

THE NEGRO AS A GAUGE OF MORAL CHARACTER
AS SHOWN IN SELECTED FICTION OF
WILLIAM FAULKNER

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STATE

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Approved for the Major Department

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PREFACE

There are many facets of the Twentieth Century novel which merit more than reading for the sake of personal enjoyment or intellectual profit. The development of a humanistic viewpoint may well be one of the most important. The American novelists and their three-hundred-to-seven-hundred-page productions have assumed an attitude that theirs is a mission to perform: exposing corruption, interpreting history, revealing human strengths and weaknesses, or, by imposing the psychiatrist's jargon on simple, everyday events, turning them into catastrophic personal dilemmas. The novelists have become students of politics, ethics, and the professions, the recorders of history, the observers of society. Withal, each has had to become a craftsman and develop a literary style that is of some significance.

An investigation of the themes, the techniques, and the social attitudes of particular writers helps the reader sort out his own ideas and form opinions. This can best be done through the study of the entire body of the author's works, rather than of single writings. One piece of fiction, like one life cycle, cannot give more than a brief impression of what the novelist has to say by way of his art medium. If he has developed continuity by carrying his

themes or his characters through several generations and the varied circumstances in a region's development, and if he has a message or is trying to find one, he has built the proper vehicle. This gives both the writer and the reader the opportunity to see for themselves whether or not events are the result of good or evil intent; whether or not a sudden or protracted series of events will fashion the individual or group; or whether or not the whole thing must be determined by the Fates or the Furies, or what is, as it always has been and will be, the mystery of Man's being.

Therefore, a study of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County fiction should uncover the writer's and clarify the reader's opinions about certain major elements of the ability or inability of the human race to live in a high degree of contentment, productivity, and godliness.

The following study of one aspect of the relationship of the Negro and white races in a region of the Deep South has been chosen because it appears to relate directly to the problems that are being encountered daily by many people, whether they are in the North where integration is being outwardly accepted or guiltily rejected, or in the South where it is better understood. Impetus for the reading came through a graduate course in modern fiction taught by Dr. Green D. Wyrick, whose help and understanding during the writing of this thesis have been most valuable. Through

him a great many other students have, no doubt, been made aware of a new and fresh approach to the place of fiction in both the cultural and sociological outlook of this age in which it is so easy to broadcast opinion. For his excellent critical eye and his penetrating suggestions, I wish to express my appreciation.

Since Faulkner's personal attitude, his almost complete avoidance of public life, his frank approach to subjects often considered out of taste in print, and his distinctive literary style have all been apparent in the thirty years of his publishing, these subjects have come up for much well-defined comment by both professional and amateur critics. The symbolists have had a heyday reading into the saga meanings obvious as well as obscure. Mr. Faulkner has let the intellectuals delve, ask their questions, form their opinions, and praise or condemn him while he continues to hope, as he said in his speech of acceptance of the Nobel award, that he has only done something "to lift men's hearts."

While basing conclusions for this study almost entirely on primary sources, selected fiction of William Faulkner, I have done extensive reading in background material concerning the author's life and his place in American Letters, pertinent criticism in periodicals, and book reviews of the major works under consideration. In none of these, however, has a

definitive study of the Negro as a gauge of moral conduct for one man, for one community, or for wider areas been considered.

With this approach in mind, the investigation of the reasons why some of the Negroes of the South, both of the past and the present, as represented through William Faulkner's fiction, have endured or been destroyed, may help answer the questions that Anyman, regardless of race, color, or creed should ask himself: What must I do, how must I live, how shall I use my body, mind, and heart to be assured that my small place in Time shall be marked with my name? What must I do to endure and thus become a bright and memorable speck on the macrocosm?

This thesis will attempt to answer these questions.

CHAPTER I

FAULKNER RAISES SOME QUESTIONS

The American Negro is the product of an environment, training, and association with white civilization that today makes him represent a compromise between his innate savage traits, affecting his long years of enslavement and subsequent "freedom," and the changes that modern civilization is making on all peoples as attitudes narrow or broaden, and individuals rub shoulders with each other in what is not a very brave or certain present day outlook. As he is represented in today's American literature, he has only the very faintest trace of the chanting savage of the Congo, the tawny Moor of European drama, the sentimental hero of British anti-slavery verse, or the misty Ethiopian of the ancients.

The Negro has been known in literature for many ages and in many lands. Homer's age knew him well, as well as our own. Among the earliest Egyptian inscriptions are records of a black race which dwelt beyond the Nile. The ancient Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, the Spanish, French, German, and English-speaking nations have all made the Negro, in one way or another, the theme in song and story. Most of all, however, he has come to be associated with the New World, particularly the United States. Here, where for so long he labored in bondage and where has come his greatest opportunity for development and cultural growth, he has ever been an important and unsolved problem for society, and in recent decades, at least, a human type highly attractive

to writers of fiction. Neither sociologists nor novelists could afford to neglect him if they could.¹

Americans, particularly those of the South, have associated with the Negro as have no other whites. From this association they have no doubt received much: something from his carefree and irresponsible temperament, his irrepressible good humor, his musical talents, his unconscious philosophy that the present is all-important, and his spiritual viewpoint of complete surrender. There has been something, too, that the social and political ferment of his mere presence has created. Gradually he has affected American civilization, and gradually he has found himself changed. He has slowly won favor as a literary subject where "with the Indian and the frontiersman he shares the honor of being the most original and distinctive contribution which America has made to the world's small company of literary types."²

Here, in a 1926 study of the Negro in American literature, Dr. John Nelson poses a question: Will American novelists, dramatists, and poets ever rise to the challenge of portraying the Negro in his true role? He quotes Benjamin Brawley as declaring that "the Negro himself, as

¹John Herbert Nelson, The Negro in American Literature (Lawrence, Kansas: Department of Journalism Press, 1926), p. 27.

²Ibid., p. 14.

the irony of American civilization, is the supreme challenge to American literature. Like Banquo's ghost, he will not down."³

In Margaret Butcher's book, based on the late Alain Locke's materials, a Negro writer brings up to date the role that the Negro is playing, not only as a craftsman producing music, the dance, poetry, painting, drama, and literary and critical writing, but also as the subject for thoughtful action in the works of art by members of any race. Particularly as characters of fiction does she feel that they have made a definite impression.⁴ The ghosts of the dark figures which before 1920 were consistently stereotyped into the servile Uncle Toms, the simple, nature-wise Uncle Remuses, and the childlike, hoodlum-anticking Black Sambos have changed into portrayals of realistic human beings, sometimes strong, sometimes evil, sometimes pitiable, but at least with the dignity of membership in the human race, not puppets without feelings. This new and humanistic approach has often produced a stark and psychological turn, but as a whole, it appears to have had effect on or been the effect of the present decade's conscience-ridden, forthright, and

³Ibid., p. 136.

⁴Margaret Just Butcher, The Negro in American Culture (New York: New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1953), p. 133.

sometimes angry attempt to wipe out racial subjugation in both the North and the South.

Exactly what part fiction has played or could play in an effort to visualize human characteristics as paramount to racial prejudice is, at most, conjectural. But there is no question that a new interest in the Negro as a fictional hero or villain, with his simulated real-life situations, is going hand in hand with America's approach to a number-one problem. The "ghosts" have done their walking and their talking and haven't been downed because problems of personal struggle and accomplishment, as well as of delinquency and fate-decreed defeatism, have all found outlets in Twentieth Century fiction. It has appeared to be a challenge to portray the Negro character in his true role as an individual, and to have accorded him the nobility of a human being able to win or lose in his fight with or against circumstances as he finds or makes them.

While this challenge has been accepted by many writers in many individual pieces of fiction, it has been best met by William Faulkner's portrayal of several generations of Negro characters set against similar generations of white protagonists, showing up their inter-dependencies and setting a pattern for the measuring of enduring qualities in individuals and social groups. In the last thirty years, Faulkner has portrayed the Negro with a force that has

justified the very considerable attention it has elicited. He has faced the problems of the blacks and whites on his home ground, and has incorporated the Negro into regional fiction with both artistry and meaning.

Malcolm Cowley says that in writing about the South Faulkner has

performed a labor of imagination that has not been equaled in our time, and a double labor: first, to invent a Mississippi county that was like a mythical kingdom but was complete in all its details; second, to make his history of Yoknapatawpha County stand as a parable or legend of the Deep South.⁵

Since 1920, Percy Boynton has observed, the South has talked and written about itself fluently:

Sergeant York, Muscle Shoals, the oil fields, Ben Tillman and Tom Heflin, the boll-weevil, Coca Cola, Duke University, the Florida winter resorts, the T.V.A., the Negro migrations, Wendell Wilkie, Huey Long and the share-croppers, soil erosion, and the differential freight rates have all furnished matter for researchers, novelists, and speculative social philosophers.⁶

Added to this in the last decade would be the Bowl games, Cape Canaveral, Harry Golden and his Carolina Israelite, the Supreme Court's decisions, the Little Rock crisis, Negro-white violence and subsequent convictions by Negro-white juries, the Earl Long fiasco, and the quadrennial threat

⁵Malcolm Cowley (ed.), The Portable Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 2.

⁶Percy Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 91.

of a split in the Democratic Party, all subjects indigenous to the South.

In race relationships it is obvious that something is the matter, though there is no agreement as to cause or cure; that the malady is no deeper seated in the South than corresponding problems are elsewhere; and that a cure

if one be found, will come from patient living and the human adjustments that take time, rather than from inspired schemes imposed by even the most benevolent Doers of Good or Economic Planners endowed with the powers to crack down on the sluggard or the obstructionist.⁷

The past has not been easy to put behind, and constantly crops up when least expected. Some of today's spokesmen for the South say that most of the region's troubles are due to the Civil War; others say that they were coming to a focus before 1863; still others are sure that the lament for the "Golden Age" and the paternalistic system screened off the real problems. It appears that Faulkner, through his fictionalized reporting, feels that the source is even farther back; that it stems from the time when the first Indian lost out in his first encounters with the white intruders; that the enslaver is more at fault than the enslaved; and that only the individuals who have the ability to attain their full stature can survive, can endure, can prevail.

⁷Ibid., p. 92.

Faulkner's technique in showing the great variations and the similarities in racial reactions is developed through a series of genealogical relationships in their corresponding environments. He rarely strays from Yoknapatawpha County, and when he does it is only because his characters escape momentarily but never break their ties with the magnetic homeland. The imaginary county has 15,611 inhabitants--6,298 whites and 9,319 Negroes, scattered over 2400 square miles--and Faulkner has made himself the sole owner, proprietor, surveyor, and mapper of the area. The nine books and more than thirty stories are concerned in part, at least, with the area and its people: landowners, sharecroppers, honest business men, housewives, brokers, senators, poor white trash, murderers, horse thieves, perverts, idiots. They are children, old people, and the in-betweens; they have the innate dignity of the Sartoris, DeSpain, or Compson inheritances, the base instincts of the Snopeses, or the backwoods stamina of the Bundrens; they rebel or acquiesce; and they are all, as Faulkner seems to want to say, touched with the "finger of doom" because of the past that lives within each one, whether he clings to it, denies it, or ignores it.

The stories cover a time span of more than two hundred and fifty years, from the time when old Ikkemotubbe became the deposed Indian king because the white man enslaved

him, to 1945 or thereabouts in a hazy era that the reader can scarcely identify as more than "the present." Jefferson is the county seat with its storekeepers, mechanics, professional men and the usual urban distribution of residential and segregated areas. The rest of the region is rural, with sawmills, cotton gins, a few plantation houses (relics of a colorful age Faulkner does not stress), farm houses, and shacks; and the county is criss-crossed with dirt roads, the railroad, the highway to Memphis, creeks, and imaginary boundary lines; there are sand hills, pastures, swamps, and woods. The people are simple, educated, generous, self-centered, contented, or in rebellion against themselves or the times. This one county forms a cross section of both the old and the new South that the novelist uses to display the whole gamut of human emotions that emerge in members of the three races, Negro, white, and Indian, in their succeeding generations. "Although the pattern is presented in terms of a single Mississippi county," says Malcolm Cowley, "it can be extended to the Deep South as a whole; and Faulkner always seems conscious of a wider application."⁸

The following outline shows Faulkner's methodical use of the genealogical lines that interweave the old Indian inhabitants of the primitive area, the white Compson line

⁸Cowley, op. cit., p. 9.

that traces its lineage back to a runaway Scotch freeman, and the Negro slave family who are the personal servants.

First, there is Ikkemotubbe, the regal old Chickasaw chief, witty and wise, who began to see the writing on the wall and anglicized his title, "d'Homme," meaning "The Man," to "Doom." His vast domain gradually slipped away from him until he traded his last square mile to Jason Compson I for a "small, lightwaisted but stronghocked mare,"⁹ and his people either trekked off to Oklahoma to land granted to them by (President) Jackson, the Great White Father, or stayed to live

not as warriors and hunters but as white men, as shiftless farmers or, here and there, the masters of what they too called plantations, and the owners of shiftless slaves, a little dirtier than the white man, a little lazier, a little crueller--until at last even the wild blood had vanished, to be seen only occasionally in the nose shape of a Negro on a cotton wagon or a white sawmill hand or trapper or locomotive engineer.¹⁰

Here is the brief, declining history of the first people on Yoknapatawpha County soil who did not endure because they became enslaved by their own weaknesses.

The Compson line was founded by Quentin MacLachan who fled from Scotland to Carolina after his king had lost his

⁹William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: Random House, 1946), p. 7.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

throne and who, at eighty, fled to Kentucky with his infant grandson, his son having vanished. Charles Stuart, the son, left for dead in a Georgia swamp, overtook his father and the boy in the wilderness four years later. From there, his school teaching and gambling occupations kept him alternating his activities until finally, fleeing by night, "running true to family tradition,"¹¹ he and his son escaped his co-plotters. It was this son, Jason Lycurgus, who rode up Natchez Trace in 1811 with two pistols and a fleet-footed horse and eventually became the owner of Compson's Mile, "the solid square mile of land which someday would be almost the center of the town of Jefferson."¹² There he built the Governor's House and founded a dynasty and became a slaveholder. He was "the last Compson who would not fail at anything he touched save longevity and suicide."¹³

The old Governor's son, Brigadier Jason Lycurgus Compson II, put the first mortgage on The Mile, was defeated intermittently by the encroaching Snopeses, and ended his days quietly in a river-bottom fishing camp.

In the next generation, Jason III, who was educated for the law, "sat all day long with a decanter of whiskey and a litter of dogeared Horaces and Livys and Catulluses, composing . . . satiric eulogies on both his living and

¹¹Ibid., p. 5.

¹²Ibid., p. 6.

¹³Ibid., p. 7.

dead fellowtownsmen."¹⁴ It was he "who sold the last of the property, except that fragment containing the house and the kitchengarden and the collapsing stables and one servant's cabin in which Dilsey's family lived,"¹⁵ for the ready money to provide a fine wedding for his daughter, Candace, and a year at Harvard for his son, Quentin. Two other children, the idiot Benjy and Jason IV, and his incompetent and ailing wife were the last remnants of the aristocratic Compsons. This last Jason was the sole survivor and brought the line to a decadent close in 1945 as his penurious, childless existence left nothing enduring, a thinning out of a once strong family line.

Here is a second racial strain that has obviously brought upon itself, through personal or spiritual weaknesses, a recession that matches in many ways that of the Indian.

Faulkner says little about the third race, the Negroes, who were originally imported as slaves. That they had endured almost intact as families and as a race is apparent proof that they had acquired or retained qualities that the other races had possessed at one time in great abundance, then lost. Throughout his writing Faulkner indicates that because of the white people the Negroes have

¹⁴Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁵Ibid.

faced additional problems, physiological, social, and economic.

The treatment of the Negro is one of the main facets of the Faulknerian theme, an integral part of his fiction. It is seen in the major characters in the novels such as Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury, Lucas Beauchamp in Intruder in the Dust, and Joe Christmas in Light in August. It is recognized in the symbolic characters of Sam Fathers in "The Bear" and Nancy Manningoe in Requiem for a Nun. It comes in the handling of short story characterizations such as Rider in "Pantaloons in Black," Butch Beauchamp and Aunt Mollie in "Go Down, Moses," Ringo in "The Retreat," the black slave of the Indian chief in "Delta Autumn," and the ever-present manservant in "A Rose for Emily." The Negro is seen through the eyes of white men or women like Miss Burden, Doc Hines, or Percy Grimm in Light in August; Wash, the Sutpens, and Miss Rosa in Absalom, Absalom!; Gavin Stevens, Chick, and Miss Habersham in Intruder in the Dust; the Compsons in The Sound and the Fury; Temple Drake in Requiem for a Nun; or the boy, Ike, in "The Bear." Faulkner uses the Negro as a factor in the struggle of the traditional against the modern. To him the Negro seems to symbolize Anyman, oppressed, whether his skin is dark or light. The treatment seems to show up the flaws and errors of the oppressors, whether they grind him under their heels deliberately or simply crush him by

misunderstanding and thoughtlessness. It is difficult to isolate any of Faulkner's characters without taking with them the hosts of relationships the races have had with each other. They seem not meant to be considered alone but in their racial interplay.

Some of these fictional Negroes and part-Negroes have enough stamina to withstand the situations they find themselves in or the circumstances which close about them. These endure. Men of any race might endure under similar trials. Others become so confused that they rebel and wreck their hopes of enduring. Men of all races have fallen by the way just as some of these Negro characters do. The test of endurance, as Faulkner defines it, appears to be on an individual basis; but the same test, the same evaluation, has universal overtones and can be applied as a measure of the enduring qualities of mankind.

In three popular novels, The Sound and the Fury, Intruder in the Dust, and Light in August, the major characters, Dilsey, Lucas Beauchamp, and Joe Christmas, exemplify three ways in which the individual, and by extension the race of mankind, may respond to a fate that has been decreed long before he had any control of it.

In The Sound and the Fury, the Negro woman, Dilsey, accepts unquestioningly a servile status assigned to her, but she has more dignity and compassion than does the decadent

society which physically supports her. She becomes the symbol of motherhood for all families, all races. Because she has the instinct to care for those who are in the image of God, whether their skins are light or dark or their minds well or sick, she has strength that all human beings must have in some degree in order to be able to live with and beyond themselves in time.

Lucas Beauchamp, the mulatto farmer in Intruder in the Dust, accepts the things he cannot change and does so in a proud and dignified relationship with himself as a man, while his chances for freedom from a murder accusation rest with members of the white race who make his problems theirs. Lucas represents more than one man and even more than the Negro race; he is Man, the Male, free and enduring because he knows himself and is proud.

Joe Christmas, the "lost man" of Light in August, believes he has mixed blood, and his whole life is a sort of rebellion against himself in his uncertainties. In his crucifixion at the hands of bestial white pursuers, he becomes the symbol of all victims of racial prejudice and misunderstanding. Physically, Joe Christmas does not endure, and he has never been free; but he, too, is Man, whose soul transcends his earthly degradation and suffering, both of which he could have escaped had he known how to endure and to be free.

These three novels and their Negro characters illustrate the basic Christian notions that all men are brothers; that freedom is not a matter of law; and that "courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past" are the props that will "help him endure and prevail."¹⁶ These memorable people answer the three-fold question that William Faulkner poses: What is endurance? Is endurance the same as freedom? How can any race, any individual endure?

¹⁶William Faulkner, "Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature," The Faulkner Reader (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 3.

CHAPTER II

WHAT IS ENDURANCE?

The quality of endurance is a precious one in William Faulkner's category of human attributes. The words "endure" and its antithesis, "doom," are two favorites of this author when he is taking a sociological view of mankind. In his Nobel speech in 1950 he expressed his belief that man will "not only endure; he will prevail," and that it is "the writer's duty to write about these things"¹ and so be a prop to help the individual or the group endure and thence prevail. A novelist must do this, obviously, by imparting enduring qualities to those characters with whom he has a high degree of understanding and sympathy, and for whom he wishes the reader to have similar feelings.

Dilsey, the Matriarch

In Faulkner's complex yet deft handling of the Negro character he has not made the purity of blood lines and the mixing of strains the basic reasons for doom or endurance, although they may be contributing factors. Rather, he has shown that there is dignity in mankind regardless of the intermingling of racial traits or appearances in the

¹Ibid.

the normalcy of her own family and the faults and frailties of her white folks with patience, pride, and spirit. She doesn't question the fate that gave her skin its dark color and her body an odor course and earthy, the fate that made her station in life one of servitude. Her philosophy is one of complete acceptance, and her religion is buoyant to her spirit. Her cabin, along with the dilapidated carriage house, is the remnant of the once great slave quarter area, and as familiar to the white Compson children as to her own. Neither family could do without the other. Dilsey is dependent on the Compsons for sustenance and a pitiable wage, and the white folks are dependent upon her for services which they had never been taught to perform for themselves. This inter-dependence that began in the Old Governor's day did not cease a generation or two afterward with an act of legislation or the battling to prove its legality. Its long history was not something to be shaken off quickly and completely as Jason IV found out: "In 1865 . . . Lincoln freed the niggers from the Compsons," but it was not until 1933 that he (Jason) "freed the Compsons from the niggers."³

The Sound and the Fury is technically a masterpiece in the handling of characterizations by means of various

³Ibid., p. 18.

viewpoints and time elements. It tells of the fall of the once proud and wealthy Compson family, but it does not do so in an orthodox time sequence. Actions of the present stimulate thoughts of the past, and the reader who bears up under the intricacies and the unpredictable, often vague references to events of other days, pieces together an extremely vivid portrayal of the fortunes of the closely knit family group which Faulkner uses to illustrate the sad state of decadence in an important segment of American society. The past is important to the white folks who escape into it because it seems so much better than the present. To the black folks, as represented by Dilsey, it is sad that the past is no more. The present is of equal importance and of immediate concern, and the future holds a promise of "de power and de glory" for those who have put their faith in a religion which gives satisfying spiritual strength.

Dilsey's own family never question her authority, her sharp words of discipline, or her practical observations, no matter what their age. Each one is experiencing touches of the "new freedom," but she makes great effort to instill in them all the basic principles upon which they can build satisfactory lives. Frony's sense of duty to her mother has brought her, with her little boy, back to Jefferson although she is not completely satisfied with the

limitations from which she had escaped for a while with her Pullman porter husband in "Saint Looey." Her ideas of dress and propriety are not always acceptable to Dilsey, who does not hesitate to make her opinions felt. On Easter Sunday morning the family went in solemn dignity to church services.

They walked along the street. Along its quiet length white people in bright groups moved churchward under the windy bells, walking now and then in the random and tentative sun. The wind was gusty, out of the southwest, chill and raw after the warm days. . . . Frony wore a dress of bright blue silk and a flowered hat. She was a thin woman, with a flat, pleasant face.

"You got six weeks' work right dar on yo back," Dilsey said. "Whut you gwine do ef hit rain?"

"Git wet, I reckon," Frony said. "I aint never stopped no rain yit."

"Mammy always talk about hit gwine rain," Luster said.

"Ef I dont worry about y'all, I dont know who is," Dilsey said. "Come on, we already late."⁴

Versh, the older son, lives at home too, but he has a job in town. He is subject to Dilsey's orders to substitute for old Roskus when he has the misery and can't milk the cows or drive the surrey. He is a steady boy and not the worry to Dilsey and Roskus that T. P. is. In his late teens, T. P. has acquired some of the flashiness that Memphis has brought about, and when out from under Dilsey's eyes he wears flamboyantly the "fine bright cheap intransigent clothes manufactured especially for him by the owners of

⁴Ibid., p. 305.

Chicago and New York sweat shops."⁵ He is the new "free nigger," but neither strong enough nor weak enough to break the family ties completely. He is a real worry to both Roskus and Dilsey, who fear this new freedom without being able to put it into words.

Grandson Luster is Dilsey's pride, however little she will admit it. She will take no impudence from him, will not countenance his laziness, and tries to keep him from learning new ideas from the low class whites who come through town with the travelling shows. She buys him a new straw hat for Easter, then cautions him soundly on its care. At fourteen she has made a man of him, "capable of the complete care and security of an idiot three times his size."⁶ Luster and Benjy Compson are companions, if the relationship between a grown man with a three-year-old mind and a lively young Negro boy can be dignified by that title. Luster has lived near Benjy all his life, and probably is as dependent upon Benjy for occupation as caretaker as the Compson family is on his ability to keep their idiot son out of sight and hearing. Luster knows when to turn the big hulk around and let him watch the dancing flames in the cookstove and so hush his bawling. He often threatens to "whup" him, knowing well that he would never lay a hand on

⁵Ibid., pp. 21-22. ⁶Ibid., p. 22.

him except in gentleness. The two make a striking picture on a Sunday afternoon, going along the square: Ben, a huge soft lump in the back seat of a dilapidated carriage, holding a wilted flower, his gaze empty and untroubled; Luster whipping the sorry white horse with a switch and saying as he spied a group of lounging Negroes, "Les show dem niggers how quality does, Benjy."⁷ Luster, like Dilsey, has many of the attributes that make a human being endure. He would not change places with the white folks if he could. "Aint got nothin against them. I goes my way and lets white folks go theirs,"⁸ he once said; and again, "Dese is funny folks. Glad I aint none of em."⁹

Against the moral and physical collapse of the Compsons Faulkner has placed Dilsey. She is the strength and the oracle of her own family, a matriarch in a clean checkered apron, voluminous underclothing which she could peel off as the weather warmed, and a headrag, the mark of servitude she had donned in her teens. For years her great vigor held her own family together, with a generous amount left over to help those she served and was devoted to, regardless of their inability to cope with their own circumstances. In her genuine acceptance of life as it is, she proves to be a steadying influence, the imperishable, the

⁷Ibid., p. 292. ⁸Ibid., p. 335. ⁹Ibid., p. 35.

prevailing. This is all the more remarkable because the Compsons appear to have no idea of their dependence, and it is only near the close of the novel that Jason IV finally recognizes the position as titular head of the family which Dilsey has of necessity accepted. In his final act of ridding himself of personal responsibilities and moving to living quarters over his business, he composes his Emancipation Proclamation: he finally frees himself of the Negro.

Dilsey's position with the Compson family was primarily that of cook. In the old days she might have been only that, calling in her own children to assist with the kitchen work when great crowds gathered for meals or parties. With the failing fortunes of the Compsons she had become the only servant, a combination of cook, housekeeper, nurse, foster parent to the white children, and arbiter in all disputes, childish or adult.

Representing the only things that are completely good, she becomes a tower of strength upon which each one depends more than he realizes. She had never lived with nor known any other people, and although she frequently disapproved of their actions or attitudes, she never would countenance criticism by anyone, most other white folks being in her mind, "white trash." Her penetrating mind had catalogued each Compson in his childhood, and as her long life spanned five generations, she had observed at close range their

habits, their desires, their needs, and their failures. She had started life as a slave child and had known old Jason I as a master. She had grown up and played with Jason II "who failed at Shiloh in '62 and failed again though not so badly at Resaca in '64, who put the first mortgage on the still intact square mile to a New England carpetbagger in '66,"¹⁰ fading out of the family picture ignominiously.

As a freed slave she had worked as a household servant, seeing the next Jason living in an alcoholic dream of past glories, the ineffective head of the family. Her own children grew up with those of Miss Caroline and Mr. Jason, playing, eating, sleeping, thinking, and doing exactly the same things that all little white and Negro children had been doing through all the past paternalistic generations. But she sees in both her own and the Compson children the changes that the times are bringing. In her own family she observes the "new freedom" as it appears in Frony's marriage and life in St. Louis, in the jobs Versh gets in town, in T. P.'s secretive and periodic trips to Memphis. She does her best to hold Luster in the traditional pattern and there seems little doubt that he will stray.

Dilsey saw the Compson children grow to adulthood in the patterns they developed as children when they lacked

¹⁰Ibid., p. 7.

discipline and spiritual guidance in a generation of unstable values. She saw their unbridled and selfish desires lead Quentin to his doom in self blame and suicide, and Caddy to an escape in promiscuous living, salving her conscience only occasionally with a monetary substitute for family responsibilities. She saw Benjy taken to the State Asylum at Jackson, having little, losing nothing because "as with his sister, he remembered not the pasture but only its loss, and firelight was still the same bright shape as sleep."¹¹ She lived to see Jason IV eke out a starved, insecure, and fruitless middle age; and Quentin II disappear, taking with her the inheritance she had to steal from her uncle. Then Dilsey, nearly blind and not caring to "see" what she could see, figuratively closes the family album, locks it, and throws away the key. Although Jason's independent acts of putting Benjy away permanently, selling the remnants of the once handsome estate to a Snopes opportunist, and living with a "big plain brazenhaired pleasant faced woman no longer young"¹² are the gestures of washing his hands of his own inheritance, he really has emancipated himself from Dilsey. She, in a strange irony, was the symbol of the strength he should have possessed as the head of the family, and a

¹¹Ibid., p. 19.

¹²Ibid., p. 18.

living reminder of his scheme to rob his niece of her rightful due.

Dilsey can perhaps be best understood through her varied relationships with the Compsons. Mrs. Compson, Miss Cahline to everyone except the children, was a delicately nurtured Southern lady, shielded so well from the crass, material world that she had neither the physical nor the moral strength for more than self pity. Proud of her ancestry and feeling that she had married slightly beneath a Bascomb, she never failed to taunt her husband with his financial failures or to take advantage of her ostensible frailty. One Sunday morning, the whimpering, backboneless figure, clutching a quilted dressing gown around her, came to the top of the stairs, and in a monotonous voice called down to Dilsey. Dilsey left her biscuit making, wiped her floury hands on her apron, and labored toward the stairs. She had sent her grandson up some time before to dress Benjy.

"Luster hasn't been in the house. I've been lying here listening for him. I knew he would be late, but I did hope he would be on time to keep Benjamin from disturbing Jason on Jason's one day in the week when he can sleep in the morning."

"I don't see how you can expect anyone to sleep wid you standin in de hall, holl'in at folks from de crack of dawn," Dilsey said. She began to mount the stairs, toiling heavily. "I sont dat boy up dar half hour ago."

Mrs. Compson watched her.... "What are you going to do?" she said.

"Gwine git Benjy dressed and bring him down to de kitchen whar he wont wake Jason and Quentin," Dilsey said.

"Haven't you started breakfast yet?"

"I'll tend to dat too," Dilsey said. "You better git back to bed twell Luster make yo fire. Hit cold dis mawnin."

"I know it," Mrs. Compson said. "My feet are like ice. They were so cold they waked me up." She watched Dilsey mount the stairs. It took her a long while. "You know how it frets Jason when breakfast is late," Mrs. Compson said.

"I cant do but one thing at a time," Dilsey said. "You git back to bed fo I has you on my hands dis mawnin too."

"If you're going to drop everything to dress Benjamin I'd better come down and get breakfast. You know as well as I do how Jason hates it when it's late."

"En who gwine eat yo messin?" Dilsey said. "Tell me dat. Go on now," she said, toiling upward. Mrs. Compson stood watching her as she mounted, steadying herself against the wall with one hand, holding her skirts up with the other. "Are you going to wake him up just to dress him?" she said.

Dilsey stopped. With her foot lifted to the next step she stood there, her hand against the wall and the grey splash of the window behind her, motionless and shapeless she loomed.

"He aint awake den?" she said.

"He wasn't when I looked in," Mrs. Compson said. "But it's past his time. He never does sleep after half past seven. You know he doesn't."

Dilsey said nothing. She made no further move, but though she could not see her except as a blobby shape without depth, Mrs. Compson knew that she had lowered her face a little and that she stood now like a cow in the rain....¹³

Through incidents such as this, Dilsey accepted her fate, and she endured.

Mr. Compson, fortified by drink both before and afterward, occasionally took the reins of family affairs into his own hands. Dilsey accepted him as the master of

¹³Ibid., pp. 286-288.

the household, and her duty was to see his orders carried out and his comfort considered. Climaxing weeks of emotional controversy, he had brought Caddy's illegitimate daughter back into the family circle. It was just a month before he died, and this was his final positive and defiant gesture. Mrs. Compson and her brother, Maury Bascomb, had hoped that Caddy's new husband would keep the child and save the Compson honor. Young Jason reports the conversation:

"And whar else do she belong?" Dilsey says. "Who else gwine raise her 'cep me? Aint I raised eve'y one of y'all?"

"And a damn fine job you made of it," [thought Jason.] ...

"It'll be hard enough as it is, with the heritage she already has," [said Mrs. Compson.]

"Hush," said Father. "Don't be silly."

"Why aint she gwine sleep in here," Dilsey says, "In the same room whar I put her ma to bed eve'y night of her life since she was big enough to sleep by herself."

"You dont know," Mother says, "To have my own daughter cast off by her husband. Poor little innocent baby," she says, looking at Quentin. "You will never know the suffering you've caused."

"Hush, Caroline," Father says....

"How sleepin in dis room gwine hurt her, I like to know," Dilsey says.

"I cant help it," Mother says. "I know I'm just a troublesome old woman. But I know that people cannot flaunt God's laws with impunity."

"Nonesense," Father said. "Fix it in Miss Caroline's room then, Dilsey."...

"En you's about sick too," Dilsey says. "You looks like a hant. You git in bed and I'll fix you a toddy and see kin you sleep. I bet you aint had a full night's sleep since you lef."

"No," Mother says, "Dont you know what the doctor says? Why must you encourage him to drink. That's what's the matter with him now. Look at me, I suffer too, but I'm not so weak that I must kill myself with whiskey."

"Fiddlesticks," Father says, "What do doctors know? They make their living advising people to do whatever they are not doing at the time....You'll have a minister to hold my hand next." Then Mother cried and he went out. He went downstairs, and then I heard the side-board....

Dilsey fixed the cradle and undressed her [the baby] and put her in it. She never had waked up since he brought her into the house.

"She pretty near too big fer hit," Dilsey says. "Dar now. I gwine spread me a pallet right acrost de hall, so you wont need to git up in de night."

"I wont sleep," Mother says. "You can go on home. I wont mind. I'll be happy to give the rest of my life to her, if I can just prevent--"

"Hush now," Dilsey says. "We gwine take keer of her. En you go on to bed too," she says to me. "You got to go to school tomorrow."¹⁴

Through such family crises as this, with a self-pitying, whining woman, a well-intentioned but weak head of the family, a parasitic brother-in-law, a resentful young boy, and an innocent and fated baby, Dilsey did her daily stint of handling the affairs of the Compsons. Her white folks seemed to be failures in everything they touched, but it was her duty to make the most of the situations, to attempt to keep each member in his proper place, and to have love enough to spare for the ones who were in need of it.

After Mrs. Compson's ineffectual promise to care for the unwanted child, there is no question about whose breast was the haven of comfort during little Quentin's growing years. Dilsey continued to be her champion. She once even

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 215-217.

let Caddy sneak home to see her child and Benjy, breaking the rules laid down by the now-grown Jason. Jason tells of the incident:

I thought I had everything fixed until that day when I came home and found Ben bellowing. Raising hell and nobody could quiet him. Mother said, Well, get him the slipper then [One of Caddy's wedding shoes]. Dilsey made out she didn't hear. Mother said it again....So I says I'd go and Dilsey says quick, "Jason."

Well, like a flash I knew what was up, but just to make sure I went and got the slipper and brought it back, and just like I thought, when he saw it you'd thought we were killing him. So I made Dilsey own up, then I told Mother. We had to take her up to bed then, and after things got quieted down a little I put the fear of God into Dilsey. As much as you can a nigger, that is. That's the trouble with nigger servants, when they've been with you for a long time they get so full of self importance that they're not worth a damn. They think they run the whole family.

"I like to know whut's de hurt in lettin dat po chile see her own baby," Dilsey says. "If Mr. Jason was still here hit ud be different."

"Only Mr. Jason's not here," I says. "I know you wont pay me any mind, but I reckon you'll do what Mother says. You keep on worrying her like this until you get her in the graveyard too, then you can fill the whole house full of ragtail and bobtail. But what did you want to let that damn idiot see her for?"

"You's a cold man, Jason, if man you is," she says. "I thank de Lawd I got mo heart dan dat, even ef hit is black."¹⁵

Dilsey's humanitarianism gives her a quality that makes her stand head and shoulders above those in whose eyes she is just a servant, but the kind of servant from whom Jason later insists that he has had "to free the Compsons."

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 224-225.

No matter how old he is, Dilsey treats Jason as a boy. He had just come home late for supper on one occasion, and was met by a somewhat disgruntled Dilsey:

"You come, is you?" she says. "Whut you been up to dis evenin? You knows how much work I got to do: whyn't you git here on time?..."

"Quentin come in a while ago and says you been follerin her around all evenin and den Miss Cahline jumped on her. Whyn't you let her alone? Cant you live in de same house wid your own blood niece widout quollin?"

"I cant quarrel with her," I says, "because I havn't seen her since morning. What does she say I've done now? Made her go to school? That's pretty bad," I says.

"Well, you tend to yo business and let her alone," Dilsey says. "I'll take keer of her ef you'n Miss Cahline'll let me. Go on in dar now and behave yoself twell I git supper on."¹⁶

The occasional sharp tongue that accompanied the understanding heart was often a necessary adjunct to Dilsey's remarkable ability to hold the Compson's together in the face of their almost perennial discontent.

She is just as capable of putting other white folks in their place when a situation arises in which she feels the need to uphold the Compson honor. One Sunday, as Dilsey's family and Benjy were returning from church, the daughter took her mother to task:

"I wish you wouldn't keep on bringing him [Ben] to church, mammy," Frony said. "Folks talkin."

"Whut folks?" Dilsey said.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 270-271.

"I hears em," Frony said.
 "And I knows whut kind of folks," Dilsey said.
 "Trash white folks. Dat's who it is. Thinks he aint good enough for white church, but nigger church aint good enough fer him."
 "Dey talks, jes the same," Frony said.
 "Den you send um to me," Dilsey said. "Tell um de good Lawd dont keer whether he smart or not. Dont nobody but white trash keer dat."¹⁷

Dilsey is always warmly sympathetic when she is caring for Benjy, and she is particularly efficient in emergencies. Once, in a moment when Luster had turned his back, Benjy reached for the dancing flames in the cook stove and burned his hand. Here is Benjy's story:

My hand jerked back and I put it in my mouth and Dilsey caught me....My voice was going loud.
 "Get that soda," Dilsey said. She took my hand out of my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to get back into my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud. She sprinkled soda on my hand.
 "Look in the pantry and tear a piece of rag hanging on the nail," she said. "Hush now. You dont want to make your maw sick again, does you. Here, look at the fire. Dilsey make your hand stop hurting in a minute."
 ...My hand was trying to go to my mouth but Dilsey held it.
 She wrapped the cloth around it. Mother said,
 "What is it now. Can't I even be sick in peace. Do I have to get up out of bed and come down to him, with two grown negroes to take care of him."
 "He all right now," Dilsey said. He goin to quit. He just burnt his hand a little."
 "With two grown negroes, you must bring him into the house bawling," Mother said. "You got him started just on purpose because you know I'm sick...."
 "You go back upstairs and lay down," Dilsey said.
 "It'll quit smarting him in a minute now, and he'll hush. Come on, now."

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 305-306.

"And leave him here for you all to do something else to," Mother said. "How can I lie there and him bawling down here...."

"There aint nowhere else to take him," Dilsey said....

"I know, I know," Mother said. "It's all my fault...." She began to cry.

"You hush that now," Dilsey said. "You'll get yourself down again. You come on back upstairs. Luster going to take him into the liberry and play with him till I get his supper done."¹⁸

Each, in his own way, is mothered by Dilsey, from whom compassion flows in a never-ending stream.

A SUSTAINING FAITH

Dilsey has perfect faith in her God, who smiles on a little child in its innocence and on the man-child, Ben.

One day Ben was wailing steadily and hoarsely. Luster couldn't quiet him and led him to his grandmother:

"I tole you he warn't gwine stay quiet," Luster said.

"You vilyun!" Dilsey said, "Whut you dont to him?"

"I aint done nothin. I tole you when dem folks start playin [golf], he git started up."

"You come on here," Dilsey said. "Hush, Benjy. Hush now." But he wouldn't hush. They crossed the yard quickly and went to the cabin and entered. "Run git dat shoe," Dilsey said. "Dont you sturb Miss Cahline, now. Ef she say anything, tell her I got him. Go on, now. You can sho do dat right, I reckon." Luster went out. Dilsey led Ben to the bed and drew him down beside her and held him, rocking back and forth, wiping his drooling mouth with the hem of her skirt. "Hush, now," she said, stroking his head, "Hush, Dilsey got you." But he bellowed slowly, abjectly, without tears: the grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun. Luster returned, carrying a white satin slipper. It was yellow now and cracked and soiled, and when they

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 78-79.

placed it in Ben's hands he hushed for awhile. But he soon whimpered and raised his voice again....

Dilsey rocked back and forth, stroking Ben's head.

"Dis long time, O Jesus," she said, "Dis long time."

... "I does de bes I kin," she said, "Lawd knows dat."

... "You's de Lawd's chile, anyway. En I be his, fo long, Praise Jesus...."¹⁹

Her deep-rooted religious beliefs uphold Dilsey in many circumstances when affairs need interpreting or when events have gone wrong for her. There was the little incident of the family's decision to change the name of the idiot child from Maury, after Mrs. Compson's brother, to Benjamin, the name of the brother who, the Bible story tells, was "sold down into Egypt." It seemed a very appropriate change to the Compsons, but the superstitions of the Negro church members in regard to such an act worried both Roskus and Dilsey. Nothing good, they were sure, would come from tampering with something that became God-given through the sacrament of baptism. Caddy, however, thought it a fine idea and insisted that Dilsey adopt the new name.

How come it is [changed], Dilsey said. He aint wore out the name he was born with yet, is he.

Benjamin came out of the Bible, Caddy said. It's a better name for him than Maury was.

How come it is, Dilsey said.

Mother said it is, Caddy said.

Huh, Dilsey said. Name aint going to help him. Hurt him neither. Folks dont have no luck changing names. My name been Dilsey since before I could remember and it be Dilsey when they's long forgot me.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 331-332.

How will they know it's Dilsey when it's long forgot, Dilsey, Caddy said.

It'll be in the Book, honey, writ out, Dilsey said.

Can you read it, Caddy said.

Wont have to, Dilsey said. They'll read it to me. All I got to do is say I'se here.²⁰

Prayer meetings and Sunday services were both a duty and a privilege to Dilsey and her family. On the fateful Sunday morning when the discovery had been made that Quentin II had escaped in the night with the contents of her uncle's strong box, Dilsey, Frony, and Luster, with Benjy in tow, joined the parade of churchgoers. Dilsey wore her "maroon cape and purple gown, and soiled elbow-length gloves and minus her head cloth now."²¹ Frony was in a flashy dress and flowered hat, and Luster sported a stiff new straw. As they passed the cabins, Negroes spoke to Dilsey:

"Sis Gibson! How you dis mawnin?"

"I'm well. Is you well?"

"I'm right well, I thank you."

Unless the greeters were particularly old, Dilsey let Frony respond:

"Mammy aint feelin well dis mawnin."

"Dat's too bad. But Rev'un Shegog'll cure dat. He'll give her de comfort and de unburdenin."²²

In the church Ben sat quietly beside her, her hand out to pat his knee occasionally and her voice to whisper "Hush

²⁰Ibid., p. 77.

²¹Ibid., p. 303.

²²Ibid., p. 307.

now. Dey fixin to sing in a minute."²³ On this special morning, a shabby wizened man, black faced and unimposing, was occupying the pulpit.

"En day brung dat all de way fum Saint Looey," Frony whispered.

"I've knowed de Lawd to use cuiser tools dan dat," Dilsey said.²⁴

There was singing, and the congregation was soon under the spell of the little man as he began to preach.

As the scudding day passed overhead the dingy windows glowed and faded in ghostly retrograde. A car passed along the road outside, laboring in the sand, died away. [It was Jason on his way to find his niece.] Dilsey sat bolt upright, her hand on Ben's knee. Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time.

"Brethren," the minister said in a harsh whisper, without moving.... "I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!... I sees de light en I sees de word, po sinner! Dey passed away in Egypt, de swingin chariots; de generations passed away. Wuz a rich man; whar he now, O Breddren? Wuz a po man; whar he now, O sistuhn? Oh I tells you, ef you aint got de milk en de dew of de old salvation when de long cold years rolls away!... I sees de darkness en de death everlastin upon de generations.... I sees de doom crack en hears de golden horns shoutin down de glory, en de risen dead whut got de blood and de ricklickshun of de Lamb!"

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 remembered Lamb.

As they walked through the bright noon, up the sandy road with the dispersing congregation talking easily again group to group, she continued to weep, unmindful of the talk.

"He sho a preacher, mon! He didn't look like much at first, but hush!"

²³Ibid., p. 310.

²⁴Ibid., p. 309.

"He seed de power and de glory."

"Yes, suh. He seed hit. Face to face he seed hit."

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," Frony said. "Wid all dese people lookin. We be passin white folks soon."

"I've seed de first en de last," Dilsey said. "Never you mind me."

"First en last whut?" Frony said.

"Never you mind," Dilsey said. "I seed de beginnin en now I sees de endin."²⁵

Rev'un Shegog had spoken directly to Dilsey; and she knew she was seeing the prophecy come true with her own white folks--the beginning, back when she was a little slave child of the old governor's; the ending in Jason's turning from all the old people and the good ways of the past.

Dilsey becomes no longer a member of one race, black or white. She is simply a member of the human race; and race, as a differentiation, is absorbed in her compassion as a human being, a mother, seeing life widely and wisely and well.

One must not neglect the fact that Faulkner has shown considerable bias in equating goodness with the Negro characters and decadence and even corruption with the whites in this novel. His own life in the Deep South leads to speculation that his characterizations come from observation as well as imagination. Although he has repeatedly said that

²⁵Ibid., pp. 311-313.

his characters were not taken from his own family or from the Oxford locality, there is much of Faulkner's life and home in his work. Faulkner portrays Dilsey with an unusually warm and affectionate touch. She could easily be the shadow of a Dilsey that had endured in his own memory for nearly half a century. She is much too real to be drawn by an outlander whose imagination in regard to the old family retainer is purely sentimental. Faulkner dedicated the Go Down, Moses collection of short stories thus:

To Mammy
CAROLINE BARR

Mississippi
(1840-1940)

Who was born in slavery and who
gave to my family a fidelity without
stint or calculation of recompense
and to my childhood an immeasurable
devotion and love.²⁶

Dilsey would appear to be the novelist's most loved character because she embodies the qualities that make for permanence, qualities that transcend race. She never performs a single act for which she has personal regret. She sees where others fail and does her part to sustain them or make up for their weaknesses. She wields a strong disciplinary hand on the children who are her responsibility

²⁶William Faulkner, Go Down, Moses (New York: Random House, 1942), Dedication.

during the time they are under her care. She is a sort of Biblical maternal figure who can see back into time and forward into space, loving all men as her children, and content to leave her own destiny in the hands of her Maker. As a pillar of strength she held the Compson family together for fifty years, and she remained in her closing days a symbol of dignity in her refusal to admit the possibility of things that were no longer meant to be brought into the light.

There is nothing of doom about the character of Dilsey; instead, she is all that Faulkner could crowd into the two words, "she endured," and her spirit and personality have prevailed.

the town of Jefferson; Best Four (townships in Mississippi are called bests); Yoknapatawpha County; and finally the far

ex:

for the first time,

through the white

of the day, the

judgment of a mind

CHAPTER III

IS ENDURANCE THE SAME AS FREEDOM?

Although Intruder in the Dust is a novel of near-violence in a Southern community, it is not only William Faulkner's powerful indictment of mob vengeance, but is also a reiteration of a belief in the brotherhood of man, an expression of North-South kinship, and an emphasis on the individuals' responsibilities to each other and to all. In the course of the novel's action a whole region responds to the long-established factors of race prejudice, and then is faced with a problem of conscience. A whole society is involved: men and women, both Negro and white; the town of Jefferson; Beat Four (townships in Mississippi are called beats); Yoknapatawpha County; and finally the far reaches of the South in the relationships between itself and the rest of the United States.

Lucas Beauchamp, a Free Man

The plot involves a macabre mystery; but even the excitement and the white heat of unbridled passions are, for the most part, secondary to the author's comments, through his white characters, on one of the greatest evils of the day, the right of groups of prejudiced men to sit in judgment on a single human being. Whether Faulkner chose a

current issue as his subject or the subject, instead, chose him, makes little difference. The matter of mob violence and the mishandling of justice in regard to minority groups is not foreign to the daily newspapers.

Here, as in The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner equates black blood with good and white blood with evil; but the picture is less biased, although farther reaching, and the equating less didactic. Good and evil can come in varying degrees and combinations; therefore the application is more universal. While Faulkner ascribed no bad traits whatever to Dilsey, he makes Lucas prideful and arrogant as well as honest and trustworthy. While he gave the Compsons, as representatives of the decadent, aristocratic Southern whites, no enduring qualities whatsoever, he attributes to a number of white folks in this novel the virtues of selflessness and faith. On the other hand, he peoples the community with a poor white trash element which, through mere numbers, can control the course of events.

Intruder in the Dust is a much easier book to read than The Sound and the Fury. Its time element is almost conventional, and its rhetoric, while stylistically Faulknerian in its lengthy sentences, is free-flowing and often poetic. The story is reported through the central consciousness of Chick Mallison, Jr., the sixteen-year-old white boy in whom an accused Negro puts his trust. Much of the thought

sequence could never have occurred to a teen-age boy nor have even been a part of his world, but the method is fictionally acceptable. The youth and his honest, open, and humanistic attitude give support to the idea that Faulkner may see hope for the South in its young white blood which will have the opportunity to erase some of the mistakes of the older generation.

As the novel opens, Lucas Beauchamp, a mulatto, is in jail on circumstantial evidence, charged with the murder of a white man. He had been found with a gun in his hand, standing over the body of a man who had been shot in the back. The victim was a man of questionable business ethics, but nevertheless, a white man and a member of a community element whose passions could be easily ignited into a state of uncontrolled violence. The names could be Gowrie, or Fraser, or Ingraham, or Workitt, but they were all the same when it came to loyalties which required nothing but striking down the enemy with brute force. A Sunday intervening--a time when a hanging was not ethical--gave an odd assortment of Lucas' friends, a white boy and his lawyer uncle, an elderly and courageous spinster, and a young Negro boy, a chance to take matters into their own hands to prove that the accused was not a criminal. During their midnight opening of the grave of the murdered man they discover instead a second corpse with its additional mystery to be

solved. Lucas gives few clues and no reasons for his supposed act of racial hatred. He admits or denies nothing. In the few remaining hours before the mob plans to take the prisoner forcibly from the sheriff and hang and burn him, the old man's friends know that the real perpetrators of the double crime must be discovered and apprehended. By tricking the father of the first murdered man into admitting both murders, the trio solves the puzzle of the removal of the bodies and their reburial in shallow graves and quicksand. News of the disclosure reaches the courthouse square just as the crowd, in a holiday mood, converges on the jail to watch proceedings. When they realize that the criminal is one from among their own lot, and that the Negro is innocent, they turn, shame-faced, to their own homes to hide their burning consciences. Lucas, of course, is grateful; but, aware of his own position all along, he has the attitude that he has made the affair a crisis through which the white people may develop new strengths. The complete about-face of the entire township's low-caste element into a conscience-stricken retreat gives Faulkner, through the reactions of the Negro and his friends, an opportunity for many sociological observations and speculations.

Faulkner's emphasis on geneology in Yoknapatawpha County colors Intruder in the Dust with a sense of the past as emphasized in Lucas' background and physiognomy. His

superior attitude toward all that is not aristocratic in either the black race or the white, dominates his appearance, speech, and actions. He is a man whom nobody can forget, from the Negro boy who spoke to him as "Mr. Lucas," to Carothers Edmonds on whose place he lived seventeen miles from town. Lucas was the grandson of old Carothers McCaslin and one of his slaves, and as proud of his blood line as if he were of royal lineage. "I don't belong to these new folks," he would say. "I belongs to the old lot. I'm a McCaslin."¹ In a short story in the Go Down, Moses collection, the author tells of Lucas as a young man who became so obsessed by a hunt for buried treasure that he precipitated action for divorce by his faithful Molly. Lawyer Roth Edmunds was called in, and as he looked at the proud, determined, part-Negro, part-white man before him he thought in amazement and something almost akin to horror that Lucas was

... more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put together, including old Carothers. He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and all our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now except himself who fathered himself, intact and incomplete, contemptuous as old Carothers must have been, of all blood, black, white, red, and yellow including his own.²

¹William Faulkner, Intruder in the Dust (A Signet Book, New York: Random House, 1948), p. 15.

²William Faulkner, "Fire and the Hearth," Go Down, Moses (Modern Library, New York: Random House, 1942), p. 118.

Lucas was a Negro by the community's classification and his own way of living, but he dressed and acted like a white man of aristocratic heritage. It was this that both the whites and the blacks had against him. "We got to make a nigger of him first," they said. "He's got to admit he's a nigger. Then maybe we can accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted."³ Lucas' creed, if put into words, would be the opposite: I am a man. Accept me first as a man. Then it makes no difference to me or anybody else whether I am a nigger or a white or of any other breed.

Charles, nephew of Lawyer Gavin Stevens of Jefferson, first met Lucas when he was twelve years old, four years before the story opens. At the invitation of his uncle's friend, Carothers Edmonds, he and his "boy," Aleck Sander, started out on a rabbit hunt in the Edmonds' fields. Chick and Aleck had been reared together in the traditional manner of the old family even though the time was the 1940's, and both boys knew the inter-relationships of all the Negro and white families of the whole county. As he was crossing a log over a stream, Chick fell into the icy water. Lucas aided in his rescue by directing the boy to help himself out of his predicament, at the same time refusing to let his companions risk their comfort by assisting him just because

³Faulkner, Intruder in the Dust, op. cit., p. 14.

the smell always of the places where people with any trace of Negro blood live.⁶

Inside the house and beside the "clay daubed fieldstone chimney in which a half-burned backlog glowed and smoldered" sat a tiny, "almost doll-sized woman, much darker than the man, in a shawl and an apron, her head bound in an immaculate white cloth on top of which sat a painted straw hat bearing some kind of an ornament."⁷ This was Molly, Lucas' wife of many years. "Strip off," said Lucas to Chick, and Molly got up and enveloped him in a quilt like a cocoon and he felt warm and dry and as much at home as he felt in the cabin near his own house in Jefferson with Aleck's mother, Paralee. Lucas' clothing, which Chick now noticed for the first time, was a vivid link to the past and to the McCaslin line. He was still wearing the gum boots and the faded overalls of the Negro

but with a heavy gold watch chain looped across the bib of the overalls and shortly after they entered the room he had been conscious of the man turning and taking something from the cluttered mantel and putting it into his mouth and later he had seen what it was: a gold toothpick such as his grandfather had used; and the hat was a worn handmade beaver such as his grandfather had paid thirty or forty dollars apiece for, not set but raked slightly over a face pigmented like a Negro's but with a nose high in the bridge and even hooked a little and what looked out through it or behind it not black nor white either, not arrogant

⁶Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁷Ibid., p. 10.

at all and not even scornful: just intolerant, inflexible, and composed.⁸

The chain, the toothpick, and the hat were obviously his prized heirlooms; and the shape of his nose was his proud inheritance from his white grandfather. They remained all his life as emblems of his aristocracy, acquisitions Faulkner uses to symbolize the best of the past.

An incident that occurred following the meal which the twelve-year-old Chick ate in Molly's kitchen remained as a prick to his conscience long after the event. He sat alone at the clean oilcloth-covered table in a corner of a small, bright room, barely aware of the fact that the usual deference to the white race was being practiced. The food was traditional Negro fare,

collard greens, a slice of side meat fried in flour, big, fat, heavy, half-cooked biscuits, a glass of buttermilk. . . . it was what Negroes obviously ate because it was what they liked, what they chose; not that out of their chronicle this was all they had a chance to learn to like, except the ones who ate out of white folks' kitchens, but that they had elected this out of all eating because it was their palates and their metabolism.⁹

Lucas and Molly had not expected Chick as their guest and had shared their usual fare with him. He rose from the table, and took from his pocket seventy cents which he held out to Lucas. The big man pulled himself up to appear even

⁸Ibid., p. 11.

⁹Ibid., pp. 12-13.

taller than before, and glared in an attitude of indignation and anger. Chick, sensing that he had done an unforgivable thing, flung the money on the floor. Lucas called the Negro boys to pick it up and return it, and he strode from the room. This was Chick's first lesson in the innate pride of man, regardless of his race or his station in life, the desire to do things for others without expecting a monetary return. Although in the following years the boy repeatedly sent gifts to Lucas, Molly, or their modest home, this form of apology was never accepted. There would always be a return gift of equal value, and the account was never closed. It was this inability to square himself that made Chick eventually welcome the opportunity to make amends when Lucas sent him on a mysterious trip after evidence to prove that he was not a murderer. In the end, however, the old man paid money for help from the white folks, and as an added bit of arrogance, asked for a receipt.

During the intervening years before Lucas became a figure in the eyes of the whole county, Chick learned many things about the man whom the community could not classify as either Negro or white. He gathered it bit by bit from small incidents and generally accepted local knowledge, such as the time when Lucas had gone into a grocery store on a Saturday afternoon to buy some gingersnaps.¹⁰ His dress and

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 14-15.

manner and complete indifference to others set off a tirade from three half-drunk crewmen of a nearby sawmill, one of whom had a reputation for brawling and violence. Lucas responded by looking at the white man slowly and saying that he didn't belong to the "new folks" and that he was a McCaslin. It took several men to hold off the angry fellow, but the feeling of the crowd was that Lucas was a Negro who didn't know his place, that trouble was waiting for him, and that it would be welcomed by some when it came. Chick further observed that Lucas was a

Negro who said "ma'am" to women just as any white man did and who said "sir" and "mister" to you if you were white but who you knew was thinking neither and he knew you knew it but who was not even waiting, daring you to make the next move, because he didn't even care.¹¹

Lucas did not come to town on Saturdays when all of the Negroes and most of the county's whites came to sit around the square, do a week's buying, visit with friends, and celebrate a little. He made only an annual trip to pay his taxes, and he did that on a weekday just as any white landowner would do. The boy looked forward to these brief encounters, hoping each time to see that Lucas had forgiven him, for it was not in the white mind to be beholden to a Negro, least of all for a breach of etiquette. An aloof, yet friendly greeting, and a warning not to "fall in no more

¹¹Ibid., p. 14.

creeks this winter" were all that marked the meetings,¹² until one time when Lucas seemed to look right past him with no recognition at all. Chick learned that he had recently buried Molly. "That's why he didn't see me. That's why he didn't have his toothpick. He was grieving. You don'd have to not be a nigger in order to grieve,"¹³ thought Chick.

The shocking news that Lucas had been taken into custody for the murder of a white man came to the boy from his uncle:

"Your friend Beauchamp seems to have done it this time."

"Yes, . . . they're going to make a nigger out of him once in his life anyway."¹⁴

Lucas was held at the constable's house until the sheriff could come from some far end of the county and put him in a cell whose locks would resist, for a while only, such a crowd as was already gathering:

young men and those not so young whose business addresses not only on Saturday afternoons but all week too were the poolhall and the barbershop and some of whom even had a vague connection with cotton or automobiles or land or stock sales, who bet on prizefights and punchboards and national ballgames.¹⁵

If Lucas had to shoot a man it seemed that he had chosen to do it to the wrong man, and a white man at that,

¹²Ibid., p. 18.

¹³Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 20.

on a piece of property in Beat Four of Yoknapatawpha County, a hotbed of "nigger haters." The man was no doubt expendable, but he was Vincent Gowrie,

youngest of a family of six brothers one of whom had already served a year in federal penitentiary for armed resistance as an army deserter and another term at the state penal farm for making whiskey, and a ramification of cousins and in-laws covering a whole corner of the county. . . and a connection of brawlers farmers and fox hunters and stock and timber traders who would not even be the last anywhere to let one of its members be killed by anyone but only among the last since it in its turn was integrated and interlocked and intermarried with other brawlers and fox hunters and whiskey makers . . . had translated and transmogrified the whole region of lonely pine hills. . . . where peace officers from town didn't even go unless they were sent for and strange white men didn't wander far from the highway after dark and no Negro anytime.¹⁶

It was such a man that Lucas had encountered in an area sacred to his indisputable rights, and at a moment when Carothers Edmonds, alone of all white men who might stand between him and the violent fate he had courted, was in a New Orleans hospital.

The transfer to the county jail was made early on a Sunday morning, and the crowd had already gathered to see the tall old man walk up the steps in quiet dignity. He was, as usual, wearing his beaver hat and the gold watch chain; his suit was a little rumpled but still a mark of gentility; the toothpick had been put away. The crowd held

¹⁶Ibid., p. 25.

off, assuring itself that "They won't do nothing today. They're burying Vinson this afternoon and to burn a nigger right while the funeral's going on wouldn't be respectful to Vinson."¹⁷ The men talked quietly, speculating about the difficulty of taking the prisoner from the sheriff. One asked, "Who in this county or state either is going to help protect a nigger that shoots white men in the back? Or the South either."¹⁸ The paradox was that Lucas, in bonds, was completely self-contained, giving the impression that he had been working toward this crowning moment for twenty-five years.

Faulkner carefully examines the crowd watching the jail entrance. He indicates that they were the ones who helped color the white man's reputation in the South. They were mostly young men or men under forty, bachelors, the homeless, . . . truck drivers and garagehands, the oiler from the cotton gin, a soda jerker from the drugstore and the ones who would be seen all week long in or around a poolhall who did nothing at all that anybody knew, who owned automobiles and spent money nobody knew exactly how they earned, . . . the men who . . . were in every little Southern town, who never really led mobs nor even instigated them but were always the nucleus of them because of their massed availability.¹⁹

These were the landless whites, caught up in a mechanized civilization, who, like wolves, surrounded the Negro and held

¹⁷Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 30.

him until they were ready to tear him apart. In contrast was Lucas, arrogant and calm, with no more defiance than fear in his face, looking not at the crowd but toward it, "detached, impersonal, almost musing, intractable and composed, the eyes blinking a little in the sunlight."²⁰ Lucas Beauchamp had been caught two minutes after a shot had been heard and a man found lying dead, shot in the back. He had never denied firing the gun; he had simply refused to make any statement at all.

Chick Mallison, Jr., standing at the edge of the crowd, was surprised that Lucas had seen him. "You, young man, tell your uncle I wants to see him."²¹ Later, Lawyer Stevens had something provocative to say to his nephew in regard to the more deep-rooted attitudes of the white businessman of any Southern community, such a man as Mr. Lilley, the grocer:

He [any one of them] has nothing against what he calls niggers. If you ask him, he will probably tell you he likes them even better than some white folks he knows and he will believe it. . . . All he requires is that they act like niggers. Which is exactly what Lucas is doing: blew his top and murdered a white man, which Mr. Lilley is probably convinced all Negroes want to do--and now the white people will take him out and burn him, all regular and in order and themselves acting exactly as he is convinced Lucas would wish them to act: like white folks; both of them observing the rules: the nigger acting like a nigger and the white folks acting like white folks and no feelings on either side (since Mr. Lilley is not a Gowrie) once the fury is over; in

fact he [or any one of them] would probably be the first to contribute to Lucas' funeral and the support of his widow and children if he had them. Which proves again how no man can cause more grief than that one clinging blindly to the vices of his ancestors.²²

In Stevens' meeting with Lucas, Chick observes that the proud Negro cannot let his white friends do anything for him without reimbursement. "I pays my own way," he would say.²³ The boy is aware that this is the opposite of the attitude Lucas had displayed some years before when his offer of hospitality to a young white boy had not been accepted as a matter of friendship and courtesy. Chick also sees that "people like the Gowries dont attach a great deal of importance to dying. But they do put a lot of stock in the dead and how they died, particularly their own."²⁴ When Lucas offers the information that Vinson was not killed by "a fawty-one Colt," his own ancient model pistol, and says "I'm gonter pay you. Name yo price at anything in reason and I will pay it,"²⁵ there seems nothing for Chick to do but try to perform the seemingly impossible, which is to dig up the buried body and get proof before Lucas is hanged.

Faulkner uses Lucas Beauchamp not only as a portrait of the making of a man, but as a symbol of the feelings of the Negroes and the whites for each other; and, even more,

²²Ibid., p. 33.

²³Ibid., p. 40.

²⁴Ibid., p. 45.

²⁵Ibid., p. 49.

of the reasons for the passions which get out of control when led by an element that has been corrupted by the false standards of the day. In the action which finally frees Lucas, the participants are much more important as studies of racial attitudes than for plot development. Lawyer Stevens does very little for the old Negro except to offer professional services which are not accepted. In his monologues with his nephew, however, he expresses Faulkner's theories in regard to the race problem in the South.

In the midnight trip to the cemetery, which he first undertakes alone, Chick is finally aided by the same Negro boy who was with him the day he first met Lucas. With them go Miss Eunice Habersham, an almost penniless spinster who happened onto the scene at the moment the boy was wavering between a compulsion to perform an act that would clear his conscience, and the privilege of refusing because he really owed Lucas nothing. When Miss Habersham heard that her old friend was in trouble, she was eager to help the boys and at the same time pay a debt she had long owed the memory of Molly Beauchamp. Miss Eunice and Molly had been born a few days apart and nursed by the same black mammy. The little girls had spent their childhood together, and when Molly and Lucas married Eunice stood up with them, and later was godmother to their firstborn child. Because of years of close and affectionate association, she felt that she had

a stake in the old Negro's future just as the boys did. Her willingness to take part in the exposure of the real criminal brought forth some cryptic remarks on the part of a couple of the townspeople:

Young folks and womens, they aint cluttered. They can listen. . . . [men] cant listen. They aint got time. They's too busy with facks. . . . If you ever needs anything done outside the common run, dont waste yo time on the menfolks; get the womens and the children to working at it.²⁶

Just remember that they [women] can stand anything, accept any fact (it's only the men who burk at facts) provided they dont have to face it; can assimilate it with their heads turned away and one hand extended behind them as a politician accepts a bribe.²⁷

It took these three, an old woman and two young boys, "to believe truth for no other reason than that it was truth, told by an old man in a fix deserving pity and belief, to someone capable of the pity even when none of them really believed him."²⁸

The White Race on Trial

Gavin Stevens gives voice to some of Faulkner's most potent beliefs as to the basic likenesses and the homogeneity of the Negro and white races. On page after page he puts his own convictions into the mouths of the lawyer and his nephew. He lets Stevens say of the Southerners:

²⁶Ibid., p. 48.

²⁷Ibid., p. 71.

²⁸Ibid., p. 83.

We are defending not actually our politics or beliefs or even our way of life, but simply our homogeneity from a federal government to which an simple desperation the rest of the country has had to surrender voluntarily more and more of its personal and private liberty in order to afford the United States....

Only a few of us know that only from homogeneity comes anything of a people or for a people of lasting value--the literature, the art, the science, that minimum of government and police which is the meaning of freedom and liberty, and perhaps the most valuable of all, a national character with anything in a crisis

.... That's why we [the South] must resist the North... to prove that the Negro is a human being living in a free country and hence must be free. That's what we're really defending: the privilege of setting him free ourselves: which we will have to do for the reason that since going on a century ago the North tried it and have admitted that for seventy-five years they have failed....Some day a Lucas Beauchamp can shoot a white man in the back with the same impunity to lynching or gasoline as a white man; in time he will vote anywhere a white man can; send his children to the same school anywhere the white man's children go; and travel anywhere the white man travels as the white man does it. But it won't be next Tuesday. Yet people in the North believe it can be compelled into Monday by the simple ratification by votes of the printed paragraph.²⁹

As for the Negro, Stevens continues:

He's a homogenous man too, except for the part of him which is trying to escape not even into the best of the white but into the second best.... [the good Negro has found roots] in the land where he actually had to displace the white man to put him down; because he had patience when he didn't have hope, the long view when there was nothing to see at the end of it, not just the will but the desire to endure....

We--he and us--should confederate: swap him the rest of the economic and cultural privileges which

²⁹Ibid., p. 100.

are his right, for the reversion of his capacity to wait and endure and survive. Then we would prevail.³⁰

What Chick and his uncle saw when they reached the courthouse was an exodus of cars, trucks, and holiday-dressed citizens. They were a mass of conscience-struck people hurrying away from an act of violence they had come to witness, to their separate homes, where they could take off their Sunday clothes, go back to their chores, and for the moment hide their shame in forced activity. They fled

. . . not even to deny Lucas but just to keep from having to send up to him by the drugstore porter a can of tobacco not at all to say they were sorry but so they wouldn't have to say out loud that they were wrong.³¹

They were running away from themselves, ashamed more of their misjudgment than for the actual injury to a fellowman. The whole exodus, Faulkner indicates, symbolizes the topsy-turvy situation wherein the one saved becomes a tyrant over the conscience of the savior. By extension, the white race, in freeing the Negro, retains a feeling of guilt because it has simply dismissed its responsibilities and given nothing in payment or offered any aid to rehabilitation.³²

Faulkner lets Stevens and Chick continue their investigation of intolerance. Lucas is a member of a minority group, endowed with dignity and integrity. He

³⁰Ibid., pp. 100-101. ³¹Ibid., p. 126. ³²Ibid., p. 128.

stands alone before his accusers because he knows that the truth as he can tell it will not be believed by those who do not want to see beneath the superficial. He is convinced that his persistence will finally cause the mob to abandon its purpose and dissolve itself; and that man, having passed into the mob, will eventually see that pity, justice, and conscience are all that must prevail. The theory that the individual will endure his trial, whatever it is, if he develops the capacity to absorb and survive is proved; (provided, of course, that the "time is not so long that we may have divided and lost America.")³³

"I only say that injustice is ours, the South's," [said Stevens.] "We must expiate and abolish it ourselves, alone and without help nor even (with thanks) advice."

.....
 "Some things you must never stop refusing to bear. Injustice and outrage and dishonor and shame. . . . Just regret it; don't be ashamed."³⁴

Faulkner continues the indictment of the intolerance of the whole country: it is a curse whose eradication only individuals, then groups made up of these individuals, can accomplish. He argues that the problem needs to be considered not just in the hinterlands but in the

Chicagos and Detroites and Los Angeleses and wherever else live ignorant people who fear the color of any skin or shape of nose save their own and who will grasp this opportunity to vent on Sambo the whole sum of

³³Ibid., p. 131.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 132-133.

their ancestral horror and scorn and fear of Indian and Chinese and Mexican and Carib and Jew, . . . a people divided at a time when history is still showing us that the anteroom to disillusion is division. . . .³⁵

The big question is, "What price Lucas' humanity?"³⁶

When can something be done? Stevens tells the boy that the time is ripe for someone to make a start.

. . . "It's all now you see. Yesterday wont be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's not two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863 [Pickett's Charge], . . . it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't begun yet, it hasn't only not begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin. . . . This is it: the absolute edge of no return."³⁷

Chick was puzzled at the sudden, quiet, and shamed retreat of the mob when they learned that Lucas was innocent.

"They ran," said the boy [incredulously].

"No," his uncle said. "It was more than that."

"They ran," he said. "They reached the point where there was nothing left for them to do but admit that they were wrong. So they ran home."

"At least they were moving," his uncle said.³⁸

This is a much stronger and more encompassing viewpoint than Faulkner used regarding Dilsey and the Compsons. The Dilseys endure because of their ability to live as individuals with pride in their tradition. The Negro race can endure only if it can become recognized for its individuality and worth. The race is a Lucas Beauchamp on trial for its

³⁵Ibid., p. 139.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 125-126.

³⁸Ibid., p. 127.

life, defended by law, and rising with courage and dignity better than the white man in the same situation could muster, calm, stoical, independent. Faulkner seems to feel that the Negro has enduring qualities in greater abundance than do the whites, and that the hope of the South in helping him rise will come in the gratitude of the people (the Miss Habershams), in the ability to look ahead and make restitution for unintentional injury (the young generation), in the need for fair laws (the Gavin Stevenses), and in the consciences of the great masses that must eventually admit their mistakes (the mob).

Faulkner is extremely emotional in the symbolism of Intruder in the Dust. He reaches some poetic heights that have great power, and the reader is aware of his deep concern and sincerity.³⁹ The novel does not end in despondency. There is a strong note of hope, but he warns that men must not "sell liberty short at a tawdry price" or crucify

. . . someone whose nose and pigment we dont like and even these can be coped with provided that few of others who believe that a human life is valuable simply because it has a right to keep on breathing no matter what pigment its lungs distend or nose inhales the air and are willing to defend the right at any price,
 . . .⁴⁰

³⁹Ibid., p. 126.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 156.

Here is a set of rules by which man can live, if he only cherishes the freedom that he admires and still possesses. Thus, William Faulkner dramatizes his conception of the writer's duty "to be one of the props, the pillars to help him [endure and] prevail."⁴¹ The individual, because of his nature of mixed blood is inevitably "lost" and belongs to no race, but to the world of violence. His life appears to be fated as he struggles in his background, his environment, and himself; and he is destined to end in some sort of violence.

Joe Christmas; Violence Predestined

central protagonist of Light in August is a man

⁴¹Faulkner, "Nobel Speech," loc. cit.

CHAPTER IV

CAN MAN DIE YET ENDURE?

The Negro in rebellion is Faulkner's most forceful approach to the problems of the South, the country, and the individual. Because the Negro of mixed blood is usually a "lost" man, belonging to neither race, he is a sorry and rootless figure. His life seems to be fated as he struggles against his background, his environment, and himself; and the struggle is destined to end in some sort of violence when the forces generated within him reach a limit and burst forth.

Joe Christmas; Violence Predestined

The central protagonist of Light in August is a man who may or may not have Negro blood. His story is a composite picture of all that is hateful, pitiable, and tragic in racial conflict and in the harboring and fostering of inherited prejudices. Joe Christmas is a man not caught between clear-cut right and wrong, but between two rights: the right of a man to be himself, and the right of a man to be his brothers' keeper. For him and for ourselves as part of the human race, we feel pity and terror almost unbearable. In him we recognize our own involvement in mankind. Because of him, so Faulkner indicates, we have a challenge to wipe

the American slate clean and start over, having discerned our errors. As in the two novels, The Sound and the Fury and Intruder in the Dust, a Negro becomes a main character because of the inter-relation of the way he acts as an individual, the manner in which his actions affect others, and the response of the community under the tenseness of racial consciousness. It is as if the Negro were the vortex of a whirlpool, and that finally all the swirling tides around him sucked down with inevitable force into the problem his presence either created or influenced.

There is no doubt that both Dilsey and Lucas are of heroic stature. Dilsey's qualities of steadfastness and endurance make her tower above those whom she served. Lucas' dignity and pride turned his accusers into a shamed and conscience-ridden lot. Dilsey represents the Negro undisturbed by any social problems or any involvement in racial supremacy or integration. Lucas represents mixed racial strains in which there is little conflict, and where there is additional pride because the influences of the past which are carried with him from both the Negro and white races are of the best.

Joe Christmas, on the other hand, is not a hero in the usual sense of the word, but a villain--and one of the basest--the perpetrator of premeditated murder. Because

of his secret conflict and because of his human sufferings, however, he transcends the villainous act and becomes a sort of hero, a martyr to a cause for which the reader, identifying himself with those who stand in judgment, must hold himself in a measure responsible. His Negro blood is questionable; there is no proof except the word of a man who had reason to dislike his father. Because of his own insistence, a few of the people with whom he associates suspect it; but over and over again, those who have known him for some time say "Why, he is as white as you or I!" He could "pass" anywhere for a white man, although it never seems to occur to him to do so. It is this irony, this fate that he didn't ask for, this search to define himself, and this suffering which stands for something in the cosmic view of man, that make Joe Christmas also a man of stature in spite of the violation of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

Light in August is the inter-weaving of several stories of human experience, all charged with social significance. The vehicle plot is one of earthy innocence against which are silhouetted physical passion, religious and racial prejudice, and mob violence. It is the tale of Lena Grove, her nameless child, and her champion, Byron Bunch. Lena, pregnant and close to her time, has walked from Alabama through Mississippi seeking Lucas Burch, the man who had promised to marry her. In childish confidence

that he would be waiting, she accepts rides and kindnesses from those who have quick pity for her yet hesitate to become her disillusioners.

In Jefferson she is directed to a mill foreman who almost immediately recognizes in a worthless fellow-worker the man she describes. Their meeting is on a day in August when the community has just discovered the murder of a white woman and the burning of her home by a man who has been identified by Bunch, alias Brown, as Joe Christmas, his bootlegging partner. Christmas has never been suspected of either of two so-called imperfections of mankind, a criminal tendency and Negro blood, a combination so repulsive to a Southern community.

In the course of her short sojourn, the simple-minded Lena is befriended, has her child, naively listens to its father's promises, and finally travels on into Tennessee with the baby and her ardent and hardly less innocent protector, Mr. Bunch. Her exodus comes just as the town and its surrounding area are settling back to normal living after Joe Christmas has been caught and killed and his mutilated body sent to his grandmother for burial.

Carried along on the threads of unashamed simplicity and unworldliness are four individuals whose lives are shadowed by evils inherited from a pre-Civil War social system and ideology, persons ridden by the ghosts of slavery

days. Through them, Faulkner shows the full range of discontent, a discontent bred from the evil that the white man has brought upon himself, nurtured in both ignorance and bad conscience, fomenting into hatred; the whole based on events of the past that force themselves on the present generation. The group includes white men, a white woman, and Joe Christmas, who is probably a mulatto. Old "Doc" Hines, grandfather of Joe, deals with the black-white relationships with a violence sprung from a seething anger that knows no humanity: not for his own daughter, or his wife, or for the child. The Rev. Gail Hightower is a spirit haunted by the ghost of his own grandfather who lived in the frantic age when the Confederacy flowered and died. Turned out by his church and deserted by his wife, he lives in a shadowy world of wild bugles, clashing sabres, and the dying thunder of hooves all mixed up with God and salvation and choir singing and prayer-meeting peacefulness. His destiny includes bringing Lena's child into the world, and his home ironically becomes Joe's Calvary.

Miss Joanna Burden, aging spinster and a "nigger lover," was haunted from childhood by her inheritance of a troubled conscience and a Calvinistic passion to raise the Negro to a level with the white man. She was never free of her dedication to a cause that was based and nurtured on the remnants of past mistakes and misunderstandings. And finally,

there was Joe Christmas who was haunted by a sense of racial inferiority and a curse put on him by his mother,

a stain either on his white blood or his black blood, he was never sure which....And all he craved was peace, an escape from fury and despair, but it was the one thing denied him by the compulsion of his own mixed temperament and the social pressures on the half-caste.¹

The story of Joe's unhappy and unproductive search for peace of mind began some months before his birth when his fate was sealed in the racial haze of his paternity, and it foreshadowed tragic loneliness from the very moment he breathed for himself. In the violence of hatred, Hines had shot the father and let his own daughter die in childbirth. He then took the unnamed baby boy to a white orphanage. "Joe Christmas" was tagged on the boy both facetiously and prophetically by the attendants on duty when he was found. He was "just a white piece of paper on which anyone could write out and identify him and make him believe it."²

The child's first years were uneventful; but when he was about five, he found a puzzling barrier erected about him. One day he was following around a Negro at work in the orphanage yard:

¹Warren Beck, "Faulkner and the South," Antioch Review, I (1941), p. 90.

²Alfred Kazin, "Stillness in Light in August," Partisan Review, XXIV (Fall, 1957), p. 520.

"What you watching me for, boy?" and he [Joe] said, "How come you are a nigger?" and the nigger said, "Who told you I am a nigger, you little white trash bastard?" and he [Joe] says, "I aint a nigger," and the nigger says, "You are worse than that. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont ever know. You'll live and you'll die and you wont ever know," and he says, "God aint no nigger," and the nigger says, "I reckon you ought to know what God is, because dont nobody but God know what you is."³

This incident opened the way for other children to call him "nigger," urged on by the fanatical grandfather who had taken a job as custodian to keep an eye on the boy and see that he did not "contaminate" the white people. Joe's loneliness increased as he became aware of some indefinable taint.

When he was adopted by the McEacherns, his strict Calvinistic foster-father assured the matron that "with us he will grow up to fear God and abhor idleness and vanity despite his origin,"⁴ and that he would learn that "the two abominations are sloth and idle thinking, the two virtues are work and the fear of God."⁵ A zealous bigot, McEachern tried to bend the boy into a stern pattern of religious conformity from which, in his teens, he rebelled. He sought knowledge and release in relationships with those in the town's byways who would accept him for a time, only to turn him out again.

³William Faulkner, Light in August (The Modern Library, New York: Random House, 1950), p. 336.

⁴Ibid., p. 125.

⁵Ibid., p. 126.

After this came years in Oklahoma, Missouri, and Detroit where, in his inevitable black serge clothing and white shirts, symbols he had put on without knowing why, he lived both high and low, in turn a laborer, miner, prospector, gambling tout, and army deserter.

He tricked and teased white men into calling him Negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; he fought the Negro who called him white.... He lived with Negroes, shunning white people. He ate with them, slept with them, belligerent, unpredictable, uncommunicative.... He thought it was loneliness he was trying to escape and not himself.... [He was] doomed with motion, driven by the courage of flagged and spurred despair; by the despair of courage whose opportunities had to be flagged and spurred.⁶

At thirty, Christmas' purposeless wanderings brought him back to Jefferson, Mississippi, where he was born. He had a job for a while under Byron Bunch, shovelling sawdust. From the very first moment he showed up he puzzled the men:

...He did not look like a professional hobo, ...but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried his knowledge with him always as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud. "As if," as the men later said, "he was just down on his luck for a time, and that he didn't intend to stay down on it and didn't give a damn how much he rose up."...

They did not know who he was. None had ever seen him before. "Except that's a pretty risky look for a man to wear on his face in public," one said: "He might forget and use it somewhere where somebody went like it."

.....

⁶Ibid., pp. 196-197.

"His name is what?" one said.

"Christmas."

"Is he a foreigner?"

"Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?" the foreman said.

"I never heard of nobody a-tall named it," the other said.

And that was...how a man's name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can somehow be an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning in time....But as soon as they heard it there was something in the sound of it that was trying to tell them what to expect; that he carried with him his own inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or a rattlesnake its rattle.⁷ Only none of them had sense enough to recognize it.

Joe Christmas became a familiar figure on the Jefferson streets, most often at dusk.

...Nothing can look quite as lonely as a big man going along an empty street. Yet though he was not large, not tall, he contrived somehow to look more lonely than a lone telephone pole in the middle of a desert. In a wide, empty, shadow-brooded street he looked like a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, the past.⁸

For some time he lived in a small cabin on the old Burden place, eating good, hot food, alone, in the white spinster's kitchen; later sleeping with her in a sort of delirious subjugation which he could neither understand nor escape. Joanna Burden, who should by rights have been the very example of respectability, devoting herself to helping the Southern Negro, was the seducer; she corrupted him, a turn of events more confusing to Joe than anything that

⁷Ibid., pp. 27-29.

⁸Ibid., p. 99.

could possibly have happened. His first amazement and acceptance turned to fear, and finally hate; he attempted to cast her off but was caught in her urgency to reform him, to make him a Negro leader. In his desire to free himself he murdered her.

The deed accomplished, he started away, but he did not run at first. For awhile the taste of freedom was good, but his going led to a road that seemed to have no ending. To him his path was like "a street which ran for thirty years." He had made a circle that covered seven days of time but he was moving inside it. He felt that he had "never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo."⁹

When he reached this decision, the peace of inevitability came over him and he revealed his identity in Mottstown, only a short distance by highway from the county seat. He was put in jail while Burch and others haggled over the thousand-dollar reward. Shortly before his hearing in Jefferson, he escaped and ran to the Rev. Hightower's cottage, only to be followed by a mob of maddened white men, members of the American Legion. He was shot and mutilated by their leader, a fanatical, Nazi-minded ex-soldier. The sudden climax of the manhunt and the horror of Percy Grimm's

⁹Ibid., p. 296.

act give to Joe Christmas' lonely and predestined physical collapse an aura of Christian symbolism as if he had for a moment become, not what he was, but Another who sadly whispered, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Thus Joe Christmas, who for thirty-three years tried to become someone, a human being he could himself understand, becomes an abstraction, the symbol of Man trying to fathom the secret of his being.

The technique of Light in August is that of aesthetic distance, particularly in regard to the characterization of Joe Christmas. His actions are seen through talk, rumor, gossip, hearsay, accusation, and the tortured memories of others--even his death is told as an incident in the life of Percy Grimm--all factors suggesting alienation. Except for the scenes wherein the little boy is pictured in his loneliness at the orphanage or when he submits to undeserved whippings by McEachern, we have difficulty experiencing his trials as familiar to us. Most of the time the reader stands apart and is sorry for him, but at the same time he feels more strongly a dissatisfaction with the events that have brought about the situation. Only in the poignant moments of childhood--and Faulkner does have a way of portraying children and old people with affection--is the reader warmly drawn to Christmas. However, unlike the mill

workers, he is aware of the "inescapable warning, like a flower its scent or the rattlesnake its rattle." He knows that something violent will happen to Joe; there is no possible escape. He is constantly reminded of what Joe stands for, the aloneness of man when he does not know himself. There is no grief when he dies in suffering, but there is an immense and weighty awareness that perhaps we--all men--are responsible for the circumstances.

As a character, Joe Christmas is not quite believable; instead, he is the medium through which are seen memorable experiences and through whom our thoughts on man's inhumanity to man are crystalized. The violence is predestined in a society which cannot yet accept and lay the ghosts of the past.

The Cross of Mankind

The exact meaning of Faulkner's writing is always speculative. The author's reserve and reticence in talking about his work gives the critic full opportunity to make his own interpretation. As a rule, however, when a novelist has established a reputation and developed a literary theme of some scope, one must assume that his characters voice some of his own opinions and conclusions. Almost every word of the Nobel Prize acceptance speech emphasizes that such is the writer's duty:

[Man] 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 duty, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, . . .¹⁰

Particularly since Faulkner's later book, A Fable, has definite religious overtones, it is safe to assume that Light in August, which suggests some parallel to the crucifixion, should be an attempt to relate to Christian symbolism such an important social problem as racial prejudice. Although Joe Christmas, as a character, has no virtues except that he endures for a while something which he cannot escape and which sets him apart in loneliness, there are many things about his life which recall the Christian myth. There was a haze over his paternity; Joseph is the father-name in the Holy Family; his childhood was withdrawn from other children; he was conscious of some "difference" in himself; his feet were once washed almost ceremoniously by his foster-mother; he constantly sought a kind of truth; he was always a wanderer; he was betrayed for "pieces of silver"; his death was cruel and undignified; he lived for just thirty-three years; and he died not so much for what he had done as for what he represented in the minds of the soldier-pursuers. In his death there was a sort of resurrection, if only in

¹⁰Faulkner, "Nobel Speech," loc. cit.

the memories of those who watched and who must have asked a silent question, "Why?"

Faulkner uses "Doc" Hines, Calvin McEachern, and Joanna Burden to represent the obsession of the elect with what they consider the utter sinfulness of others. That each is not entirely clear in his own mind just what this sin is, makes for an excessive emphasis on goodness, righteousness, salvation, or duty, whatever it may be called. The polarity of purity and guilt are the remnants of an inhuman religion which added bigotry and arrogance to the curse of slavery. These three zealots and their standards are the symbols of the church that had lost its spiritual function, the church that has thrown out Gail Hightower. McEachern once whipped Joe Christmas to make him learn his catechism, and then demanded that he kneel with him to pray.

He prayed for a long time, his voice droning, soporific, monotonous. He asked that he be forgiven for trespass against the Sabbath and for lifting his hand against a child, an orphan, who was dear to God. He asked that the child's stubborn heart be softened and that the sin of disobedience be forgiven him also, through the advocacy of the man whom he had flouted and disobeyed, requesting that the Almighty be as magnanimous as himself, and by and through and because of conscious grace "Take the book," he said.¹¹

The boy was just eight then, and his foster-father was a ruthless man who had never known pity or doubt.

¹¹Faulkner, Light in August, op. cit., p. 133.

"Doc" Hines, who sometimes confused himself with God, advocated the extermination of the Negro in the interest of racial purity. He said that God had kept in touch with him, His chosen instrument, and that He had finally told him that something would have to be done about the boy: "Your work is not done yet. He's [Joe] a pollution and abomination on my earth,"¹² and forever it would be his duty to see that the child was an outcast. God, being a white man in Hines' belief, had elected him, another white man, to wipe out the black race as if it were the world's greatest evil. After Joe was behind bars, the old man stood on the street corners calling the people cowards because they didn't take the prisoner and hang him right away. He wanted to help lynch him.

He said he had a right to kill the nigger. He never said why, and he was too worked up and crazy to make sense even when somebody would stop him long enough to ask a question. There was a right good crowd around him by then and him yelling how it was his right to say first whether the nigger should live or should die.¹³

On the other hand, Miss Burden's passion was to lift the Negro to equality with the white man. This dedication she had inherited from her father, and he from his father, a man who had instilled into his children a hatred of two things, hell and slaveholders. The old man had been killed

¹²Ibid., p. 338. ¹³Ibid., p. 308.

near Jefferson by an ex-slaveholder and Confederate soldier named Sartoris, over a question of Negro voting. Miss Joanna led a quiet life, shunned by the whites because she was a "nigger lover," helping Negroes with food, clothing, money, and education for those with ambition, while spending all that was left of the family fortune to clear the blot on her conscience. To Christmas she once said:

"They hated us here. We were Yankees. Foreigners. Worse than foreigners: enemies. Carpetbaggers. And it--the War--still too close for even the ones who got whipped to be sensible. Stirring up the Negroes for murder and rape, they called it. Threatening white supremacy. So I suppose that Colonel Sartoris was a town hero because he killed with two shots from the same pistol an old onearmed man and a boy who had never cast his first vote. Maybe they were right, I dont know."..."Just when do men that have different blood in them stop hating one another?" [said Joe Christmas] "When do they?" Her voice ceased.¹⁴

Joanna's father had taken her, as a child, to the graves and made a long impassioned speech to her:

Remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever.... The curse of every white child that was ever born and that ever will be born. None can escape it.¹⁵

His words stamped a deep impression upon the young girl who already had been well indoctrinated with a zeal to do

¹⁴Ibid., p. 218. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 221.

something for those for whom she felt responsibilities. The image of the white-Negro relationship was stark and naked to her. She had seen and known Negroes all her life.

I just looked at them as I did at rain, or furniture, or food or sleep. But after that [her father's words] I seemed to see them for the first time, not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the other children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them even before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out as their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross. I saw all the little babies that would ever be in the world, the ones not yet even born--a long line of them with their arms spread, on the black crosses. I couldn't tell then whether I saw it or dreamed it. But it was terrible to me. I cried at night. At last I told father, tried to tell him. What I wanted to tell him was that I must escape, get away from under the shadow, or I would die. "You cannot," he said. "You must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level. I see that now, which I did not see until I came down here. But escape it you cannot. The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He first cursed Him."¹⁶

Except in her physically misguided behavior with Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden--and Faulkner takes extreme satisfaction in the aptness of the surname he has given her--was literally carrying her share of the cross which she had accepted, a responsibility to help the Negro race. Her love

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 221-222.

was possessive. Unwisely she tried to force on Christmas obligations similar to those she had accepted, including becoming educated and representing his people, something between a lawyer and a missionary. She was cursed with her own fanaticism and could no more escape her obsession with the Negro than could Christmas. She had assumed that he was part Negro. Early in her association with him she had asked:

"You dont have any idea who your parents were?"...

"Except that one of them was part nigger."...

"How do you know that?"

He didnt answer for a time. Then he said: "I dont know it." Again his voice ceased;...[it] now had an overtone, unmirthful yet quizzical, at once humorless and sardonic: "If I'm not, damned if I haven't wasted a lot of time."¹⁷

"She shouldn't have prayed over me," was Joe's only comment and justification for killing her and thus destroying the thing she was doing to him; he felt no guilt.

Miss Burden was aware of the uselessness of wars to settle problems, just as she was conscious that her own family's methods were not fully acceptable. As she explained to Joe Christmas:

It [the War] was all over then. The killing in uniform and with flags, and the killing without uniforms and flags. And none of it doing any good. None of it. And we were foreigners, strangers, that thought differently from the people whose country we had come into without being asked or wanted....[My father was enough French] to respect anybody's love for the land where

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 222-223.

he and his people were born and to understand that a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act.¹⁸

Although Faulkner does not hesitate to imply the wrongness of forceful interference and unwarranted violence, he does place, in the depths of the original purpose, the seeds of the Christian doctrine of man's humanity to man. Miss Burden, "Doc" Hines, Calvin McEachern, and others were all trying to improve the world, but their methods were wrong. Even Grimm was well-intentioned in his effort to wipe out an evil. It is the misguided and sanctimonious diligence of a few individuals that ultimately leads to more corruption and confusion--acts of violence and repayment in more violence, with little gained in the end. All of these themes are advanced in Light in August by both the blacks and the whites: sometimes in a deliberate act with a deeply hidden reason, as with Christmas' murder of Miss Burden; sometimes in spontaneous violence, as Grimm's brutal mutilating just to teach a man he had already killed "to let white women alone, even in hell."¹⁹

Joe Christmas' flight after Joanna's murder is deliberate, as if he had done something which had to be done and he had not yet realized the consequences. He believed "with calm paradox that he was the volitionless

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 407.

servant of the fatality in which he did not believe. He was saying to himself, 'I had to do it'.²⁰ When a message comes to the sheriff that a white man had disrupted a Negro revival meeting by cursing from the pulpit and fighting viciously all who tried to hold him, the bloodhounds almost track him down, for Joe is now beginning to run, not from any one thing, least of all his own conscience, but from what he cannot understand about himself. The posse found where he had traded his shoes for a pair of brogans worn by a Negro woman, the fugitive trying to throw the pursuers off his track but at the same time making one more attempt to walk, not as a white man, but as a Negro. As he paused to lace up his shoes

It seemed to him that he could see himself hunted by white men at last into an abyss which had been waiting, trying for thirty years to drown him, and to which now and at last he had actually entered, bearing now upon his ankles the definite and ineradicable gauge of its upward moving. "That [peacefulness] was all I wanted," he thinks in a quiet and slow amazement. "That was all, for thirty years." That didn't seem a whole lot to ask in thirty years.²¹

Time becomes a hazy thing and hunger acute, but when he stops at a cabin, it seems important to him to ask "Can you tell me what day this is? I just want to know what day this is."²² When he runs to the point of exhaustion and asks

²⁰Ibid., pp. 244-245.

²¹Ibid., p. 289.

²²Ibid., p. 290.

for food at a Negro cabin, he is sickeningly aware that "they were afraid. Of their brother afraid."²³ He knows that any one of a dozen persons could have captured him, but that they all "started running themselves" as if, he thinks, "there is a rule to catch me by, and to capture me that way would not be like the rule says."²⁴ Finally, having lost account of time and distance, and with only the need to stop running left to him, he sees Mottstown.

Looking he can see the smoke low in the sky, beyond an imperceptible corner; he is entering again the street he has run for thirty years. It had been a paved street where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he was still inside it. Though during the past 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 the 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, ...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.²⁵

In the town he gets a shave and a clean shirt, then walks the streets until a surprised citizen recognizes him and he is put in jail, an independent being whom society has recognized as an individual. His captors are more angry than pleased because Joe Christmas

²³Ibid., p. 293. ²⁴Ibid., p. 294.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 296-297.

...never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made folks so mad. For him to be a murderer and all dressed up and walking the town like he never dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too."²⁶

Christmas has been a symbol of flight, and has become the symbol of the end of man's running, a dignified end rather than one of confusion. In his capture he attains a moment of selfhood, forerunner of the martyrdom that awaits him; and martyrdom it is, rather than punishment. Because he does not know who he is he cannot locate the source of his misery in either the white race or the black. His pursuers do not know; they are only striking out at "Negro," representing either the white man's guilt or his fear. In its most bestial moments the mob has found someone to "crucify," and the irony is that the act will be done as much in anger at themselves for being disturbed in their own consciences as in punishment for a crime.

Lawyer Gavin Stevens interprets the conflict that kept Joe Christmas running for thirty years, from the time the little three-year-old boy in an orphanage was aware of his aloneness and difference:

... It was not alone those thirty years...but all the successions of thirty years before that which had put a

²⁶Ibid., pp. 306-307.

stain on his white blood or his black blood, whichever you will, and which killed him. But he must have run with believing for awhile; anyway with hope. But his blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. Because the black blood drove him first to the Negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which made him snatch up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it. And it was the white blood which sent him to the minister, which rising in him for the last and final time, sent him against all reason and reality....Then I believe the white blood deserted him for a moment. Just a second, a flicker, allowing the black to rise in its final moment and make him turn upon that on which he had postulated his hope of salvation. It was his black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up into that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment. And then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. He did not kill the minister. He merely struck him with the pistol and ran on and crouched behind the overturned table and let them shoot him to death, with that loaded and unfired pistol in his hand.²⁷

It was Percy Grimm, another self-styled defender of the white race against the evils of the Negro (here again Faulkner has the deft, artistic touch in a name that implies an epithet) who emptied his automatic's magazine into the table, then rushed toward the victim. His Nazi-inspired deed of killing and mutilation done, he sprang back while Joe Christmas did not move.

. . . He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow about his mouth. For a long moment he looked

²⁷Ibid., pp. 393-394.

up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, . . . [and] the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.²⁸

Thus, in a deed so vile, the reader sees a tragic moment of Aristotelian catharsis as he feels, with the dying man, a final peace and tranquility in acceptance. Joe Christmas had been crucified, not alone for an act of premeditated violence, but for something which he could not understand, but through which he endured to show others a light they should not lose in

. . . whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading, and not particularly threatening, but of itself alone and serene, of itself alone triumphant.²⁹

This is the "Light" in an "August" of the end of man's brilliant and seething growing days. Malcolm Cowley wishes to interpret the novel's title in the purely basic relation it has to the vehicle plot of Lena Grove's earthiness.³⁰ However it appears to have had to Faulkner a more

²⁸Ibid., p. 407. ²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Cowley, The Portable Faulkner, op. cit., p. 653. "Incidentally the title of the novel has nothing to do with August sunlight; it refers to Lena Grove and her baby. In the Mississippi backwoods, it is sometimes said of a pregnant woman, but more often of a cow or mare, that she will be light in August."

symbolic meaning and refers to a social problem of wide scope, proving, as he said in the Nobel speech, that it is the writer's duty to "remind him [the reader] of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of the past."³¹ Alfred Kazin says that the book has a "stillness," that it is "curiously soundless for it is full of people thinking to themselves about the past."³²

Joe Christmas was as obsessed with the stain on his heritage as Aylmer with the blemish on his wife's face in Hawthorne's short story, "The Birthmark." He could not face the burden of being a human being and went about trying to erase the stain with relentless fury. Melville's Ahab was seeking a whiteness, a purity, in the great white whale, and it, too, was his Nemesis. The "Moment of Truth" is all the matador seeks. A search for something very precious absorbs most men's minds, whether for a lifetime or for just an hour.

Faulkner has made Light in August a strong plea for a better understanding of the causes for the rebellion of a minority race. Byron Bunch, who ties the threads of the

³¹Faulkner, "Nobel Speech," loc. cit.

³²Alfred Kazin, "Stillness of Light in August," op. cit., p. 527.

plot together very subtly, puts the philosophy of the novel into simple language in two comments:

... there is a price for being good the same as for being bad; a cost to pay. And it's the good men that cant deny the bill when it come around. They cant deny it for the reason that there aint any way to make them pay for it, like a honest man that gambles. The bad men cant deny it; that's why dont nobody expect them to pay on sight or any time. But the good cant. Maybe it takes longer to pay for being good than being bad.³³

... it seems like a man can just about bear anything. He can even bear what he never done. He can even bear the thinking how some things is just more than he can bear. He can even bear it that if he could just give down and cry, he wouldn't do it. He can even bear it not to look back, even when he knows that looking back wont do him any good.³⁴

Light in August is a tragic vision of a man of an inescapable dual nature in a world in which there is a mixture of good and evil, the vision of a sort of cross that mankind has to bear and that no individual can carry alone. Whether "Negro" represents the white man's guilt or his fear, he is always a thought in the white man's mind--in the South, an obsession, seen both as the cause and the image of guilt. Miss Burden and "Doc" Hines paradoxically appear "fair," but their possessiveness in the forms of conscience and hatred make them "evil." Christmas, on the other hand, is "evil" by all civilized standards, but he is "fair" in that Miss Burden and "Doc" Hines, not he, were responsible for

³³Faulkner, Light in August, op. cit., p. 341.

³⁴Ibid., p. 371.

his being the manner of man he was. Joe Christmas is not only the incarnation of the race problem, but of the condition of man.

Through his fiction William Faulkner appears to be asking some by-orthodox questions: What is conscience? Is conscience the same as morality? How can any man, any indi-

vidual, can at best be only a creature of habit and never have the rigidity of a two-plus-four-equals-six result. They deal not with concrete matters but pertain to time and distance and certainties and

investigative thinking of those who are willing to pose original and perhaps more complicated questions in response to perplexing original inquiries.

William Faulkner

Faulkner himself, with a sociological rather than a literary interest in the human condition, has been more concerned with causes and effects than with the individual. He has been more interested in the social order, especially in the South, than in the individual.

his world of people and events; and because of his own view of a small world, he gives us

CHAPTER V

A PARTIAL ANSWER

Through his fiction William Faulkner appears to be asking three hypothetical questions: What is endurance? Is endurance the same as freedom? How can any race, any individual, endure?

The answers to such questions can at best be only relative because they can never have the rigidity of a four-plus-four-equals-six result. They deal not with concrete matters but pertain to time and distance and condition and mind. Any answer can only come out of the sincere and investigative thinking of those who are willing to pose additional and perhaps more complicated questions to untangle the perplexing original inquiries.

Some Endure; A Few Prevail

Faulkner habitually sets a sociological rather than a personal pattern for his characters so that the reader identifies himself more with causes and effects than with portraiture and plot. He sees the young generation, confused, rootless, desperately searching for some tradition that might bring order. He knows how to evoke for his readers a vivid world of people and events; and because of his concentration on a small geographical area, he gives to its

fictional history an air of reality as well as of representative importance. The decadence of Southern character and society following the Civil War, the infiltration and abuse of both well-intentioned and material-minded Northerners, and the ebb-and-flow of racial interrelations are themes that give his writings substance as social documents.

However, Faulkner makes no pretense of writing for wide circulation--he appeared even a little embarrassed at the success of Sanctuary, which he said was a "cheap idea, deliberately conceived to make money."¹ His goal, he said, was "to become admired by the discriminating few in the hope that their taste eventually would form the taste of the intelligent many."² It is this "intelligent many" who, with materials laid before them, should be the ones to appreciate the "courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have gone into the making of the past"³ and which must be saved or renewed or built anew.

In the three novels here considered, The Sound and the Fury, Intruder in the Dust, and Light in August, there is an immense amount of observation and comment ranging from

¹Robert Coughlin, The Private World of William Faulkner (New York: Harper and Bros., 1954), p. 77.

²Ibid., p. 76.

³Faulkner, "Acceptance Speech," loc. cit.

dialogue to description to soliloquy." Although Faulkner has jokingly said "I'm not responsible for the statements of my characters or for anything lost or found in the pages of my books,"⁴ it is unlikely that he would have spent a lifetime writing fiction that had no significance to him.

It is scarcely fair to an author for a critic to pick up bodily three pieces of writing and say "This is IT"! It is much more fair to the writer for the critic to see if the themes that are uppermost in his representative novels are more or less inherent in his entire works. The questions of endurance and freedom in relation to individuals and society are as recurrent in William Faulkner's novels and short stories as are his reverence for the past, his feeling for the power and glory of the land itself, the warmth of family ties and brotherly affection, and the various gradations between "good" and "evil."

One of his highly significant accomplishments lies in his handling of the Negro character to illustrate the value of endurance and freedom. The Negro in America has always lived in a white-controlled society; but how he has lived and how the majority race lives with and around him are issues of growing importance. Faulkner has no answers to the problem of integration, nor does he consider it in his

Negro. Bayard's companion in The Unconquered, is loyal and

⁴Coughlin, The Private World, op. cit., p. 89.

fiction. He strongly indicates the theory of determinism --that all men, but particularly those of a race that has a "stain on either its white blood or its black blood, whichever you will," are determined by birth into certain patterns. The whole human race cannot escape either the best or the worst in mankind, and it is those individuals in whom there is a mingling of strains who are most apt to rebel or be misunderstood. If their choice of the best or the worst is not wise or proves inescapable, there will be both violence and suffering. These things Faulkner has shown in the characters of Dilsey, Lucas Beauchamp, and Joe Christmas as they become focal points for the action of the white characters in the three novels.

The Negro as a domestic is also seen briefly in some of the Sartoris stories--in the faithful manservant in "A Rose for Emily," and Molly in "Go Down, Moses." Like Dilsey, they have little quarrel with their lot, have a religion to uphold them, and are unquestionably loyal to their masters or employers. The quality of endurance has more to do with their own attitude of social acceptance than with any question of their blood lines; and their worth comes primarily because they are able to hold together the white folks who have become weak through some abuse of their faculties. Ringo, Bayard's companion in The Unvanquished, is loyal and intelligent, and in some ways more admirable than Bayard.

Loosh, on the other hand, who wants to be "free" and help the Yankees, has not the strength of endurance.

No Negro character in Faulkner's fiction, even Joe Christmas, is morally less admirable than Nancy Manningoe, the maid in Requiem for a Nun. Yet it is her killing of a little child that promises to make Temple Drake and her husband more reputable members of society; otherwise her sacrifice would have been in vain. Another killer, Butch Beauchamp, grandson of Molly and Lucas, turns from the steadying influence of the old people in "Go Down, Moses," wallows in "freedom" in Chicago's "black belt," and ends up in the electric chair.

Although Faulkner makes the primitive Indian-Negro an almost perfect biological specimen, the complete blend of man and the land itself, he shows that he endures only as the strong spirit of man, uncorrupted. Sam Fathers of "The Bear" has, over the years, proved to be the master of himself and his temptations, but he has done it away from crowds, in the untamed wilderness. He has the same virtues as the bear, Old Ben; both are patriarchs of the forests, ideals antedating civilization, timeless, living a ritual pattern of behavior. Boon, the half-breed, Lion, the mongrel dog, and Ike, the white boy, are influenced by the courage, pride, and humility of the old man. Sam Fathers dies and leaves nothing to endure except in the memories of Ike

McCaslin. It is prophetic that with the death of the "kings" of the open spaces, the new settlers should move in and the land be violated by the cruelty and materialism of civilization.

The Negro characters in Absalom, Absalom! are a part of the countless race of halfbreeds whom the racial strains pull asunder in varying degrees. Faulkner seems to be filled with loathing in this novel because so much is cruel and ugly and hopeless and perverse. None endure, except in the pessimistic--or optimistic--Northerner's attitude that in a few thousand years all will have levelled off.

As to freedom, Faulkner's implications are that legal freedom and individual freedom are antipodal, that those who are tied closest as "brothers" are in the long run the most free. Freedom is not so much a matter of no physical restrictions as it is an inner release of restricting attitudes. Freedom and endurance are almost synonymous; at least, in order to endure one must be free, and to be free is the most desirable condition of mankind. The Lucas Beauchamps who come to grips with the world are more free in prison than the Quentin Compsons at the university who are tied to their guilts and consciences.

Historically, Faulkner views the origin of the South's Negro problem as the result of an empty legal emancipation; there still remains the problem of freeing

the Negro from his environment and the white prejudices.

There are personal trials that the whites face, as illustrated in Jason IV "freeing the Compsons from the niggers." Faulkner does not idealize the South in its lingering legends, but suggests that the magnitude of the sin of slavery and the need for expiation are both current and demanding. The mere words, "I have no prejudices," are an admission that there is an obligation only partly met.

The South has inherited the violence of its whole history. Changes and adjustments to meet today's situations are destined to come slowly. It is still less than a hundred years since the Civil War, and both whites and Negroes are living together in prolonged uneasiness. The Negro is the gauge of moral conduct in the South; and though he may have been abused and exploited, it is his obligation, as well as that of the majority race, to settle the scores fairly. The public's admission that there is a problem may be the opening wedge.

Faulkner makes no such bald statements as these, but his characters indicate that this is what he may think, and the whole range of Southern society is very close to his heart. The Dilseys must do more than serve and endure; they must advance economically and intellectually, and so prevail. The Lucas Beauchamps must continue their independence and pride and endurance, but they must be willing to accept help

and advice and so gain the valued qualities of contentment and respect without the arrogance; then they, too, will prevail. The Joe Christmases will need great help and understanding from both races, for theirs is the most explosive plight. They will have to be accepted for their own worth; then somehow they will have to learn or be taught that "good" and "bad" are not wholly determinative; that man may be set in a pattern, but only a pattern, not a mold. An idealistic view of a "one world" attitude within one section of a country is not without possibilities for those of any race if they put their minds to it.

To Lift Men's Hearts

Faulkner would be the last to set down rules or answer rhetorical questions. After all, he is only a writer of fiction, albeit an immensely imaginative and poetic one. He intends to ask no questions; he proposes to make no answers. But he declares, in the preface to the Faulkner Reader, and his fiction seems to bear him out, that literary men have a dedication to meet:

To uplift men's hearts; the same for all of us; for the ones who are trying to be artists, the ones who are trying to write for simple entertainment, the ones who write to shock, and the ones who are simply escaping themselves and their own private anguishes.

Some of us don't know that this is what we are writing for. Some of us will know it and deny it, lest we be accused and self-convicted and condemned for sentimentality,

which people nowadays for some reason are ashamed to be tainted with; some of us seem to have curious ideas of just where the heart is, confusing it with other and baser glands and organs and activities. But we all write for one purpose.

This does not mean that we are trying to change man, improve him, though there is hope--maybe even intention of some of us....

So he who, from the isolation of cold impersonal print can engender excitement, himself partakes of the immortality he has engendered. Some day he will be no more, which will not matter then, because isolated and itself invulnerable in the cold print remains that which is capable of engendering still the old deathless excitement in the hearts and glands whose owners and custodians are generations from even the air breathed and anguished in; if it was capable once, he knows that it will be capable and potent still long after there remains of him only a dead and fading name.⁴

The critic of William Faulkner's work must not forget that he is dealing with a novelist with strong ethical preconceptions. His fictional characters come alive when strong social interpretations are put upon their actions. It is both satisfying and a little surprising to find that the fictionist has a dedication to his reading public and that he feels it his duty

... to write about the things that 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 of the past. The poet's voice need not be merely the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him prevail.⁵

⁴Faulkner, "Foreword," Faulkner Reader (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. ix-xi.

⁵Faulkner, "Nobel Speech," loc. cit.

Although by many critics Faulkner is considered a pessimist in his ultimate expression of despair through such characters as Joe Christmas, still there is, beyond a doubt, a great and glowing optimism. As long as there is the quality of endurance and the love of freedom in the hearts of a large segment of society, there is hope that freedom and humanity will prevail. It does not seem mere chance that the titles of all of Faulkner's fiction have confident overtones and that three of his greatest novels are named significantly. The Sound and the Fury indicates that even though there is much confusion, man can understand his past, present, and future if he determines to do so. Intruder in the Dust shows that the elements of evil can be eliminated if man wishes to make improvements. Most hopefully, Light in August proves that knowledge and maturity are undeniably opposed to ignorance and misunderstanding.

Thus, William Faulkner satisfactorily sets a standard of measurement for man's actions, and hopefully views the future in the light of man's potential quality of endurance.

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