by Caddy and Quentin III, whom she also could not understand. Just as she could not understand her granddaughter's motives, neither could she understand those of the other two:

"They deliberately shut me out of their lives. It was always her and Quentin. They were always conspiring against me. Against you too . . . They always looked on you and me as outsiders."<sup>9</sup>

Jason is Faulkner's third objective presentation of the lack of understanding just as he is the third presentation of the lack of belief. Jason's lack of understanding is not as obvious as that of Benjy and Quentin III, but, then, his lack of belief also is not as complete. Although Jason's only belief is in his own self-righteousness, he can not understand that others might also be righteous, that there were others that he could trust as well as himself. Whereas Quentin III could not understand the presence of what he considered to be evil in others, Jason cannot understand the

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8 Ibid., p. 184.

9 Ibid., p. 185.



presence of good in others. Nor can Jason see the contradictions by which he lives. He condemns Caddy's promiscuity, but he uses her money to pay a Memphis prostitute whom he considers to be a fine woman. Another contradiction which Jason fails to recognize is in his business life. He continually berates those who are doing the same thing as he, but who are more successful. He does not understand that he wishes to gain the same end as they. While Jason is waiting for the market reports to come in so that he can hear how well his cotton speculation is doing, he speaks to a salesman:

"There's nothing to it . . . Cotton is a speculator's crop. They fill the farmer full of hot air and get him to raise a big crop for them to whipsaw on the market, to trim the suckers with. Do you think the farmer gets anything out of it except a red neck and a hump in his back? You think the man who sweats to put it into the ground gets a red cent more than a bare living... Let him make a big crop and it wont be worth picking; let him make a small crop and it wont be enough to gin. And what for? so a bunch of damn eastern Jews . . . .<sup>10</sup>

All of this is said by a man who makes his entire living from the labor of farmers and is trying to gain more from speculation. Faulkner follows Jason's tirade against cotton speculation with Jason's explanation of the way in which he is able to beat the market. Without understanding it or believing it, Jason has become a prime example of what

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 140.



Faulkner would term Snopesism. Jason's failure to understand the contradictions in his own character is emphasized time after time. Each time Jason speaks, his actions refute his words.

Therefore, although Jason will outlast the rest of the Compsons because of his belief in something, his lack of understanding makes him unable to prevail. He has no namesake; he will not leave any significant mark upon man's condition.

Of all the characters in The Sound and The Fury, Dilsey is the most probable candidate for the title of heroine. It is her belief and the actions which this belief makes possible which are most significant. But even Dilsey does not have the last essential quality of understanding. She believes in the honor of the old code which Quentin III attempts to uphold, and she believes in God, but most of all she believes in the Compson family. As strong as her belief is, it does not permit her to understand what has happened to the Compson family. She knows that the family is decaying, but she cannot understand why. Faulkner illustrates this lack of understanding when he gives a picture of Dilsey after the Easter sermon which she has heard with Benjy:

In the midst of the voices and the hands Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze. Dilsey sat bolt upright beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the recollected Lamb.

... Dilsey made no sound, her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses, walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even.

"Whyn't you quit dat mammy?" Fronny said.

"I've seed de first en de last," Dilsey said . . .  
 "I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin."<sup>11</sup>

Dilsey's tears are caused by the contradiction of her two beliefs. She believes in God and mercy, but this same God has permitted the downfall of her other source of belief, the Compsons. She cannot understand how these two seemingly opposite circumstances can exist.

Dilsey's actions have significance until she is made aware of her lack of understanding. One finds that Dilsey loses the power of significant action after that time. The appendix to The Sound and The Fury which Faulkner wrote as an explanation of its meaning bears out this loss of significance in two areas. The first is her loss of influence upon Jason:

(Jason) was able to free himself forever not only from his idiot brother but from the Negro woman too. . . He was emancipated now. He was free. 'In 1865,' he would say, 'Abe Lincoln freed the niggers from the Compsons. In 1933, Jason Compson freed the Compsons from the niggers.'<sup>12</sup>

The second is her refusal to recognize the picture of Caddy with a German officer, which is shown to her by the librarian.

The librarian says:

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 208-9.

<sup>12</sup> Appendix to The Sound and The Fury, p. 13.



'Dont you know what he (Jason) said? When he realized she was in danger, he said it was her, even if I hadn't had a picture to show him. But as soon as he realized that somebody, anybody, even just me, wanted to save her, would try to save her, he said it wasn't. But it is! Look at it!'

and Dilsey replies:

'Look at my eyes. How can I see that picture?'

'My eyes aint any good any more. I cant see it.'

and later the librarian understands:

Yes she thought, crying quietly that was it she didn't want to see it know whether it was Caddy or not. . . .<sup>13</sup>

This lack of understanding is the reason for Faulkner's closing line in the explanatory appendix. There is not great enough significance in action without understanding to enable man to prevail over himself, but belief alone is enough to permit him to say, "Dilsey. They endured."<sup>14</sup>

The preceding interpretation of The Sound and The Fury, in addition to adding illumination to the central themes of Faulkner's work, may aid the reader in understanding the order in which the four parts of the novel are presented. Part one, Benjy's impressions, shows a total lack of belief and understanding and therefore can signify nothing. Part two, Quentin's story, presents a nebulous belief with no understanding; part three, a strong but invalid belief with

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 17.



no understanding; and part four, a strong and valid belief, but still lacking understanding. As the complexity of the relationship between the central themes and significance increases, the method of presentation becomes less complex. This would indicate that Faulkner felt the subtleness of his theme increase and countered it with increasingly simple presentation.

## CHAPTER IV

### A FABLE

The theme of A Fable may be partially understood when one is made aware of the slight difference in the article used in the title from the article critics sometimes apply to the title.<sup>1</sup> One sometimes hears or reads of Faulkner's novel, "The Fable." But Faulkner is not writing of The fable, he wrote of A fable. He combined two stories of man's existence to form a fable which includes man's natural existence and its growth into an ideal existence. Emphasis on such a seemingly minor point may appear superfluous, but it serves to call attention to the difference between that which Faulkner might have done and that which he did. Although there are many similarities between the events in A Fable and the life of Christ, the novel is not a retelling of the life of Christ. It is the story of a man who, because of his strength of belief and understanding, resembles Christ in the effect of his action. Therefore, one must view A Fable not as the story of Christ's life, but as the story of a man and his strength of belief and understanding. On this level A Fable stands out as Faulkner's most pointed statement of his central theme.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns from Rebellion to Conformity, p. 105.

The novel actually contains two symbolic stories or fables. The first is the story of the Corporal, who is the Christ symbol, and the mutiny of a French regiment during the First World War; the second is the story of the racehorse which the old Negro minister tells the Runner. Both stories tell of the power of man's belief and ability to endure, but the two stories are contrasted because of the quality of understanding.

The entire section involving the theft and running of the racehorse is the story of the strength of man's belief. In this fragment the belief is reduced to the lowest denomination: the need for an animal to fulfill its destiny. The Deputy, who pursued the horse for months, puts this need into words:

'You could have surrendered the horse at any time and it could have stayed alive, but that was not it: not just to keep it alive, any more for the few thousands or the few hundred thousands that people will always be convinced you won on it.'

'The reason was so that it could run, keep on running, keep on losing races at least, finish races at least even if it did have to run them on three legs, did run them on three legs because it was a giant and didn't need even three legs to run them on but only one with a hoof at the end to qualify as a horse.'<sup>2</sup>

Belief in the need of a horse to fulfill the destiny for which man has bred it and to which it is directed by

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<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, A Fable (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 162-63.



man's belief would seem to be as pure a form of belief as possible short of religion. It is primitive man's belief in nature. It is the belief of the Groom and the Negro minister in the horse that gives significance to their actions. Everything they do is done to keep the horse running, and their actions are soon known to everyone in the section of the county in which the horse appears. The strength of the belief of these two is so great that the people in the towns in which they appear are affected by it to the extent that they attempt to stall the pursuers. Even the "leader of the pursuit" is finally so affected by the strength of the belief that he attempts to stop all pursuit "because at last he had finally seen the truth even if it did take him a year."<sup>3</sup> The deputy realizes that nothing can stop the horse but death and those who believe in it will endure as long as it lives.

The belief in the horse is not completely good, but it is strong enough to link good and evil together. It links:

the aged Negro man of God, and the foul-mouthed white one to whom to grant the status of man was merely to accept Darkness' emissary in the stead of its actual prince and master.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

Therefore, in the racehorse episode one finds three symbolic representations: the Negro minister is equated with good; the groom is equated with evil, and the horse is the natural and indomitable spirit of man. The first two symbols are combined to perpetuate the third, and one sees man as both good and evil. Within this spirit of man both good and evil must partake of the other. The Groom becomes a Baptist and devotes himself to the horse; the minister accepts the gambling and theft of the Groom in order to serve the horse. And although the belief in the horse is not evil in itself, it has the effect of contaminating those who come into contact with it. The theft gives rise to pursuit which in turn contaminates those who are touched by it. The money won by the horse and the money offered as a reward for its return become all important to anyone not actually with the horse. The power of evil is greater than the horse; it is "always ahead of them . . . disseminating the poison faster than they advanced."<sup>5</sup> The poison is the money which man sees in place of the real belief.

In the racehorse episode, then, one finds a perversion of good. It is almost the Melvillian concept of fair seeming evil. The belief is so powerful that it becomes distorted into false belief. The only characters who are

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 161.



not affected by the evil caused by the horse are those who are able to understand the real basis for the belief: the old Negro, the Deputy, and the Runner to whom the story is told. The Groom is evil himself and therefore cannot be contaminated, nor does he understand the belief. He is no more aware of what he does than is the horse. It is not, then, the horse which is important; it is the power of belief in the horse which continues to affect the lives of men. It is the story of belief, not in the horse but simply belief, which causes the Runner to speak after hearing the episode:

'Maybe what I need is to have to meet somebody. To believe. Not in anything: just to believe. To enter that room down there, not to escape from anything but to escape into something, to flee mankind for a little while. Not even to look at the banner because some of them probably cant even read it, but just to sit in the same room for a while with that affirmation, that promise, that hope. If I only could. You only could. Anybody only could.'<sup>6</sup>

The Runner is aware that the bulk of mankind is not aware of the true source of belief, and he feels that he must separate himself from the materialistic habits of most men in order to find real belief.

Contrasted with the episode of the horse is the story of the Corporal and his belief. Although the racehorse episode may be viewed as a fair seeming evil, the story of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 203.



the Corporal is an evil seeming fairness. While the Corporal's belief is the greatest example of real good, the results of the belief seem to be evil. Those people who are not aware of the belief can see the Corporal only as the cause of the probable death of an entire regiment. They cannot see that the regiment is to be lost in order to save the rest of the world.

There are two groups in the novel who are not deluded into viewing the Corporal's good as evil. The first group consists of those who are aware of the belief and understand the need for it. They are the twelve followers and the Deputy, and they may be equated with the old Negro and the Deputy of the racehorse episode. The second group consists of the leaders and perpetuators of the war. They are the Generalissimo and the nationalistic forces and they may be equated with the groom and the pursuers of the horse.

In the symbolic meaning of the novel the Generalissimo becomes the personification of all evil, just as the Groom is "Darkness' emissary" in the race horse episode. It is the task of the Generalissimo and his aides, the other military leaders, to destroy the Corporal and the belief for which he stands. To accomplish this it is necessary for the military leaders to keep the privates from understanding their own power as men. When man becomes aware of the power he holds through belief, he is able to control his fate.

It is this awareness against which the leaders struggle.

The Runner is aware of this when he says:

'the purpose of war is to end war. We've known that for six thousand years. The trouble was, it took us six thousand years to learn how to do it. For six thousand years we labored under the delusion that the only way to stop a war was to get together more regiments and battalions than the enemy could . . . We were wrong, because yesterday morning, by simply declining to make an attack, one single French regiment stopped us all.'<sup>7</sup>

But it is also demonstrated that man's actions have no lasting significance until he understands the power his belief gives him. When man understands, he can overcome his fate which is symbolized by the authority which causes and rules war. The Runner realizes that "even ruthless and all-powerful and unchallengeable Authority would be impotent before that massed unresisting undemanding passivity."<sup>8</sup>

The struggle of belief against Authority or evil to gain understanding is brought out in the Runner's attempt to convince the groom of the need for understanding, but on an even wider scale it is the struggle between the Corporal and the Generalissimo.

The power of the Corporal's belief is great enough to bring the entire war to a halt; and the Generalissimo knows that if the men in the ranks realize it is in their power to halt the war, he will be defeated. In order to

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 68.



keep the men from understanding the power of their belief, the Generalissimo stages a fake barrage with disarmed shells. The Generalissimo, then, must use all of his force in an attempt to defeat the belief of a single man. Even the forces of the Generalissimo are not enough to stop the movement started by the Corporal; he must call in the aid of the enemy general to help him. Finally, the Generalissimo realizes that his only chance for complete victory lies in overcoming the Corporal himself. He knows that killing the Corporal will win the battle for the time, but it will not defeat the belief for which the Corporal stands. He also realizes that he will ultimately defeat himself. If the Generalissimo permits the Corporal to live, the Corporal will succeed in stopping the war which is the Generalissimo's life; but if he kills the Corporal, he will make him a martyr and thereby perpetuate the ideas for which the Corporal stands. Therefore, the Generalissimo knows that the Corporal will defeat him; he also knows that making a martyr of the Corporal will disseminate his beliefs more rapidly than it would be possible for the Corporal to do if he lives. His awareness of this fact is shown in his words to the Quartermaster General:

'If he (the Corporal) does, if he accepts his life, keeps his life, he will have abrogated his own gesture and martyrdom. If I give him his life tonight, I myself could render null and void what you call hope and the



dream of his sacrifice. By destroying his life tomorrow morning, I will establish forever that he didn't even live in vain, let alone die so.<sup>9</sup>

The Generalissimo, therefore, attempts to defeat the Corporal by offering him those things which the Generalissimo himself considers to be important. The scene in which the Generalissimo attempts to defeat the Corporal is symbolic of the story of Christ's temptation by Satan. The Generalissimo offers everything within his power, and the Corporal rejects it:

'I will take Polchek (the betrayer) tomorrow, execute him with rote and fanfare; you will not only have your revenge and discharge the vengeance of the rest of those three thousand whom he betrayed, you will repossess the opprobrium from all that voice down there which cannot even go to bed because of the frantic need to anathemise you. Give me Polchek, and take freedom.'

'There are still ten,' the corporal said.<sup>10</sup>

Having failed with his first offer, the Generalissimo displays the knowledge of the tenuousness of his position and makes a second offer:

'Oh yes, I can destroy you tomorrow morning and save us--for the time. For the length of my life, in fact. But only for the time. And if I must, I will. . . Take the highest of all the ecstasies: compassion, pity; the orgasm of forgiving him who barely escaped doing you a mortal hurt--that glue, that catalyst which your philosophers have trained you to believe holds the earth together. Take the earth.'

'There are still ten,' the corporal said.<sup>11</sup>

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9 *Ibid.*, p. 332.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 346.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 347.

The Generalissimo has failed a second time, but he is now ready to offer the greatest thing over which he has control. He is the instrument of that Authority which the Runner identified earlier--that power against which man must continually struggle, which man himself has created, and the defeat of which is his most significant action. And the Generalissimo, acting as the instrument of Authority, offers the greatest temptation that man has created in the name of Authority, the chance to renounce his own ideals in order to keep life:

'Then take that bird (life). Recant, confess, say you were wrong; that what you led was--led? you led nothing; you simply participated--an attack which failed to advance. Take life from me; ask mercy and accept it. I can give it, even for a military failure. . . .'  
'There are still ten,' the corporal said.<sup>12</sup>

The Corporal's replies to the three temptations offered by the Generalissimo effectively demonstrate the depth and strength of the Corporal's belief and understanding. Even the Generalissimo must yield before it. One of the strongest arguments the Generalissimo uses in his attempt to defeat the Corporal is that one of the Corporal's followers had denied him three times since the group had been placed under arrest. The last time the man made a denial by saying that he was not actually one of the group, and he was then

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 352-53.



released from the prison. After the Generalissimo has failed to tempt the Corporal and they have returned to the prison, the man who had denied the Corporal was trying to get back into prison. When he sees this exhibition of the power of the Corporal's strength, the Generalissimo says, "Forgive me, I didnt know what I was doing."<sup>13</sup>

One now observes that A Fable is told in two segments, one representing the strength of belief and the other the greater strength of belief plus understanding. But the two segments do not have the same meaning. The racehorse episode illustrates man's ability to endure. The Groom is a Jason Compson or a Lucas Burch; he can make significant actions as long as the object of his belief exists; his significance fades when that object ceases to be. The remainder of the novel illustrates the undefeatable strength of belief when it is combined with understanding. By means of these two statements of man's capabilities, Faulkner is able to set up dichotomies which may be interpreted in a number of ways. By placing the two positions in opposition with each other, one is able to see the range of philosophical matter covered in the novel. The racehorse episode may be equated with materialism, the physical world, belief, and enduring. The story of the Corporal may be equated with

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 356.



thought, the spiritual world, understanding, and prevailing. To realize on which side Faulkner takes his position, one need only compare the result and significance of the actions of the opposing sections. The racehorse episode is local and it ends with the death of the horse; the story of the Corporal is international and it continues after the death of the Corporal with his fated and unplanned resurrection. The accidental quality of the resurrection is a suggestion that the Corporal's ideals will not be allowed to remain buried. Those ideals will be resurrected again by man in spite of himself.

But Faulkner does not leave the question of his position to anything as easily overlooked as the scope of the two parts of the novel. He uses the characters in both sections to illustrate the relative strength of the arguments. Each character in the primary story of the Corporal has his counterpart in the episode of the horse. The Runner is equated with the Deputy; the Generalissimo with the Groom; the military powers with the pursuing forces; and the Quartermaster General with the Lawyer. The only characters Faulkner does not equate between the two segments are the Corporal and the old Negro; but even these two, having no other counterparts, may be partially equated with each other. An examination, then, of each character as he is

equated with his counterpart will show the care with which Faulkner has established and stated his position.

The Deputy and the Runner are both seekers after belief. The Deputy follows and attempts to catch the symbols of belief. He is changed when he is made aware of the power of belief. After gaining the belief symbolized by the horse, the Deputy attempts to aid the source of that belief and perpetuate it. He knows what the belief is, but he cannot understand that it will cease when the horse is dead. He acts, and his actions have significance to those with whom he comes in contact. But the significance of his actions disappears after he loses sight of the horse; his actions do not affect those who continue after the horse is gone. The Deputy's most significant action is his attempt to stop the owner from continuing the pursuit of the horse. The Deputy tells the owner:

'Give it up. You'll never catch him. . . I know about what you have spent so far. You know what the horse is now. I'll give you my check for that amount. I'll buy your ruined horse from you. Call it off.'<sup>14</sup>

The owner responds to the offer by having a check made out to the Deputy to be paid when the horse is caught. The Deputy has failed because he does not understand that it is not money that is important. The belief which the horse symbolizes cannot be purchased with money.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 159.



The Runner also seeks belief, and he also succeeds in gaining that belief. But in contrast, the Runner is able to understand the power and direction of the belief. Although he has never met the Corporal, the Runner is aware of what the belief symbolized by the Corporal can do. The Runner's awareness of this power is shown in this incomplete statement which he makes to the Negro minister:

'Dont you see? If all of us, the whole battalion, at least one battalion, one unit out of the whole line start it, to lead the way--leave the rifles and grenades and all behind us in the trench: simply climb bare-handed out over the parapet and through the wire and then just walk on barehanded, not with our hands up for surrender but just open to show that we had nothing to hurt, harm anyone; not running, stumbling: just walking forward like free men. . . .<sup>15</sup>

The Runner is willing to give up the guns and grenades which are the material resources of Authority. By this action the Runner demonstrates that his understanding surpasses that of the Deputy who was not able to see that Authority's money was not of real importance. This understanding enables him to defy Authority by leaving the trenches unarmed. Authority, acting through the command of the Generalissimo, attempts to destroy the Runner by laying down a barrage when he leads the movement from the trenches, but they succeed only in destroying a part of him, just as they succeed only in destroying the body of the Corporal.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 312.



The Groom and the Generalissimo are symbols of evil, but their strength is not equal. The Groom continues to act after the death of the horse, and he has great control over those around him. But the controlling force in his actions is completely material. He rejects the attempt of the Negro minister who tries to enlist his aid in the stopping of the war. In fact, he refuses to act in the final scene and is forced to leave the trenches in a display of belief he no longer maintains, and he is then killed. His actions never have true significance; it is the belief which he represents that controls those around him.

The Generalissimo is by nature of his position a significant figure. So great is his power to affect the lives of others that he yields only to the Corporal's belief. He even gains a momentary triumph when he kills the Corporal and continues the war. But he finally falls before the power of the understanding which the Corporal's disciple, the Runner, displays at the Generalissimo's funeral services. Although he too is destroyed, the Generalissimo has greater effect than does the groom. He is apparently the greater force of evil needed to outline a greater force of good.

The third pair of important characters in A Fable may be used as examples of spectators to the scenes which are played before them. The Lawyer is called upon by the Deputy to defend the Negro minister when he is captured.

But it is not the Lawyer who frees the Negro, it is the people who are affected by his tremendous belief. The Lawyer is aware of, and may even share in, the belief; but he does not understand it. He does not realize that it is the belief alone and not its source or its rewards which carries the old Negro on. Although the Deputy attempts to explain the belief, the Lawyer does not understand what he has heard. The Deputy's words to the Lawyer illustrate the gulf between the Lawyer's concept of the situation and the belief as it is:

'I said from the first that you didn't understand . . . that you did not believe me, even after I tried to tell you. I don't want to find him--them. I had my turn at bat, and struck out. You stay there. That's what you are for.'<sup>16</sup>

The Lawyer emerges, then, as being no more important than the check with which the Deputy attempted to stop the pursuit of the horse.

The old Quartermaster General also fails. He symbolizes Authority's goods, just as the Lawyer symbolizes Authority's money. The important difference between the two is that the Quartermaster General is able to understand his failure and attempts to redeem himself. He is aware that it was through him that the mock battle was accomplished, thus keeping man from understanding his own power. He

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 165.



states his part in the scheme in words which illustrate his understanding of his failure:

'We did it . . . A subterfuge not of ours to confuse and mislead the enemy nor of the enemy to confuse and mislead us, but of We to betray all, since all has had to repudiate us in simple defensive horror; no barrage by us or vice versa to prevent an enemy running over us with bayonets and hand grenades or vice versa, but a barrage by both of We to prevent naked and weaponless hand touching opposite naked and weaponless hand. We, you and I and our whole unregenerate and unregenerable kind; not only you and I and our tight close jealous unchallengeable hierarchy behind this wire and our opposite German one behind that one, but more, worse: our whole small repudiated and homeless species about the earth who not only no longer belong to man, but even to earth itself, since we have had to make this last base desperate cast in order to hold our last desperate and precarious place on it.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Quartermaster General understands how he has failed man and attempts to redeem himself by resigning his position, he is also aware how futile his small sacrifice, still being a sacrifice of goods, is when compared to the action of the Corporal.

These comparisons demonstrate that the racehorse episode is narrow in scope when compared to the story of the Corporal, but they also demonstrate that the latter is grounded in the principles of the former. The relationship between the two also illustrates Faulkner's emphasis upon the need for both belief and understanding. Although belief, as shown in the racehorse episode, is essential to man's

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17 Ibid., p. 327.



endurance, it is not of major significance until it has been directed by understanding, as shown by the Corporal's story.

It is in the character of the old Negro that one finds the most positive statement of Faulkner's emphasis on the need for both belief and understanding. During the racehorse episode, as told by the old Negro himself, he is not a sharply defined character. He is firm in his belief in the racehorse, but he does not display the understanding shown by the Corporal. Only after the death of the horse, when he is able to realize that it is the belief, not its source, which is important, does he begin to become a strongly significant character. He is of primary importance in the racehorse episode, as is shown by these words of the lawyer as he questions the Negro: "So he (the Groom) is the one who needs you . . . How can anyone with forty thousand dollars need you?"<sup>18</sup> But the Negro minister's actions do not take on any real significance until he learns of the Corporal and understands what power belief can have. He then realizes that he is of secondary importance--that the Corporal is primary. His actions assume a major significance only after his belief, engendered by the horse, is directed by the Corporal toward the power of man. Thus,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

belief, directed by understanding, enables the Negro to go to the front in an attempt to persuade the Groom to leave the trenches and meet the enemy without arms. The Groom has the belief, but it is undirected by understanding, and he does not leave the trench--he fails to act significantly.

One critic has written of A Fable, "The real subject is: are human beings worthy of supreme nobility?"<sup>19</sup> But it seems more probable to assume that Faulkner is saying that only human beings are capable of supreme sacrifice and, therefore, must be worthy.

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<sup>19</sup> Delmore Schwartz, "Faulkner's A Fable," Perspectives, X (Winter, 1955), p. 127.



## CHAPTER V

### THE BEAR

Because the action in "The Bear" is set primarily in the wilderness, one might assume that the values dealt with in the story would be outlined in distinct patterns of black and white, rather than the various shades of gray used in the novels presented in the three previous chapters. But the very complexity of the themes with which Faulkner works precludes the possibility of presenting these themes in sharply defined pictures.

The straightforward quality of narration in the first three sections of "The Bear" invites the critic to view the story as a simple chronology of the passing of the wilderness. Viewed in this way, the story would surely not be in keeping with the central themes of Faulkner as they have been presented in this thesis. (This view of "The Bear" is expressed by one critic who writes:

It is not too much to say, then, that Ike is the last priest of a dying cult, both doomed and avenged by an immanent principle in its source, the wilderness. As to the question of where man is to turn for spiritual renewal when the wilderness is gone, there seems to be no solution . . . This is a negative philosophy of history, a prophecy of decline. There is no basis in the wilderness stories for the apparently optimistic belief reflected in Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech that man will "endure" and "prevail."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Otis B. Wheeler, "Faulkner's Wilderness," American Literature, XXXI (May, 1959), p. 134.



This interpretation of "The Bear" may be compared to an interpretation of the story of Christ as being a chronicle of man's perpetual baseness, which it obviously is not.

In order to realize the significance of "The Bear" and recognize the presence of Faulkner's central themes of belief and understanding in the story, one must be aware of the symbolic value of each major character in the story. Old Ben, the bear, is the symbol of nature, but he is more than nature alone: he is nature after it is transformed and partaken of by man. In this respect Old Ben is similar to the racehorse in A Fable; he has no real significance until he has become a part of man's consciousness. Old Ben, as nature, is that quality in man against which he must struggle and from which he gains his power. Ike is aware of this power before he meets it:

It (the bear) loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big . . . . It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Ike can believe in Old Ben even before he sees him, but he does not understand what Old Ben is. (At the beginning of the story Ike is the uninitiated--the man with belief, but not understanding. Ike does not suddenly come

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<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, Go Down, Moses (New York: Random House, 1942), "The Bear," p. 193.



to an understanding of the meaning of Old Ben; he learns gradually from Sam, the woods and a small mongrel dog. Each of these symbols teaches him something. (His awareness begins when he goes into the woods to look for Old Ben. Sam Fathers tells Ike that he must prove his ability to stand alone if he wishes to see the bear:)

“You aint looked right yet,” Sam said.

(Ike) stopped. For a moment he didn't answer. Then he said peacefully, in a peaceful rushing burst, as when a boy's miniature dam in a little brook gives way: “All right. Yes. But how? I went to the bayou. I even found the log again. I--”

“It's the gun,” Sam said . . . . The gun, the boy thought. The gun. “You will have to choose,” Sam said.<sup>3</sup>

(This is the beginning of Ike's understanding. He realizes that it is neither the bear nor the killing of the bear which is important; it is the spirit of belief in the capabilities of the individual which Old Ben symbolizes.)

Ike's realization that he must believe is demonstrated when he finally relinquishes all ties with aids which keep him from complete independence:

It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. He removed the linked chain of the one and the looped thong of the other from his overalls and hung them on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and entered it.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Ibid., p. 206.

4 Ibid., p. 208.



Ike is rewarded for his belief in man's capability by a view of Old Ben, the source of that belief.) Ike has learned of the necessity for belief from Sam and has gained that belief from Old Ben.

Ike has moved beyond Sam Fathers because he is more aware of the scope of man's power than even Sam. His understanding of the possibilities of belief comes from the bear and a small mongrel dog. That Ike now has more understanding than Sam is shown in these lines:

If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and the squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the episode involving the small mongrel's attack on Old Ben that Ike first becomes aware of the dual nature of the power of belief. In this episode the power is symbolized by the undirected and unthinking courage of the small dog. The dog is brave, but its courage is ("that sort of courage which had long since stopped being bravery and had become foolhardiness."<sup>6</sup>)

The mongrel might well be compared to Boon Hogganbeck. Boon also has a foolhardy sort of courage which permits him

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5 Ibid., p. 210.

6 Ibid., p. 211.



to attack Old Ben with a knife. Although Boon kills the bear, he is unaware that the bear has made himself susceptible to death by breaking the code by which he lived. Boon does not understand that it is the evil quality in Old Ben which he is destroying. Boon believes in his own power, but he does not understand that it must be directed and controlled.

After the mongrel's attack on Old Ben, Sam says that someone will finally kill the bear, and Ike answers:

"I know it," the boy said. "That's why it must be one of us. So it won't be until the last day. When even he don't want it to last any longer."

So he should have hated and feared Lion.<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of the paragraph of which the above is the first line, Faulkner gives no explanation of the reasons for Ike's not hating Lion, the dog which would eventually run Old Ben to a finish. One suspects, then, that Ike's new awareness of the dual quality of the belief represented by the bear is the reason for Ike's lack of fear and hatred. The next series of events which Faulkner relates in the story is the killing of a colt by Old Ben. This killing is not in keeping with the code of the wilderness:

"It was Old Ben," Major de Spain said. "I'm disappointed in him. He has broken the rules. I didn't think he would have done that . . . . He broke the rules . . . ." <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 213-14.



This episode solidifies the idea of the duality of the belief. Old Ben, the source of the belief, is not all good; he also has some quality of evil. Ike's final stage of understanding is reached when he becomes aware of the coexistence of good and evil in man and his belief. )

The closing paragraph of the section in which Old Ben is almost killed illustrates Ike's understanding:

So he should have hated and feared Lion. Yet he did not. It seemed to him that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it or even just to see it too.<sup>9</sup>

( Ike now understands that the evil in Old Ben, his power to break the code, can be destroyed without destroying the belief which Old Ben symbolizes. Ike has now reached the stage of combined belief and understanding which will enable him to make significant actions. ) There is no further need for the guidance of Sam Fathers nor for the instruction from Old Ben. The two characters who remain are Boon, undirected belief; and Ike, belief directed by understanding.

The one major symbol which remains for examination is Lion. This "big, grave, sleepy-seeming dog which, as Sam

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9 Ibid., p. 226.



Fathers said, cared about no man and no thing<sup>10</sup> may be compared to Boon and equated with pure belief. Unlike Old Ben, who is the source of belief, Lion is the force itself. He may be directed toward anything or anyone, but he has no moral value himself. Lion is neither feared nor hated by Ike because Ike understands that he is a force which may be controlled. Faulkner describes the dog in these terms:

It lay on its side while Sam touched it, its head and the gaunted body, the dog lying motionless, the yellow eyes open. They were not fierce and there was nothing of petty malevolence in them, but a cold and almost impersonal malignance like some natural force.<sup>11</sup>

It is in section four that one finds the action for which Ike has been prepared in the earlier sections. Ike has come to understand that the evil forces which are a part of man may be destroyed only by significant action, and he realizes that the land which he is to inherit is tainted in the same way that Old Ben was tainted. Old Ben used his power, supreme in the woods, to break the code under which he was committed to live. In the same way, man broke the code under which he was committed to live when he divided the land into mine and thine:

He created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name, not to hold for himself and his descendants

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10 Ibid., p. 220.

11 Ibid., p. 218.



inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood . . . .<sup>12</sup>

But the taking of the land for his own private use was not the only thing that man had done wrong. Ike has found the record of evil being compounded when he studied the ledgers of the estate. Faulkner uses page after page of the ledgers to illustrate the strength of the evil which had stained the land. Ike says:

Dont you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black, lie under the curse?<sup>13</sup>

Ike realizes that he must repudiate the land in order to demonstrate the strength of the individual against evil. He knows that simple force and undirected belief are not enough to re-establish man in the position which is possible for him. Faulkner illustrates Ike's awareness of man's possibilities in this speech:

'He didn't hope He just waited because He had made them: not just because He had set them alive and in motion but because He had already worried with them so long: worried with them so long because He had seen how in individual cases they were capable of anything any height or depth remembered in mazed incomprehension out of Heaven where hell was created too so must admit them . . . .'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257. CP. "He's the head bear. He's the man." (p. 198)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.



It is this understanding which permits Ike to act with extreme significance and repudiate the land.

Faulkner uses the final section of the story to illustrate the difference between the undirected belief of Boon and the understanding of Ike. Ike returns to the woods to hunt with Boon. When he sees a rattlesnake in the path, Ike again displays the awareness which he developed in the bear hunt. He understands that his actions are good, but he is still susceptible to evil and recognizes evil as being a part of man:

it crawled and lurked: the old one, the ancient and accursed about the earth, fatal and solitary. . . .  
 "Chief," he said: "Grandfather."<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Boon is found sitting at the base of a tree full of squirrels, hammering at the barrel of his rifle. Boon says, "Get out of here! Dont touch them! Dont touch a one of them! They're mine!"<sup>16</sup> Boon is still touched by the curse of mine and thine, and his failure to understand leaves him in a position in which he cannot act with meaning.

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15 Ibid., pp. 329-30.

16 Ibid., p. 331.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The foregoing interpretations serve to establish one point above all others: William Faulkner was not simply stating a hypothetical creed for literature in his Nobel Prize speech. He was attempting to express in as few words as possible the ideals upon which he had based his better work before that time and upon which he attempted to base his work since 1950.

To Faulkner there are three conditions of human life. They are best described as the lack of belief, the presence of belief, and belief directed by understanding. The first of these three conditions might be better described as anti-life. This is the condition of the majority, it would seem. Faulkner presents this condition in the form of those characters in his work who exhibit few or none of the traits which set men apart from animals. In fact, these characters seem to be somewhat lower than animals. Although an animal will attempt to preserve its own kind, the characters who exhibit a total lack of belief and understanding seem to be trying to end man's existence. The second condition is that of a Snopes or a Jason Compson. It is the character who has a motivation and an instinct for self-preservation and self-perpetuation, but who is not aware of the possibilities of



man. These are the characters who will endure. The third condition is represented by those characters who have an understanding of man's capability to rise above himself and leave a significant mark on life. They are the High-towers and the Corporals. It is these characters who are able to lift themselves and make the meaningful gesture which raises man above animals. These will prevail.

Whether one is inclined to agree with Faulkner or not, one cannot easily discount Faulkner's belief in man's ability to be more than man.

It is sometimes said that Faulkner presents a very pessimistic view of man's condition. It would be difficult to refute such a statement because the bulk of Faulkner's characters are not examples of the power of man, but it is this latter case which refutes the implication carried by such a statement. It would not be difficult for a man living in a world of saints to be a saint, but it is extremely difficult for a man living with men to be more than a man.

Therefore, those characters in Faulkner's work who exhibit the qualifications necessary for rising above themselves are much more sharply outlined by the very fact that they rise so far. It is little for a Jason Compson, surrounded by Snopeses, to become a Snopes; but it is a great deal for a Joe Christmas, betrayed by the world, to display a supreme trust in another man.

This attempt to isolate the themes which are central to Faulkner's works is not intended as a final statement of Faulkner's position as a symbolic writer. Much of the above interpretations can be applied to particular areas of possible meaning in Faulkner's work. Faulkner makes specific comments on such subjects as society, religion, the Negro, and materialism; but it is necessary to identify those themes in Faulkner's work which will shed light on the meaning he gives to specific areas.

If the mark of a great writer is his ability to deal with "the universal truths," then the particular problems of a single time and area are not sufficient. Therefore, if William Faulkner's final position in the hierarchy of American literature is to be located, the critic must be able to verify the presence or absence of these truths in Faulkner's writing. It has been the object of this thesis to identify William Faulkner as one of the "pillars which help man to endure and prevail."



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