Dilsey and Lucas: Faulkner's Use of the Negro as a Gauge of Moral Character

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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 "Pantaloon 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 two popular novels, *The Sound and the Fury and Intruder in the Dust,* the major characters, Dilsey, Lucas Beauchamp, exemplify two ways in which the individual, and by extension the race of mankind, may

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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.

These two 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, as Faulkner said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "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."

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 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.

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 individual. It is the Negro's attitude, based on many influences, plus the antagonism and prejudices of the white man that make him what he is and give him his ability to withstand circumstances beyond his own making. Faulkner indicates that there are Snopeses and Sartorises, slaves, and aristocrats, not in name but in quality, among men and women of any race.

In *The Sound and the Fury* there are two groups of people, the Compsons, remnants of Southern aristocracy, and the others who "were

not Compsons. They were black. . . . They endured."[1] This last comment is the crux of the matter, Faulkner appears to think. Certain individuals, in this case Negroes, apparently have the ability to make the best of things; not letting the pre-ordained inundate the soul no matter how strong the tide is; not ignoring the physical facts but admitting their presence; and not forgetting that man is constituted with a heart that has a two-fold purpose, keeping his life flowing and his humanness alive.

Among the Negroes, Roskus, T. P., Versh, Frony, and even Luster are completely overshadowed by Dilsey. Tall, gaunt, ageless, strong with the strength of a woman who has known nothing but a life of physical labor, Dilsey accepts 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, 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.[2]

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, leaving, for the moment, her Pullman porter husband. 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."[3]

1. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 22.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

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 Chicago and New York sweat shops."[4] He is the new "free Negro," 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.[7]

Grandson Luster is Dilsey's pride, however little she will admit it. She will take no impudence from him, will not countenence his laziness, and tries to keep him from learning new ideas from the low class whites who come through town with the traveling 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."[5] 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 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 showing a group of lounging Negroes, how quality does."[6] 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. "Ain't got nothin against them. I goes my way and lets white folks go theirs,"[7] he once said; and again, "Dese is funny folks. Glad I ain't none of em."[8]

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

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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 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,"[9] and faded 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 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

9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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."[10] 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"[11] 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 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 Caroline 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.

> 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."
>
> . . . "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. Comp-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

son knew that he had lowered her face a little and that she stood now like a cow in the rain . . . ."[12]

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

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

> 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."[13]

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

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."

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

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 286-288.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-217.

> let her alone? Cant you live in de same house wid your own blood niece widout quoilin?"
>
> "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."[14]

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

She is just as capable of putting others 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.
>
> "I hears em," Frony said.
>
> "And I knows whut kind of folks," Dilsey said. "Trash white folks. Dat's who it is.

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.[16]

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

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 305-306.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Nothing good, they were sure, would come from tampering with something that became God-given through the sacrament of baptism. Caddy, however, though 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.
>
> 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.[17]

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.[18] Frony was in a flashy dress and flowered hat, and Luster sported a stiff new straw. As they passed the cabins, Negros 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."[19]

In the church Ben sat quietly beside her, where she could pat his knee occasionally and whisper "Hush now. Dey fixin to sing in a minute."[20] 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.[21]

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17. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
18. *Ibid.*, p .303.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

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

> 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!"
>
> "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."[22]

Rev'un Shegog had spoken directly to Dilsey; and she knew she was seeing the prophecy come true with her own white family—the beginning, back when she was a little slave child of the old governor's; the ending in Jason's turning from all the people and the 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 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," Caroline Barr, who 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:

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22. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-313.

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.[23]

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 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.

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 individual's 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.

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 with good and white with evil; but the picture is less biased, although farther

23. William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses,* Dedication.

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 decandent, 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 Chuck 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 people 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, charge 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, and 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 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, shamefaced, 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.

The shocking news that Lucas had been taken into custody for the murder of a white man came to the boy from his uncle.[24] 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.[25]

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, 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.[26]

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 off, assuring itself that "They won't do nothing today.[27] The men talked quietly,

24. William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*, p. 23.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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 Negro] that shoots white men in the back? Or the South either.[28] The paradox was that Lucas, in bonds, was completely self-contained, giving the impression that he had been working toward this crowing moment for twenty-five years.

Faulkner carefully examines the crowd watching the jail entrance. He indicates that they were the ones who helped ruin 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.[29]

These were the landless whites, caught up in a mechanized civilization, who, like wolves, surrounded the Negro and held him until they were ready to tear him apart. In contrast was Lucas, easy 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.[30] 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.[31] 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

28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
30. *Loc cit.*
31. *Loc. cit.*

> 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.[32]

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.[33] 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 don't 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."[34] 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,"[35] 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 in 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 Negros and the whites for each other; and, even more, 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.

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 mouth of the lawyer and his nephew. He lets Stevens say of the Southerners:

> 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.[36]

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32. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

What Chick and Gavin 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.[37]

They were running away from themselves, ashamed more of their misjudgement than for the actual injury to a fellowman. The whole exodus, Faulkner indicates, symbolizes the topsyturvy 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.[38]

Faulkner lets Stevens and Chick continue their investigation of intolerance. Lucas is a member of a minority group, endowed with dignity and integrity. He 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.")[39]

> "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; dont be ashamed."[40]

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 Detroits 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 their ancestral horror and scorn and fear of Indian and Chinese and Mexican and Carib and Jew, . . . a people divided at a

37. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

> time when history is still showing us that the antiroom to disillusion is division . . .[41]

The big question is, What price Lucas' humanity?

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."[42]

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."[43]

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 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. 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 . . . .[44]

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41. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
44. *Ibid.*, 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."

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