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# Narrative patterns of racism and resistance in the work of William Faulkner

Janet Elizabeth Barnwell

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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NARRATIVE PATTERNS OF RACISM AND RESISTANCE  
IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Janet Elizabeth Barnwell  
B.A., Emory University, 1989  
M.A., University of New Orleans, 1994  
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## ABSTRACT

Keeping in mind the complicated nature of race relations in the South during the segregation era, as well as the economic volatility of the time, and recognizing Faulkner's position as a white southern writer, this dissertation poses and attempts to answer a few specific questions regarding Faulkner's work. First, beginning with *New Orleans Sketches* and ending with *Go Down, Moses*, what texts seem most devoted to examining issues of race difference? Second, where in these texts does Faulkner most strikingly incorporate and then challenge racial stereotypes and clichés about the South? Third, working chronologically, how did Faulkner reconcile his position as a son of the South, with his position as a writer who felt it necessary to develop all types of characters realistically--from Jason Compson to Rider, from Thomas Sutpen to Mollie Beauchamp? And finally, as readers, what insights can Faulkner reveal to us about the interpersonal relationships of his characters, characters drawn heavily from the segregation era of the South? What did he want readers to see?

Because most of his novels are set in the same Oxford-inspired Yoknapatawpha county, it is not surprising that certain characters appear again and again in his work. Likewise, Faulkner also revisits similar themes and repeats certain narrative patterns. Juxtaposing a character "type" with other characters or "community," Faulkner is able to create real possibilities for exploring human nature. Repeating broad narrative patterns allows Faulkner to reveal particular intricacies of social hierarchies and to expose the origins of oppressive actions by individuals and masses. The repetition allows Faulkner to emphasize the existence of unspoken cultural norms that empower some while oppressing others. One such repeated theme shows a white middle-class moderate

choosing to turn away from injustice, choosing complicity with other white characters rather than action on behalf of a black or mixed-race character who suffers and sometimes dies unfairly. If Faulkner had portrayed only one such character, the importance might be lost to readers. Because Faulkner creates several characters choosing to turn away from injustice, avid readers of Faulkner must pause to consider the significance of this repeated behavior.

## INTRODUCTION: ESCAPING INERTIA: FAULKNER'S DEPARTURE FROM SOUTHERN TRADITION

### I. Dissertation Introduction

Five years before Faulkner's most prolific and successful writing period, 1925-1940, the well-known writer and editor H. L. Mencken proclaimed, "For a Southerner to deal with his neighbors realistically . . . would be almost unbelievable" (Mencken 136-7). Known as an "iconoclastic journalist and acerbic social critic," Mencken was responding to southern fiction popular at the end of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century (Franklin C-13). The southern fiction produced by nineteenth century writers, such as Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris, was marked by a kind of romantic nostalgia -- a view of the old South as a glorious homeland that had been struck down during the Civil War and misunderstood throughout history, but which still struggled to hold intact its old ways and customs. In particular, nostalgic southern stories and novels were promoted as folk tales of the South, but such narratives often did not portray southern blacks realistically. In terms of Mencken's critique, the white southern writer's depiction of his black "neighbor" did not ring true.<sup>i</sup> In *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890- 1940*, Grace Hale extends what Mencken suggests by asserting that during the segregation era "white southern fiction and memoirs flowed off the presses with tales of the loyal and lifelong relationships of black slaves or servants and white owners or employers." It was writing that "in [Albion] Tourgee's phrase [was] 'distinctly Confederate in sympathy'" and "peopled with 'happy darkies,' noble masters, and doting mistresses" (Hale 51-52).<sup>ii</sup>



In a significant departure from the traditions of southern writing, Faulkner wrote narratives that employed a raw, and sometimes brutal, authenticity. His works bring black, white, multi-racial, as well as poor, middle class, and wealthy characters face to face in situations where they at times transgress racial and class boundaries. Narrative conflicts become race and class conflicts in which readers, along with characters, are forced to confront, acknowledge, and learn about human difference, ultimately, in order to view these confrontations as a means toward reconciliation. During the segregation era – a time when racial battles were being fought daily, lynchings occurred across the South, and Americans in general were suffering from the poverty of the Great Depression – Faulkner’s writing would become one catalyst for change, forcing even the author himself to confront his own deeply-held beliefs concerning race and class divisions.

World War I and the Depression, as well as the growing influence of the Modernist movement, also contributed to a change in the aesthetic landscape of southern fiction, and Faulkner more than any other popular writer of the time incorporated and developed modernist techniques to tell the stories of his homeland. He read Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, yet he also read the works of other American and European novelists who wrote quite differently. Michael Millgate asserts that Faulkner served “an apprenticeship to Melville, Conrad, Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Dostoevsky, [and] Cervantes.” Other biographers and scholars, including Daniel Singal, make clear that Faulkner also read Shakespeare, Voltaire, O’Neill, Twain, Poe, Joyce, and Eliot as well as many works of literary criticism.<sup>iii</sup> A young observant Faulkner would have been exposed to degrading images of

blacks as well as brutal acts of lynching that occurred publicly in town squares. He would have heard rumors about the secret violence that occurred in the South. Yet unlike his predecessors, an adult Faulkner would not dismiss the malevolent attributes of southern culture; he would write in order to reveal and record both the positive dignified aspects of life in the South and its terrible unspoken truths. For readers, Faulkner's resulting narratives capture fully the problematic dynamics of the South's segregation history, and they do so as well as any of the great writing he would have read and admired.

In the early 1930s, ten years after his proclamation that it would be "unbelievable" for any southern writer "to deal with his neighbors realistically," H. L. Mencken, then an editor at the *American Mercury*, read a story manuscript called "----That Evening Sun Go Down" by a young southern writer. He thought the story a "capital" one and published it in March of 1931 (Polk X). "That Evening Sun," as it was titled at the time of publication was one of Faulkner's first great short stories, revealing a whole host of human injustices. Clearly Mencken saw Faulkner's work as quite distinct from the writing that had come out of the South up to that time, and he subsequently published several more of Faulkner's stories in the *American Mercury*, including "Hair" (Hobson 25-26).

Keeping in mind the complicated nature of race relations in the South during the segregation era, as well as the economic volatility of the time, and recognizing Faulkner's position as a white southern writer, this dissertation poses and attempts to answer a few specific questions regarding Faulkner's work. First, beginning with *New Orleans Sketches* and ending with *Go Down, Moses*, what texts seem most

devoted to examining issues of race difference? Second, where in these texts does Faulkner most strikingly incorporate and then challenge racial stereotypes and clichés about the South? Third, working chronologically, how did Faulkner reconcile his position as a son of the South, with his position as a writer who felt it necessary to develop all types of characters realistically--from Jason Compson to Rider, from Thomas Sutpen to Mollie Beauchamp? And finally, as readers, what insights can Faulkner reveal to us about the interpersonal relationships of his characters, characters drawn heavily from the segregation era of the South? What did he want readers to see?

In his 1966 introduction to *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Robert Penn Warren considered how a bright young introvert with a rebellious spirit might have viewed the prospect of spending his or her life in a small southern town like Oxford, Mississippi, during the early part of the twentieth century:

The South which Faulkner had grown up in – particularly the rural South – was cut-off, inward-turning, backward-looking. It was a culture frozen in its virtues and vices, and even for the generation that grew up after World War I, that South offered an image of massive immobility in all ways, an image, if one was romantic, of the unchangeableness of the human condition, beautiful, sad, painful, tragic – sunlight slanting over a mellow autumn field, a field the more precious for the fact that its yield had been meagre. (3-4).

For Sherwood Anderson, who was Faulkner’s mentor and confidant during several months when he lived in New Orleans, this sense of “massive immobility” may not

have been specific to life in the South; it was a condition of living isolated from the dynamics of city growth during the fascinating modern times.

It is not surprising then that soon after learning to read, Faulkner who was bright and curious about all things, had a fervent desire to see the world, and he would see much of it. Yet what he gained from his travels as a young man may have been more than he could have anticipated. What a young Faulkner may not have known, at the time he left Oxford, was how time spent in Canada, New Haven, New York, New Orleans, and Paris would provide him with more than a means of escaping inertia. Out in the world, he would gain a perspective that would allow him, upon returning to Oxford, to write about his home and all of its people with an extraordinary new clarity.

Sherwood Anderson's writing about American life offered poignant portrayals of interpersonal relationships between strangers and friends, characters who were often caught between a loyalty to the traditions of rural life and a longing to adventure into the progressive, modern world. Under Anderson's influence, Faulkner also began to write about individual relationships and what they showed about the changing landscape of American society and culture.<sup>iv</sup> Anderson's influence caused Faulkner to direct his attention homeward as well. Faulkner had always resisted being "labeled a provincial or regional figure," yet when Anderson shared with the young writer his belief that "modern American fiction had to be rooted in specific localities," Faulkner absorbed the message (Singal 58). The South became Faulkner's primary setting, and the resulting fiction would offer something that Anderson's fiction had not: powerful portrayals of racially diverse characters engaged in individual relationships. While Anderson had depicted

African American characters in *Dark Laughter*, his characterizations, according to Thadious Davis, tended to focus on “the Negro’s mystical qualities – intuitive sensitivity to man’s innermost life and instinctive perception of human nature” (Davis 39-40). Moreover, elements of race difference were missing entirely from Anderson’s most famous work, *Winesburg, Ohio*.<sup>v</sup> By contrast, and due at least in part to the setting he chose, Faulkner’s narratives depicted all people of the South and reached across color lines in carefully constructed portrayals.

The importance of such characterizations needs to be underscored for when Faulkner first published his narratives, depictions of interracial relationships made his fiction revolutionary. His stories and novels succeeded in breaking the mold of American writing, especially southern writing, that up to that point had treated relationships between blacks and whites with more humor than seriousness and with more nostalgia than honesty. Rendering his perspective of Oxford county with a modern voice led to astounding texts, which presented readers with a perspective of racial and economic strife that they otherwise had little access to.

There could be any number of events, relationships, and revelations that contributed to Faulkner’s fictional perspective of his homeland. Exhaustive biographies by Joseph Blotner, Joel Williamson, and more recently, Don Doyle, offer detailed descriptions and possible sources for Faulkner’s narratives. Yet any study of Faulkner’s work that includes a discussion of race necessarily must focus on a few specific elements of his life.

In his introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*, Malcolm Cowley describes “a whole interconnected pattern that would form the substance of his novels” and that

“was based on what he saw in Oxford or remembered” (viii). Faulkner’s interactions in Oxford would not have been limited only to its white citizens; he would recall later in his life several long-lasting friendships with African Americans, including Ned Barnett, who is said to have worked for the Falkners over four generations.<sup>vi</sup> Faulkner’s relationship with Caroline Barr, called “Mammy Callie,” was so deeply felt by him that he dedicated *Go Down, Moses* to her just following her death.

Faulkner’s narratives were also, undoubtedly, shaped by another often overlooked element of Oxford’s history: the lynching of a black man, Nelse Patton, that occurred on the Oxford town square when Faulkner was a boy there. At the time, a furious mob of hundreds, by some accounts thousands, of people from the local and surrounding counties gathered to hang Patton long before due process could be employed. The effect of this brutal incident on Faulkner has never been made clear; however, the account of Patton’s death deserves a full examination not only for what it says about the racial environment that Faulkner grew up in, but also for what it can teach us about Faulkner’s writing.

Faulkner’s letters home from the Northeast are also important, for they give readers a good sense of the racial prejudice that was prevalent in the “Falkner” household as well as among most middle class white southerners in the early part of the twentieth century. When compared with the letters and stories he produced in New Orleans, this writing shows early evidence of the kinds of changes that would eventually transform a small town boy into a great American novelist who would be capable of developing a wide range of characters. New Orleans and all its many influences was an especially important element of this development because it

provided a setting where a boy who longed to be an artist could actually become a professional writer.

Because most of his novels are set in the same Oxford-inspired Yoknapatawpha county, it is not surprising that certain characters appear again and again in his work. Likewise, Faulkner also revisits similar themes and repeats certain narrative patterns. Juxtaposing a character “type” with other characters or “community,” Faulkner is able to create real possibilities for exploring human nature. Repeating broad narrative patterns allows Faulkner to reveal particular intricacies of social hierarchies and to expose the origins of oppressive actions by individuals and masses. The repetition allows Faulkner to emphasize the existence of unspoken cultural norms that empower some while oppressing others. One such repeated theme shows a white middle-class moderate choosing to turn away from injustice, choosing complicity with other white characters rather than action on behalf of a black or mixed-race character who suffers and sometimes dies unfairly. If Faulkner had portrayed only one such character, the importance might be lost to readers. Because Faulkner creates several characters in different narratives choosing to turn away from injustice, avid readers of Faulkner must pause to consider this repeated behavior and its significance.

In another repeated theme, Faulkner gives voice to individual characters who can be considered excluded, very often black male or female characters. Nancy of “That Evening Sun,” Will Mayes of “Dry September,” and Joe Christmas of *Light in August* are shunned because they do not conform to social and cultural norms. Not only in Joe Christmas’s depiction, but in all of these portrayals, “black” is constructed not as a condition of one’s skin color, but as a social position

subjectively determined by larger forces at work, such as language and culture. Additionally, excluded characters need not necessarily be assigned the position “black.” Faulkner complicates the position “excluded” by rendering Miss. Emily Grierson’s separateness from communally held norms and by depicting the Reverend Gail Hightower’s exclusion from small town life, to name just a few examples.

Another seam that runs throughout much of Faulkner’s work is the repeated portrayal of an extremist character, including Captain McLendon, Percy Grimm, and arguably, Thomas Sutpen. While any reader of Faulkner would probably insist that there are extreme characters in all of Faulkner’s writing, this analysis will focus on those characters who reveal something about racial hatred. The term “racist” may itself be an extreme usage to describe these characters, but it is a term that I believe can help draw out the true destructive nature inherent in certain characterizations. Such individual characters have either some military training or they serve as ministers, sheriffs, or jailers. They are citizens who should form the town’s infrastructure and be its greatest patriots, but often their belief systems are twisted by fear, egotism, and ignorance. If Faulkner’s great skill lies in his ability to reveal constructed hierarchies through repeated portrayals of relationships between individuals, then it is the extremist characters who act as the lynch pins for such hierarchies. They hold constructions of human difference as the final arbiters of fate, ensuring that “white” and “black” are not designations of skin color, but social and cultural positions, vital signs of “powerful” and “subjugated.”

Faulkner expresses truths about racial and economic hierarchies through individual characters, yet he also ponders what can happen when individuals



combine. By depicting individuals in combination, he can comment on the potential for both good and evil that can result from a social mass action. Repeated portrayals of community show something more than merely a tightly knit group of people living according to the same laws and customs. Community in Faulkner's texts gains an autonomous voice and becomes an entity all its own, a communal "we." Cleanth Brooks and Scott Romine's notions of community will be considered in this analysis, but I offer one caveat from the start. "Community" is never quite the same from one text to the next. It holds different positions and degrees of power, and it evolves, beginning as the communal "we" of "A Rose for Emily" and "Dry September" yet becoming the mass that gathers at the end of *Go Down, Moses* to bring home the body of one of its black sons. Faulkner worked primarily by focusing on the individual, but there are moments when the presence of community takes on a central and undeniable role.

As Faulkner wrote, there are indications that he became more and more attuned to the language of opposites, and in his later texts *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses*, he worked to "erase" such differences.<sup>vii</sup> In terms of contemporary literary theory, he strived to break down social, cultural, and language binaries, and arguably, he did so as a means for liberating his characters from designations that empowered some and oppressed others. Scholars who study race typically concur that one cannot define "race" or "a race of people" because biologically there are few differences in human genetic material. Denying that there is "racism," however, is a different matter. If there is racism, and there is, it grows from a very real desire of human beings to construct difference through language and culture. We live in an

era when attempting to deny or erase race difference is futile, for such designations are so deeply engrained in the subjective cultural matrix to which we were all born, they cannot simply be done away with or ignored.<sup>viii</sup> Yet with these later texts, Faulkner wrangled with language in order to ask “what if?” and to work at depicting a break-down of cultural and language designations of black / white and rich / poor. Key to understanding the characters Bayard and Ringo, Lucas Beauchamp and Isaac McCaslin is recognizing how these characters -- along with Molly Beauchamp, Sam Fathers, and others -- attempt to do the impossible: they strive to be more than the designation of their race. Like their textual progenitor Joe Christmas, these characters challenge a language and a culture that positions them as “black” and “white.”

From the start, I wish to acknowledge the literary theories of the scholar Georg Lukács, who sees each human as “zoon politikon,” a social animal. When Lukács thinks of the best realistic literature and the greatest realistic characters, he says of them,

The Aristotelian dictum is applicable to all great realistic literature. Achilles and Werther, Oedipus and Tom Jones, Antigone and Anna Karenina: their individual existence –their *Sein an sich*, in the Hegelian terminology; their “ontological being” as more fashionable terminology has it—cannot be distinguished from their social and historical environment. Their human significance, their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created. ( Lukács 19)

Lukács assertions are useful when reading Faulkner because Faulkner positions characters in such a way as to acknowledge “a particular synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in character and situations . . .not mere individual being, however profoundly conceived . . .[but] all the humanly and socially essential determinants” (Lukács 207). Characters in Faulkner's fiction are highly complex and carefully drawn. Their social environment, their history, their class, their gender, and most importantly for this study, their “race” are always elements that come into play in his narratives.<sup>ix</sup> Thus interwoven with their "particular," or individual characteristics, their "general" social background gives rise to characters' actions. Although certain characters may be described as isolated from society--characters including Emily Grierson, Sam Fathers, Isaac McCaslin, or Lucas Beauchamp--they are not somehow separated from socially determining factors, giving them a “place” in the context of Faulkner’s fiction as well as a “place” in cultural hierarchies.

For contemporary readers it is also important to see the significance of Faulkner’s position as author, himself a son of the South, a middle class, male, white writer. Lukács writes that individuals “cannot be separated from the context in which they were created,” and while this is true for most great fictional characters, it must be seen as a truth of the writer himself. Faulkner’s work illustrates how his characters are subjectively determined within a social framework and a mass of cultural codes, yet at the same time clearly Faulkner struggles to find his position in the world, and to confront his own race and class bias and prejudice. Thus, while Faulkner painstakingly acknowledges the factors that make up the fabric of southern

society, he pushes characters of all races and classes into transgressive fictional spaces where they can test the very fabric from which they were conceived.

In many ways, the questions and situations posed by Faulkner in his fiction give rise to larger ontological questions of human existence. Thus Faulkner observes human conflict as an extension and result of language, social systems and cultural constructs. Yet he often takes another important step. In his work there are often extraordinary moments when, after setting forth a narrative pattern that represents the conflicts inherent in language, society, and culture, Faulkner throws open to question the very systems upon which difference is constituted.

## II. Disruption of “Old South” Nostalgia: A Cultural and Literary Context for Reading Faulkner

Raised in Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner observed the worst manifestations of racial and economic injustice, and by the act of writing, found a medium through which he could better understand and better communicate to readers the complicated nature of life in the South. Because he depicted a wide-range of complex individuals relating to one another with a certain measure of realism, his stories and novels signal a significant departure from the Southern literature that he had grown up with, literature still very much popular at the time he was writing.

Stories popular when Faulkner was a boy would have been seemingly benign and nostalgic stories about southern culture, stories Mencken had felt were merely poor fiction. Contemporary historians and scholars argue, however, that such narratives actually constituted a small part of a larger stream of cultural production, one characterized by a particular type of myth-making, which proved useful in the

maintenance of pre-Civil War southern cultural institutions: exclusive religious, agricultural, and familial hierarchies. Grace Elizabeth Hale, Leon Litwack, and M.M. Manring, among others, have closely examined the segregation era, 1890-1940, and argue that the prolific fictional images of blacks in the South -- in advertising, songs, and minstrel shows as well as popular fiction -- fueled race and class bias. The media also played up race difference, and such images along with the Plessy versus Ferguson decision (1896), the strife of World War I (1914-1918), and a severe economic depression (beginning in 1929) resulted in post Civil War segregation that further fractured an already suffering South.<sup>x</sup>

A key element of segregation was the definition of a “New South” gleaned from the ideal of an “Old South” that never actually existed. Stories, songs, and advertisements falsely asserted a notion that during the antebellum period blacks and whites had lived together harmoniously, and they could do so again. The best attributes of the plantation “family,” so the ideology went, could be adopted in the post-war era: whites would accept blacks into their lives and even educate blacks as long as blacks stayed in their “place,” in a position segregated from and subordinate to whites. Grace Hale has focused on the creation of segregation era “whiteness,” and argued that racial separatism was driven by the desire of southern whites to promote elements of a pre-Civil War plantation “utopia” that was itself a fiction:

The making of modern southern whiteness began, then, within a time and space imagined as a racially innocent plantation pastoral where whites and blacks loved and depended upon each other. Since it was never the individual or the race’s intention to leave

this “integrated” utopia, a rising white middle class absorbing an old elite and its professed values could celebrate the master-slave relationship unencumbered by the paternalistic moral obligations whose past existence they loudly praised. (54)

Images sprang up everywhere to reinforce this nostalgic Old South vision. For Hale, “Between 1890 and 1940 . . . the culture of segregation turned the entire South into a theater of racial difference, a minstrel show writ large upon the land” (284). Not only in the South, but on town squares across the nation, tales were told of the way it was in the South before the Civil War.

The advertising and marketing of food products reinforced depictions of happy contented black servants. According to M.M. Manring,

The “peak time for the glorification of the mammy,” . . . came long after Reconstruction or the early days of the New South movement . . . . Even as actual memories of the Old South were diminishing, the popular myth of the mammy’s world grew—or perhaps, one might speculate, the popular myth grew because the actual memories had grown dim. (22-23)

The fact that the Old South “utopian” ideology was a fiction that reshaped, some would say distorted, southern history did not make southerners skeptical about what they read. Instead such stories allowed white southerners to “remember” the “ol’ times” as they wanted to. To Hale, “the slave body had been emancipated, but representations of slavery had never been more popular or profitable” (52).

The prevalence of southern nostalgic writing, comical advertisements with racial stereotypes, and minstrel show entertainment led to an embellishment of facts about southern plantation life and to countless images of "happy darkies" and "mammies." The result was a disturbing phenomenon: such images moved into popular culture to an extent that they became more real to many people than any actual memory or historical record.<sup>xi</sup> In essence, the myth of the Old South constituted a cultural and historic memory for southerners, a replacement for other more historically accurate yet more painful memories, culminating with the loss of the Civil War.

An example of the kind of depictions that were popular when Faulkner was a boy can be found in Harris's narratives. Harris's most famous character, Uncle Remus, admits that when he was forced into a position of either watching his owner be shot or shooting a threatening Union soldier, he remembered how "manys en manys de time dat I nuss dat boy, en hilt 'im in dese arms, en toted 'im on dis back, en w'en I see dat Yankee lay dat gun 'cross a lim' en take aim at Mars Jeems I up wid my ole rifle, en shet my eyes en let de man have all she had" (Harris 212). Somewhat ironically, Harris has Remus tell this tale to a visitor from Vermont who can't help but notice that Uncle Remus, "spoke from the standpoint of a [white] Southerner, and with the air of one who expected his hearers to thoroughly sympathize with him" (Harris 205). Harris allows for the doubt his readers might have about such a submissive Negro character by positioning the reader as an accomplice with Miss Theodosia Huntington of Burlington, Vermont. Miss Theodosia questions Uncle Remus, as some readers at the turn of the century might

have: "Do you mean to say . . . that you shot the Union soldier when you knew he was fighting for your freedom?" Uncle Remus responds to the question by saying that he "disremembered all 'bout freedom en lammed aloose" (Harris 212).

Although some critics have noted that Harris was more fair and accurate when depicting southern blacks than many other southern writers, ultimately the Negro characters in his texts maintain segregationist social and communal norms.<sup>xii</sup> In "A Story of War," blacks may seem to some readers to have more agency than other black characters depicted in the popular fiction of the time, but the agency of Harris's characters either never existed for blacks in the old South or was deceptively empowering. In Hale's view of "A Story of War," Uncle Remus "confirmed what southern whites so desperately wanted to believe, that their slaves, the 'old Negroes' loved them even more than their freedom" (Hale 71).

If there was a sincere desire among white southerners for a reconciliation and peace with both blacks and northerners, then it had to be constructed in such a way as not to threaten the position of the white person in society; his or her "place" could not be relinquished so that a black might rise. The pervasive images in popular stories, on billboards, and in newspapers fed the desire of white southerners to "position" blacks as they wished to. Indeed for whites across the country, embracing "old South" stereotypical images of blacks was one way they could justify the creation of boundaries between blacks and whites. The desire to play up the cultural differences, while ignoring the common humanity of blacks and whites, ultimately led to state legislation that made segregation the law of the land. So powerful was white desire to segregate that well into the twentieth century in 1963, long after the



Plessy versus Ferguson decision was over-turned, Alabama's governor, George Wallace, would proclaim, "I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" (Wallace 1).

During the segregation era, however, southern blacks were rising in spite of the movement to keep them down. Southern whites responded to the socio-economic changes with "Jim Crow" laws, but this was not the only means for insuring the separation of the races. White southern anxiety and anger over blacks' burgeoning empowerment ultimately led to increased violence, most horrifically in the form of lynchings.

Responding to the shifts and transitions of the segregation era, Faulkner acknowledged and faced the changing South differently from most southerners, and his modern fictions incorporate the past, reveal the present, and at times even imagine a future. By attempting to provide a view that was more complex than the southern nostalgic writers, Faulkner -- along other modern southern writers including Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Eudora Welty -- provided an antidote to stereotypical representations, which had been accumulating steadily since the Civil War. In Faulkner's examination of his homeland culture, he comes to realize it is only when a society can define itself truthfully, authentically, that it can begin to heal the wounds of racial and class conflict. This would be the surest way for the South to move forward toward an equality of the races, a goal that American culture increasingly demanded.

Although Faulkner wrote a new kind of modern fiction that stood in stark contrast to all the southern literature which had embellished the “Old South,” he was not immune from contributing fictional images of the sort that fueled segregation. In his early work, especially in *Flags in the Dust*, first published as *Sartoris*, Faulkner gathers up and uses many of the conventions typically associated with southern nostalgic writing. And some might argue that he, like the character Isaac McCaslin from *Go Down, Moses*, never could take a clear stand against certain old southern traditions which included the evils of selfishness, bigotry and racism as well as the verities of “pride and compassion and sacrifice” (*Essays* 120). Faulkner’s public speeches and letters do not demonstrate a man committed to securing equality and justice for the “Negro” man or woman. He was no activist protesting during the Civil Rights movement of the nineteen sixties. He was a writer. His purpose, like Twain, Hurston, Ellison, and Anderson, was to explore the human condition with all of its joy, pain, and conflict by looking at it through the perspective of the individual character. He worked at empathy and comprehension of humanity, not at its governance.

Faulkner could not escape his subjective position as a southern white male. He could, however, with his writing, bring fictional southerners of different races and classes face to face with one another. It is in the details of these fictional relationships that he is at his best, portraying to readers the unspoken truths and the underpinnings of race and class difference that led and still lead to strife and pain, yet when acknowledged, can also lead to understanding and reconciliation. As Ralph Ellison expressed it in his 1953 essay “Twentieth Century Fiction and the

Black Mask of Humanity,” “[Faulkner] has been more willing perhaps than any other artist to start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides” (148).

#### Endnotes

i In a 1987 article in the *New York Times*, entitled “Mencken Show Rebuts Racism Charge,” journalist Ben A. Franklin reports that an exhibition of Mencken’s papers displays “more than 40 articles and letters, including correspondence from black writers and early civil-rights advocates who were Mencken’s contemporaries and friends.” While Mencken was notorious for expressing scornful opinions of Jews as well as “Prohibitionists, puritans, preachers, patriots, and Presidents,” according to Franklin, he was also “an early and ardent supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.” See “Mencken Show Rebuts Racism Charge,” by Ben A. Franklin. Published in the *New York Times* (8 Feb. 1987: C-13)

ii Hale is using a quotation from Albion Tourgee, “The South as a Field for Fiction.” *Forum* 6 (December 1888): 406-407.

iii See especially *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, p. 40.

iv I am thinking here especially of the sketches Faulkner wrote for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, many of which would be compiled into *New Orleans Sketches*.

v In *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, Singal cites Thadious Davis’s work and explains the “cultural primitivism” of *Dark Laughter*. See page 58. Anderson had been most interested in the “‘Negro’s mystical qualities –intuitive sensitivity to man’s innermost life and instinctive perception of human nature’” (Singal 58). I will revisit the relationship between Faulkner and Anderson in the next chapter and consider further the differences between Faulkner’s portrayals of African Americans as compared to Anderson’s portrayals. But the point I’m making here is that when compared with Anderson, Faulkner’s inclusion of black characters sets his work apart not only from Anderson’s writing, but from any number of modern writers of the time.

vi Joel Williamson writes, “One of the tenants at Greenfield was Ned Barnett, whom family and local lore asserted had been a slave of the Old Colonel’s in Ripley and had served four generations of Falkners.” See *William Faulkner and Southern History* (New York: Oxford UP): 260.

vii In John Lowe's article, he suggests a similar concept. Faulkner leaves "traces" of an "antiquarian" South in his narrative *The Unvanquished*, and these traces speak to the reader about what Faulkner chooses not to include in his narratives. In essence an absence, can create a presence. This notion of absence or erasure has a direct correlation with Derrida/Spivak's conceptualization of language. In Lowe's interpretive words, "language itself is a trace-structure, effacing itself even as it presents its legibility." What I am arguing here is that on some level Faulkner not only had knowledge of the inherent absences in language, but like Derrida, once he gained this knowledge it granted him a kind of freedom to experiment with language, especially language binaries such as black / white, rich / poor, hunter / hunted. It is his knowledge of the impossibility of language absolutes that makes all things possible, especially the break down of cultural constructions of racial and class difference. See John Lowe's "The Unvanquished: Faulkner's Nietzschean Skirmish with the Civil War." *Mississippi Quarterly*. Summer 1993.

viii See especially Tzvetan Todorov "'Race,' Writing, and Culture," which is a response to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." Both are found in "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985).

ix I adopt Todorov's use of "race" with quotation marks here. See the above note for more.

x With the Plessy versus Ferguson decision the Supreme Court established the "separate but equal" doctrine, legalizing segregation, which remained effective until the 1954 Brown versus the Board of Education decision. See "Selected Landmarks of the U.S. Supreme Court." *Primedia*. (2000) *Lexis Nexis: Academic Universe*. CD-ROM. (12 Oct. 2000.)

xi For a more in depth discussion of the cultural effect of the "Old South" construction see the Hale section "Race in the Garden," pp 51-67 in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. (New York: Vintage, June 1999 edition)

xii An example of the kind of statement scholars typically make about Harris's fiction can be found in the introduction to the Harris section of *The Norton Anthology of American Fiction*, Volume 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition: "But surely the enduring appeal of these stories rests in their offering wise commentary on the universal features of human character in a satisfying narrative form" (471). In my estimation, such statements turn a blind eye to some of the more humorous yet distorted images of African Americans where black culture and character is degraded.

## CHAPTER ONE: NOT QUIET FICTION: A BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT FOR READING FAULKNER

Scholars who focus attention on Faulkner and race typically agree about the paradoxical nature of Faulkner's "racial unconscious."<sup>i</sup> In her article "Who Wears the Mask? Memory, Desire, and Race in *Go Down, Moses*," Judith Sensibar does an especially fine job of characterizing this paradox by describing how Faulkner's public actions at the death of Caroline Barr compare with his artistic response, which allowed him to express through the mask of the character Rider of "Pantaloon in Black" his hidden pain at the loss of "Mammy" Callie. Sensibar asserts that

cultural conventions prevented him from ever fully acknowledging one of the two women who nurtured him. In contrast to Faulkner's eulogy of Caroline Barr, *Go Down, Moses*, a fiction, is both an act of true mourning and, in rare unguarded moments, of the liberation that true mourning brings. The mask of art permits Faulkner to articulate those conventions and explore the history of his complicity in them and the confusions, desire, hatred, and pain they cause. (110)

What is ironic in the above passage is Sensibar's use of the term "fiction" because what Faulkner can express as the masked figure of Rider (Rider = writer; Mammy = mammy) is more than what he can or will express in the public language of his eulogy to Caroline Barr.<sup>ii</sup> The fiction is an altogether different, better expression of his grief than his non-fiction. Sensibar's argument here could be extended to include much of Faulkner's writing. What is paradoxical about the nature of Faulkner's

“racial unconscious” is that it allows him to say in art what he cannot or will not say with his own public voice.

It is a continual frustration to contemporary readers of Faulkner that he was a man who worked hard to confront racial issues in his fiction, but he rarely did the same in his everyday life. He did not engage in politics, and he did not go about the business of overtly changing the racial attitudes of other white, middle-class southerners. When he won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, he told a reporter, “I won’t be able to come to receive the prize myself. . . . ‘It’s too far away. I’m a farmer down here and I can’t get away’” (Williamson 273). Of course, he did receive the prize in person, and he delivered an often-quoted impassioned acceptance speech, yet he did so with a quiet reluctance.

Faulkner was not an outwardly religious man, and he did not count as one of Oxford’s most visible citizens, even if he was its most famous one. But as an artist, and often as a masked presence within his fiction, Faulkner does speak. Readers who move chronologically through his fiction will begin to decipher his presence, noting the ways that over the years, he changes his perspective and point of view of race difference in the South.

Yet the primary question that remains to be fully answered, the most vexing one of all, is why would Faulkner spend much of his life grappling with issues of race difference in the first place? While biographies, letters, speeches, and interviews may not reveal Faulkner the man acting fearlessly to change the landscape of race relations in the South, these sources do shed light on a man not only involved in a private struggle to understand certain things for himself, but also one who, as a

writer, felt compelled to share through narrative all of his discoveries. There are also particular people and events whose catalytic effect on Faulkner could have charged him with a desire to put down on paper his perceptions of individual relationships between blacks and whites in the Mississippi Delta. His narratives become the non-threatening representations, the fictions, that could be accepted and understood by all people in the South and throughout the United States because they could be read as only stories.

As Sensibar and others make clear, Caroline Barr was one such person. When she died, Faulkner dedicated *Go Down Moses* to her with these words,

To Mammy

Caroline Barr

Mississippi

[1840-1940]

Who was born into slavery and who gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love. (*Go Down, Moses* i)

These words, perhaps more than any others Faulkner would write, show the complicated nature of his relationship to blacks in Oxford. “Mammy” means mother, and Faulkner trusted and relied upon his Mammy with the devotion of a child for a mother. Yet implicit in the passage is the kind of fear, perhaps even paranoia, whites typically associated with their blacks servants. Faulkner suggests that Mammy Callie was extraordinary because she did not calculate the gain she might receive from being loyal -- because she loved unconditionally as only a true

mother would. The statement implies that in the eyes of white employers most black servants could not be trusted to do the same.

As he grew into adulthood, and by the time of her death, Faulkner did come to appreciate the kind of sacrifice that Mammy Callie made by participating in the life of a white family before engaging in her own family life. She put the Falkners first, and Faulkner's depictions of the characters Molly Beauchamp and Mannie of *Go Down, Moses* are wonderful tributes to Caroline Barr. Along with the characterizations of Lucas Beauchamp, Isaac McCaslin, and Rider, these portrayals represent the pinnacle of Faulkner's raised consciousness. *Go Down, Moses* demonstrates the work of a writer who gained a true sympathy for all southerners. It is a text that shows Faulkner had finally learned how to depict black characters in a way that would "ring true" to any reader.

Becoming the writer of *Go Down, Moses*, first published in 1942, meant Faulkner first had to objectify and question many of the lessons he absorbed as a child regarding the differences between blacks and whites and the "appropriate" manner for whites to relate to blacks. At the beginning of the twentieth century becoming socialized into a white middle class society "governed by apparently rigid sexual and racial hierarchies" would have been especially confusing for Faulkner (Sensibar 106). Although racial separatism was the law of the land, typically in the family home and even in Faulkner's "own family, these boundaries appeared extraordinarily permeable" (Sensibar 106). Black and white men and women worked together intimately in the home, especially when raising children, but this intimacy was immediately denied in any more public setting. Gaining a modern



view of humanity would be no easy task for Faulkner, and it is somewhat of a wonder that this new understanding developed in spite of the lack of racially enlightened white role models.

Other members of the Oxford's black citizenry also played a role in the development of Faulkner's raised consciousness, yet biographers tend to count those who worked for the Falkners as having the greatest influence on the writer. Ned Barnett spent many years of his life working as a butler and "yard man" for the Falkners. When Faulkner married his wife, Estelle, "Uncle Ned," as he was called, came to work for them.

As a younger man, Ned Barnett had lived in Ripley, Mississippi, where Faulkner's grandfather, the "Old Colonel" William C. Falkner, had lived and died. According to Joel Williamson, for a time Ned only lived a few doors away from a racially mixed family, of which some members were said to have been the descendants of the Old Colonel. Williamson's research reveals that along with his white family, William C. Falkner had a family by a woman whom he kept as a slave; her name was Emeline. At the age of fifteen or sixteen, the "light skinned" Emeline had given birth to a child whose father was a white man and her owner, Ben Harris. She would bear one more child by Harris before she, along with her children, were traded to Colonel Falkner. Williamson writes, "Falkner advanced Harris \$900 and brought Emeline, Delia, and Hellen into his yard to live" (65). A few years later Emeline "gave birth to a baby girl, Fannie Forrest Falkner. Emeline's descendants have always maintained that Colonel Faulkner -- not Ben Harris -- was Fannie's father" (65).

While Williamson does not argue explicitly that Barnett may have told Faulkner about the family that his grandfather had with his slave, Emeline, he does suggest that at the time of Barnett's death, "William Faulkner must have walked by [the family's gravestones] including that of 'Mrs. Emeline Lacy Falkner'" (262). As with any number of realities of his life, the knowledge Faulkner had or did not have of his grandfather's family with Emeline Falkner cannot finally be known. But again, what he kept to himself publicly, does seem to find a vital and full expression in his fiction, and in this case, a number of depictions in *Go Down, Moses* seem especially close to the history of Colonel Falkner and Emeline.

Yet another and altogether different sort of catalyst played a key role in Faulkner's development as a writer who would deal intimately with issues of race difference. While Mammy Callie and Uncle Ned, as well as other Oxford blacks, were dear to Faulkner—they were people whom he considered a part of his family—it is likely that the fate of two men he probably never had met also inspired his prolific confrontation with injustice. First, in September of 1908 and then in September of 1935, two black men were lynched in Oxford: the first, Nelse Patton, because of an accusation that he had killed a white woman; the second, Ellwood Higginbotham, because of an accusation that he had killed a white man. Both lynchings were brutal public displays that took place before judicial due process could be completed. Williamson asserts that

there is a mountain of ignorance, myth, and outright misunderstanding layered over the reality of interracial happenings in the South in the turn-of-the-century years. One of the omissions is that there was a

flood of horrendous lynchings in the region beginning essentially in 1889. Indeed, between 1889 and 1909, there were at least 2000 such events, a sort of temporary and localized insanity. (161)

The proud university town was not immune from public lynchings, and while Faulkner's boyhood there, according to the many biographical accounts, was fairly carefree, what lay beneath the surface of what might have looked like pastoral, small town life, was something that Faulkner would only later comprehend and characterize in his writing. There was not a perfect harmony among the inhabitants of Oxford, and in Williamson's view, Faulkner grew up in "the very midst of the radical racist hysteria. It was in the social air, and a child could no more escape the miasma than he could escape breathing" (162).

The first and perhaps the most notable lynching that occurred while Faulkner lived in Oxford took place September 8, 1908, just before his eleventh birthday. On that day, a rumor quickly spread about how a white woman had been killed at the hand of a black man.<sup>iii</sup> Nelse Patton, a well-known bootlegger and a "trustee" prisoner at the Oxford jail, was the one accused of slitting the throat of Mattie McMillan, the wife of another prisoner, a white man.<sup>iv</sup> In his book *Old Times in the Faulkner Country*, John Cullen, the older brother of Faulkner's classmate Hal Cullen, describes the day the two brothers pursued Patton once the rumor reached them through their father, the town's deputy sheriff.<sup>v</sup> Disobeying their father's strict instructions, the two brothers ran into the familiar woods surrounding town, discovered Patton, and held him with their "squirrel shot" until he could be captured and thrown in jail.<sup>vi</sup> As rumor spread across the county, a large mass of people

gathered outside the Oxford jail, becoming increasingly angry and restless. John Cullen gives an account of what happened next:<sup>vii</sup>

From eight o'clock that night until two in the morning the mob worked to cut through the jail walls into the cells with sledgehammers and crowbars . . . . When the mob finally got through and broke the lock off [Patton's] cell, Nelse had armed himself with a heavy iron coal-shovel handle. From the corner near the door he fought like a tiger, seriously wounding three men. He was then shot and thrown out of the jail. Someone (I don't know who) cut his ears off, scalped him, cut his testicles out, tied a rope around his neck, tied him to a car, and dragged his body around the streets. Then they hanged him to a walnut-tree limb just outside the south entrance to the courthouse. They had torn his clothes off dragging him around, and my father bought a new pair of over-alls and put them on him before the next morning. (91-92)

All reports indicate that Nelse Patton was brutally lynched long before the accusations against him could be proven in a court of law. Accounts suggest that the mob vociferously dismissed all aspects of due process without regret.<sup>viii</sup> In an Associated Press release, a former United States senator from Mississippi, W. V. Sullivan, is reported to have said at the time, ““Of course I wanted him lynched. I saw his body dangling from the tree this morning and I'm glad of it”” (Cullen 97). In the same account, Senator Sullivan, is said to have acknowledged that ““Judge Roane

advised against lynching,' but . . . the senator “got up immediately after and urged the mob to lynch Patton” (Cullen 98).

At the time, William Faulkner “was almost eleven and lived within several hundred yards from the jail and the square.”<sup>ix</sup> A few weeks later, when Faulkner began the fifth grade, exchanges with his classmates must have included a series of accounts about the dead man who had hung in Oxford’s square for several days. What had Faulkner thought of the alleged crime and the horrific response by the townspeople? And what might have been the response of the black citizens of Oxford who must have been aware of the illegal, barbaric response of the white community to the accusation against Patton? Certainly Cullen’s account represents his view and the view of other white citizens of Oxford, yet the true terror that such a public act caused cannot be easily understood in terms of the other members of the Oxford community. No public records, that I am aware of, exist to acknowledge the response of the black citizens to the Patton lynching.

Scholars such as Williamson point out that Faulkner once stated publicly “he had never witnessed a lynching and hence could not write about one” (Williamson 159). But Williamson also notes how close the family lived to the Oxford town square.<sup>x</sup> John Cullen proposes that at very least Faulkner must have known about the Patton lynching, saying, “William Faulkner was eleven years old at the time, and since he spent most of his life in this community, he must have heard numerous stories about the Patton case” (92).<sup>xi</sup> Cullen also says in his book that Faulkner was quiet: both as a boy and as an adult he typically kept his thoughts to himself. Faulkner’s fiction, however, is not quiet. The racial strife that occurred in Oxford

while Faulkner was a boy, the Patton lynching being the worst manifestation of such racial strife, stayed with him, becoming a significant catalyst for his writing and shaping his fictional accounts. Whatever one's point of view, what can be definitively established by acknowledging this painful part of Oxford's history is the attitude and the potential for racial violence that existed among its citizens during the time Faulkner grew to adulthood there.

Soon after the Patton lynching, Faulkner who until then had always been a fine student began to miss school. Blotner writes, "In mid-October [1908], Billy made honor roll, but in contrast to previous years, this was the last time his name appeared there" (33). His grades dropped and Faulkner started to spend a great deal of time at his father's livery.<sup>xii</sup> Blotner speculates that there might have been a connection between the Patton lynching and Faulkner's withdrawal from school life. Whether he came to learn of the lynching from seeing it or hearing about it, according to Blotner,

When a dramatization of Dixon's *The Clansman* came to town in October, [Faulkner] must have recognized in some of its incendiary scenes . . . the same emotions which had seethed through Lafayette County and Oxford seven weeks before. (33)

Blotner also notes that during fifth grade, Faulkner's "social consciousness was developing in a very personal way" (33). Faulkner's full recognition of the horror associated with the Patton lynching, however, would not come until much later in his life, as an adult looking back.

As he moved into adolescence, Faulkner's active childhood became an intellectual restlessness, which gave rise to an increasing desire to read, write poetry, and travel away from Oxford. By 1915, Faulkner had quit high school, and in the spring of 1918, he attempted to join the U.S. Army, but ended up instead in the Royal Air Force, reporting to duty in Toronto on July 9<sup>th</sup>. His military stint did not last long, and he returned to Oxford in December 1918. In the fall of 1921, after time spent at the University of Mississippi as a special student ended, Faulkner left Oxford again, traveling to New Haven then to New York in hopes of becoming a writer.<sup>xiii</sup>

A letter written home to his mother from New Haven, October 17, 1921, reveals how, at that time, Faulkner was still very much steeped in a southern ideology that allowed for a large measure of prejudice against blacks. The letter expresses his feelings of anger and angst over a rising black middle class in the North. Faulkner, like many southerners of that time, is disgusted by what he sees as their uppity behavior:

Well, sir, I could live in this country a hundred years and never get used to the niggers. The whites and niggers are always antagonistic, hate each other, and yet go to the same shows and smaller restaurants, and call each other by first names. I was standing in front of the Yale Post Office yesterday, beside a nice looking well dressed fellow, when two dressed up nigger boys came along. One of the niggers said Well, laddo, how's the boy? The white fellow said – Fine, Paul, fine. And the nigger said – Say, Ed, call me up tonight; got a party

on. And they kidded each other like that for about five minutes. You can't tell me these niggers are as happy and contented as ours are, all this freedom does is to make them miserable because they are not white, so that they hate the white people more than ever, and the whites are afraid of them. There's only one sensible way to treat them, like we treat Brad Farmer and Calvin and Uncle George.

*(Thinking of Home 149)*

While the letter was intended for a specific, well-defined audience, not for public consumption, it does reveal how uncomfortable Faulkner is when he witnesses the interaction of the white and black men on the street. The men might have been just teasing one another, or they might actually have been friends. However one reads the passage, what is striking is Faulkner's reaction to their conversation. There is no indication of true hatred or antagonism between the two men in the conversation that Faulkner records, yet he seems to perceive a hatred between them. Also striking is how Faulkner instantaneously compares the "dressed up nigger boys" with the more familiar blacks he knows from Oxford, men he calls "ours." Ironically, the only one who may truly feel awkward in front of the Yale Post Office is Faulkner himself. This letter and others shows a young man far away from a southern racial hierarchy that he is comfortable with, feeling odd and alone.

During this time, Faulkner's awkwardness in the North was not limited to his inability to comprehend, or accept, the changing economic status of blacks or the changing relationships between blacks and whites. In another letter home from New Haven, a week later, Faulkner describes how he "stopped traffic in the streets":



The other day I was crossing the busy corner in town, at my usual gait and failed to see the traffic cop turn his stop sign. I was thinking of something, at least I guess I was thinking, of something, anyhow; nevertheless I didn't hear his whistle at all. So I came to as a car fender brushed the skirts of my coat and another car appeared so close to me that I couldn't see my own feet, beside a trolley that stopped resting against my hat brim. . . . I did manage to climb on the fender of one of the cars while both chauffeurs and the motor man reviewed my past, present, and future, liabilities, assets, and aspirations in the most fluent Americanese. . . . [The cop] turned on me, as though I had snatched a penny from the hand of his yellow haired baby daughter. "Yes," he shouted, "It was you all right that balled the whole thing up, I seen you drooping along. What in the hell do you think you are anyway – a parade?" (*Thinking of Home* 153)<sup>xiv</sup>

Faulkner writes this letter with obvious humor, yet underlying the description is a sense that his pride is hurt. He certainly realizes that he is not easily fitting into the patterns of life in New Haven. These excerpts do not represent Faulkner's first time away from home. Earlier, in 1918, he had spent several months in New Haven before enlisting in the RAF which took him to Canada. But they do provide insight into a small town boy's coming of age in a modern world. While Faulkner writes about the street scene in a humorous way, taken together the letters reveal a young man who felt he was in a strange place, unlike home, where all the customs he was

used to had changed. For the first time in his life, Faulkner was getting a glimpse of what it was to be the different one, a white southerner out of place.

From New Haven, Faulkner traveled to New York where he became somewhat more accustomed to the landscape of a changing modern world. His friend, Stark Young, had invited Faulkner to New York and soon introduced him to Elizabeth Prall, who managed a “Doubleday bookstore on the corner of 38<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue” in the Lord and Taylor department store (Blotner 105). Prall hired Faulkner to work for her, and Faulkner found himself surrounded by books and New Yorkers. Blotner describes New York, at the time, as the place where “young men and women from all over came to embrace the cult of the new—whether in surrealist art or radical manifestoes—to try free expression and perhaps free love, but also to try to paint, sculpt, compose, or write” (105).

Faulkner did well for a time in the Doubleday bookstore. He probably drank too much, and he lived in a small apartment on little money. Yet he eventually must have adapted to life in New York, perhaps feeling less an outsider, because when friends, worried over his meager existence, arranged for him to return to Oxford to take a job as the postmaster of University’s post office, he replied, “NO THANKS” (Blotner 108). With little success publishing his own work, little money, and no prospects, Faulkner eventually did agree to take the postmaster job in Oxford. There are no indications, however, that Faulkner returned joyfully from his adventure in New York and the Northeast. When the job as postmaster ended less than two years later--with his resignation after charges had been brought against him by the postal inspector--Faulkner left Oxford again.<sup>xv</sup>

Faulkner, who had some success with his poetry during his two years at home, traveled briefly to New Orleans in the fall of 1924 where he visited with Elizabeth Prall, his former supervisor at the New York bookstore. Prall had moved to New Orleans after marrying the well-known writer Sherwood Anderson, and when Faulkner arrived for the visit she introduced the younger writer to the more experienced one. At the time, the two men got along quite well.

In January 1925, when Faulkner made the decision to travel to Europe, he chose to go by boat via New Orleans. Rather than stopping for a few days, however, Faulkner ended up staying for a number of months in New Orleans, and after making the trip, he again chose not to return to Oxford, but to stay in New Orleans once again. He had good reason to stay because he had increasingly good luck publishing his writing in the vibrant city. In essence, New Orleans became an environment that inspired him and offered him early writing successes. It gave him an experience which would eventually lead to greater awakenings and give rise to a dramatic shifts in both his life and work.

If Faulkner's literal move away from Oxford, Mississippi -- to Canada, to New Haven, to New York, and to Europe-- offered him a somewhat rude awakening to an ever-changing world, then New Orleans offered him a more inviting environment for experiencing the dynamics of a modern city. Mostly though, New Orleans offered him an education of different kinds of people.

As a vital port for hundreds of years, New Orleans had attracted people from all over the world. It had also been a major center for the North American slave trade and eventually a home to many African Americans who bought their way into

freedom or escaped their bondage. *The WPA Guide to New Orleans*, published in 1938 as a part of the Federal Writers' Project, describes how

The melting pot has been simmering in New Orleans for over two centuries, and the present-day Orleanian is a composite of many different racial elements. Intermarriage has broken down distinctions and destroyed the boundaries of racial sections. With a few minor exceptions, there are no longer any districts occupied exclusively by one group. (43)

New Orleans had a long history of being home to peoples of all races and classes, and at the early part of the twentieth century, when Faulkner arrived there, segregation and Jim Crow may have constituted the law of the land, but such laws did not prevent New Orleanians from coming together to attend street parades during Mardi Gras, to shop together at the French Market, or to gather for conversation in the French Quarter's Jackson Square. Faulkner met people of diverse backgrounds -- rich and poor, black and white -- as well as a whole range of writers and artists.

During Faulkner's time in New Orleans, before and after his trip to Europe, he came to understand race and class in a new way. Certainly he must have been influenced by time spent in the Northeast and Europe, but New Orleans was more accessible and less strange to Faulkner than busy New York or the Paris of the sophisticated expatriate writers such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald. In Paris, Faulkner had befriended art school students from Chicago, and according to Panthea Reid, he "saw private collections of Matisse and Picasso" (93). Yet in Europe he

was only another poor aspiring writer. In New Orleans, Faulkner was accepted as a proud, if a slightly eccentric and intellectual, southern gentleman.

A number of significant shifts in Faulkner's writing took place during the time he lived in New Orleans, revealing changes both in style as well as point of view and perspective. Faulkner began to comprehend the humanness of all people with a great deal more understanding than the boy who had stood in front of the Yale Post Office upset by the well-dressed "nigger boys." For Reid, it was a period in which "Faulkner was revising his aesthetic" (89).

Beginning with the trip where he met Sherwood Anderson in New Orleans, in the fall of 1924, and continuing until they had a falling out—most likely because Faulkner lied to Anderson about being wounded in World War I—Anderson became Faulkner's mentor and companion. In large part because of their relationship, Faulkner began to express himself with a new modern voice and with a style of writing that was more pared down and less romantic than the highly wrought poetry he had been writing up to that point. A great deal has been written about the mentoring relationship of Anderson with Faulkner, but a few points should be emphasized.

In *The Making of A Modernist*, Daniel Singal explains that

Faulkner, like so many other ambitious southerners, had been extremely careful to avoid being labeled a provincial or regional figure; his poetry was almost invariably set in either a European or mythic landscape, and his criticism likewise attempted to intimate that it had been written by a young man of the world. (58)

As if thumbing his nose at his small town upbringing, Faulkner's earliest writing consisted of an elevated style. Yet during his time with Anderson, Faulkner began to replace the embellished language of his poetry and essays with a more direct and realistic prose style, very much like the style found in Anderson's best-known works.

Anderson not only met with Faulkner to discuss written words on a page; he got Faulkner out into the streets of New Orleans. Critics and biographers, including James G. Watson, write of many long afternoons and evenings when the two men would sit in Jackson Square talking, smoking, and thinking. When Anderson began research for a new novel *Dark Laughter* in early 1925, he took Faulkner with him to visit "black workplaces and neighborhoods of New Orleans" (Singal 58).

Singal, building on Thadious Davis's important work, does an especially good job of describing Anderson's unique style while also making clear why Anderson had an interest in the black culture of New Orleans:

With his poor rural background and lack of formal education, [Anderson] had little desire to perpetuate genteel manners, high culture, and bourgeois civilization. Rather he valued the lives and culture of ordinary people precisely because he saw in them, in Thadious Davis' words, "an elemental connection with the earth, with their own feelings and emotions" – a connectedness that deeply appealed to his Modernist desire for wholeness and integration. Blacks held a particular attraction for him because of "what Anderson thought of as the Negro's mystical qualities – intuitive

sensitivity to man's innermost life and instinctive perception of human nature." (58)

As companion to Anderson, Faulkner began to interact with the black people of New Orleans at their work places. He learned about their lives without the same cloak of patriarchal authority that he would always have worn with the black citizens of Oxford, Mississippi. While Anderson's interest in the black citizens of New Orleans would have been primarily associated with what is typically referred to as "cultural primitivism," Faulkner seemed to absorb more of the day to day elements of the lives of not only African American New Orleanians, but New Orleanians of French, Spanish, Italian and Irish descent as well. Watson asserts that during his time in New Orleans, Faulkner was actually "more concerned with states of being than with an actual place" (217). Thus while Anderson observed New Orleans and its people as an outgrowth of a particular setting, Faulkner was beginning a life-long process of observing human nature in a more general way.

As he began to shift his writing from an elevated pseudo-Romantic poetic mode to a more modern and realistic prose, Faulkner looked for subjects that could replace what Singal refers to as the "poplars and peacocks, nymphs and fauns" of his poetry. That is, under Anderson's influence, Faulkner's writing style became more direct, capturing the language of everyday speech and thought, and so too did his subjects change. Instead of writing of unrequited love or lofty spiritual and intellectual pursuits, Faulkner began to write about the struggles of the individual in every day life. His early subjects were the people he encountered on the streets close to his home in the New Orleans French Quarter and *The WPA Guide to New Orleans*

provides a sense of what the French Quarter was like during the months that Faulkner resided there:

The visitor will find in the French Quarter a strange and fascinating jumble of antique shops, flop houses, tearooms, wealthy homes, bars, art studios, night clubs, grocery stores, beautifully furnished apartments, and dilapidated flats. And he will meet débutantes, artists, gamblers, drunks, streetwalkers, icemen, sailors, bank presidents, and beggars. The Vieux Carré is definitely the place in New Orleans where people go to live their own lives. (231)

Taking into account all of the characters who fill the pages of *New Orleans Sketches* and the novel *Mosquitoes*, it becomes clear that Faulkner observed and wrote about the full range of New Orleanians described above.

Although Watson has cast viable doubt on whether or not Faulkner actually could have written as much as he claims to have written while residing in New Orleans, certainly the New Orleans environment was the first environment where Faulkner felt comfortable enough to observe and relate to people unlike himself, comprehending the full human capacity for struggle and survival of all people.

Perhaps the best examples of this awakening can be found in the writing he did for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and the New Orleans literary magazine *The Double Dealer*. In Daniel Singal's words, sketches he did for these publications, later re-published as *New Orleans Sketches* were, "filled with people going about their normal, daily business of physical and psychological survival" (59) Many of the short sketches Faulkner showed to *Times-Picayune* and the avant-garde magazine



the *Double Dealer* were accepted almost immediately, and certainly these early successes fueled Faulkner's desire to write fiction rather than poetry. In fact, by the time he left the "Crescent City," he had completed his first long work of fiction, *Soldier's Pay*, and was preparing to write another one, later named *Mosquitoes*, largely based on a boat trip he took while living in New Orleans.

In addition to the influences of the city, its people, and his mentor, Anderson, the presence of the New Orleans *Double Dealer* played an important role in Faulkner's transformation. The magazine published some of Faulkner's poetry while he lived in Oxford, and while he lived in New Orleans, in addition to more poetry, it published some of his essays and sketches. The *Double Dealer* was compiled and published, at least in part, in reaction to H. L. Mencken's assertions, in an article entitled "The Sahara of the Bozart," that "for all its size and all its wealth and all the 'progress' it babbles of, [the South] is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert" (*Prejudices* 136). Taking up the challenge of the gauntlet thrown down by Mencken, the *Double Dealer* rose to become one of the best publications not only of the region but of the country, and Faulkner spent a great deal of time with some of its editors, including John McClure, and its artists, including Caroline Durieux, who were among a small group of southerners who strongly influenced the Modern southern literary and artistic tradition. The *Double Dealer's* claim to fame came from its impressive list of contributing authors, including rising stars Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Robert Penn Warren, Amy Lowell, Allen Tate, Edmund Wilson and, of course, Sherwood Anderson.

Faulkner allowed himself to be open to the influences of modern writers and artists in New Orleans, and the results were manifold: Faulkner abandoned poetry for fictional prose; he completed his first published novel; he experimented with narrative forms and simplified his descriptive language; and, most importantly, he learned to see people with a new kind of empathy.

In one of the *New Orleans Sketches*, "Sunset," Faulkner writes about a young, black man who comes to New Orleans from the kind of rural area that would have been completely cut-off from almost all contact with the outside world in the early part of the twentieth century. The story's plot deteriorates into an absurd scenario in which the man, who has traveled down the Mississippi river, believes he has traveled to the jungles of Africa. At its climax, the young man, believing that he will be caught by savages, takes out his gun and shoots three men. Although the story is less than impressive over-all, Faulkner sets up the story well. His subtle and careful descriptions of the man's first encounter with the streets of New Orleans captures the kind of fear a rural person might have felt coming to the city for the first time:

He came part of the way on or in freight cars, but mostly he walked. It took him two days to come from Carrollton avenue to Canal street, because he was afraid of the traffic; and on Canal street at last, carrying his shotgun and his bundle, he stood frightened and dazed. Pushed and shoved, ridiculed by his own race and cursed by policemen, he did not know what to do save that he must cross the street. So, at last, taking his courage in both hands and shutting his

eyes, he dashed blindly across in the middle of the block. Cars were about him, a taxi driver screamed horrid imprecations at him, but, clutching his gun and bundle, he made it.

(“Sunset” 76-77)

What’s especially important about this passage is that the rural character -- who is poor, black, and uneducated – is similar to the young Faulkner who “stopped traffic” on the streets of New Haven years before. Although in so many ways it is just a slight movement toward empathy, the passage indicates that Faulkner had made an important breakthrough both in the way he viewed the world and the way he wrote about that world. He could acknowledge and depict characters racially and culturally different from himself while at the same time identifying with them in the most personal way, giving them something of his own experience. To me, the parallels between the above passage and the letter he wrote home to his mother about his own confusion on a New Haven city street signal Faulkner’s first step in a life-long process of identifying with all people economically and racially different from himself. The transformation had begun.

The first three novels Faulkner wrote -- *Soldier’s Pay*, *Mosquitoes*, and *Flags in the Dust* (published first as *Sartoris*) – prove that Faulkner’s transition from a traditional poet and essayist, with strong attachments to neo-Romantic styles and themes, to a modern short story writer and novelist capable of dealing with issues of racial and class difference was not automatic. It would take the practice of writing two books and the huge disappointment that came after a number of rejections of *Flags in the Dust* before Faulkner would see significant success as a writer.

Although Faulkner had taken-in a great deal of information regarding modern art and writing, his early novels do not reveal a true comprehension of this knowledge. And while Faulkner had looked into the eyes of those unlike himself both culturally and racially, the novels *Soldier's Pay*, *Mosquitoes*, and *Flags in the Dust* (*Sartoris*) do not show indications of a writer attempting to portray truths about characters, especially black characters, typically hidden by stereotype.

Faulkner has asserted that he wrote his next book, *The Sound and the Fury*, for himself, and in so many ways it is the watershed for Faulkner. It is the text that allowed him access to all the deeply-hidden memories of his childhood, and it is the text where Faulkner continues his process of transformation by examining race and class in a more significant way.

With *The Sound and the Fury*, as was the case with *Flags in the Dust*, the focus is on the dysfunctional white middle class, but this time, Faulkner works to bring in a full range of characters from the small town citizenry. In particular, Dilsey Gibson is a fully developed black character, who behaves not in the stereotyped, melodramatic way that many white writers' black characters would have in 1920. Instead, Dilsey is depicted with subtlety, remaining at the fringes of the story's plot for much of the novel as she cares for the Compsons. Then, at the end of the novel, Dilsey emerges not so much as a Mammy so much, rather as a hard-working, well respected woman who will only speak to certain older members of her church's congregation. She has Frony speak for her "unless they were quite old" (*The Sound and the Fury* 292). Faulkner's depiction of Dilsey shows her "real" life, a life that sustains her through hard times. She is a member of a lively, loving church

community, surrounded by people who truly know her. Here Faulkner relinquishes his focus on the declining white family to show something else, something hopeful that occurs within the all black congregation. It is a narrative moment about African American heritage, which portrays sincerely the “truth” behind the Mammy stereotype, and Faulkner gets it right.

In September 1935, twenty-seven years after Nelse Patton had hung for three days from a tree on the town square, there was another lynching in Oxford. This time Ellwood Higgenbotham would be brutally and publicly murdered for allegedly killing a white man Glen Roberts (Blotner 490). According to Don Doyle,

While the all-white jury deliberated his fate, a mob outside the courthouse feared they might acquit on the grounds of self-defense; two jurors, in fact, were holding out for that. Before a verdict could be decided, the mob broke into the jail, dragged Higginbotham out, and hanged him from a tree outside of town. (Doyle 378)

Blotner writes that September 23, 1935, Faulkner left Oxford for New York City, where he visited with his friend, Stark Young. In a letter to Ella Somerfield regarding this visit, Young notes, ““He seemed bothered a good deal about his life down there”” (Blotner 350). At this same time, Faulkner, who just turned thirty-eight, was writing the last chapters of *Absalom, Absalom!*. He would write the final lines of the novel depicting the outsider Shreve, the Canadian, asking Quentin, the southerner, “Why do you hate the South?” and Quentin responding repetitively and ironically: “I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!” (*Absalom, Absalom!*).

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Judith Sensibar develops the notion of Faulkner's "racial unconscious" in part by reading *Go Down, Moses*, especially "Pantaloon in Black," in light of Eric Lott's work. She notes two articles: "'The Seeming Counterfeit': Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy" in *American Quarterly* June 1991: 223-254 and "*White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness*" in *United States Cultures of Imperialism*. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease eds. (Duke, 1993). She also notes Lott's book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

<sup>ii</sup> Sensibar is the source for equating Rider with "writer" and Mannie with "mammy," a fascinating possibility for reading "Pantaloon in Black."

<sup>iii</sup> See Blotner's description on page 32 of *Faulkner: A Biography*, One Volume Edition. Blotner indicates that the McMillan murder took place on September 8, 1908.

<sup>iv</sup> The fact that Nelse Patton was a "trustee" prisoner of the jail is extremely important. In certain circumstances Patton would have been allowed to leave the jail unattended for long periods of the day. It is understood among those acquainted with the "trustee" system, that letting a prisoner roam freely is a way of insuring that they will end up in more trouble with law and be prosecuted more severely. An assumption can be made that Patton was allowed out of the jail, so he could be caught again, and this time his punishment would be brutal.

<sup>v</sup> *Old Times in the Faulkner Country*, published in 1961, was a collaboration with Floyd C. Watkins; see Chapter XII.

<sup>vi</sup> It must be made clear that young Billy Falkner was in school with Hal Cullen, but there is no indication that he, himself, participated in the chase to find Patton or even witnessed the events I describe here. I suggest that there is evidence that Billy Falkner at least heard about what happened on the Oxford town square on September 8 and 9, and he most likely would have been aware of the huge crowd that congregated to lynch Patton since he lived only a few hundred yards away from the town square.

<sup>vii</sup> The description here of the Nelse Patton lynching comes primarily from *Old Times in the Faulkner Country*. I have also used Blotner's account in *Faulkner: A Biography*. One-Volume Edition; see pages 31-33. As boys, Hal and John Cullen knew Faulkner and later, as adults, they hunted together. In the book, Cullen made clear his own feelings at the time regarding segregation in the South. While Cullen believed, "The Negroes should have every legal right that [whites] have," he also felt "Mississippians believe in state's rights and hope that our government will not

become a judicial dictatorship” (57). On the issue of school integration Cullen noted that he believed, “Mississippi [was] providing Negro schools as good as the ones for whites” (57). Though some might find the political attitudes of the book dated and his some of his descriptions nothing more than folklore, arguably Cullen’s account of what happen to Nelse Patton in Oxford is a reliable and honest account of the terrible event. Floyd Watkins notes in the introduction to the book that Cullen offered this story before ever reading Faulkner’s *Light in August*.

viii The disagreement between the two men over the lynching, the Judge’s ineffective plea, and the community action closely resemble the plot structure of “Dry September.” While I cannot provide proof that the boy Faulkner was privy to what went on that day in 1908, I believe the short story should be read with the Patton lynching as a possible influence. Even the title provides a connection, since Patton was lynched in September. See “Sullivan’s Hot Talk on Lynching.” An Associated Press Release. Memphis, Tennessee. 9 September 1908.

ix This statement by Williamson appears as part of a photograph caption on an unnumbered page of *William Faulkner and Southern History*. The caption is titled “A Storybook Childhood” and can be found above a picture of the Oxford jail. See also Don Doyle regarding the close proximity of the Falkner home to the site of the lynching. Doyle writes that Faulkner “lived just two blocks from the public square” (326). See Faulkner’s County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001)

viii See note vii above

xi Faulkner’s birthday is September 25, so actually he would have been ten at the time of the lynching.

xii See Blotner. Faulkner says of this period in his life , ““I more or less grew up at my father’s livery stable”” (33).

xiii All of these dates are based on information from Blotner’s *Faulkner: A Biography*. One-Volume edition, especially the timeline found on page 748-51.

xiv Note the mis-spellings here are as they appear in *Thinking of Home*.

xv Again, refer to the Blotner timeline in *Faulkner: A Biography*. One-Volume edition.

## CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVE POSITIONING OF CHARACTERS AND COMMUNITY IN THREE FAULKNER SHORT STORIES

The notion that an entity “community” exists in Faulkner’s narratives should be attributed first and foremost to Cleanth Brooks, whose critical work opened the door for most scholarly reading of Faulkner’s work. In his assembled essays *On the Prejudices, Predilections, and Firm Beliefs of William Faulkner*, it is surprising, however, that Brooks represents his own subjective notions about the South, about religion, about history and other issues so candidly, departing from a typical New Critical strategy, which tends to promote an “objective” analysis of text. For example, in the chapter "Faulkner and the Community" Brooks suggests that any reader of Faulkner must necessarily have a sense of southern community to understand Faulkner’s narrative community:

Many years ago I attempted to set forth the importance of the community in Faulkner's fiction. I argued that failure to take into account the fact of the Southern sense of community kept many otherwise competent readers from understanding what Faulkner was talking about. For example, if a reader was not aware of the kind of community to be found in Faulkner’s Jefferson, he would probably have a difficulty in locating the theme of a novel or recognizing the fact of its unity. (29)

Brooks’s statement here regarding a “sense of community,” and the potential difficulty a reader might have, lends itself to sentiments that place Faulkner’s work in the same camp as the nostalgic southern writers, their writing inextricably linked



to a place and falling short of a broad reach encompassing larger questions of human experience. To understand all the nuances of the fictional relationships, to articulate a theme, or to understand the unity of narrative elements, according to Brooks, one must have a knowledge of a town resembling Jefferson.

There are a number of reasons why Brooks' assertion is overstated. It is impossible to know and articulate, for certain, the unspoken rules or the communal norms of any community because such attributes are always in flux. In the case of a fictional community, as with Faulkner's town of Jefferson, the author's own subjective mood regarding "community," not to mention his artistic license to depict any kind of community he wishes to, further problematizes the possibility of such an understanding. Instead, a fictional community can be distinguished, in Faulkner's work, because it occupies a narrative space where communal norms are posited, norms that are invisible until they are revealed through individual characters' actions. Community can be distinguished when it is set against individuals who seek to separate themselves from it or when individuals are forcibly excluded from it. Rather than familiarizing one's self with southern community, a reader should read more of Faulkner's texts to understand not Faulkner's "community"—there is not only one community--or even "the South," but instead to comprehend the narrative oppositions that Faulkner repeatedly sets up. To argue that "community" in Faulkner's texts can be understood by knowledge of certain cultural references is to take away some of its power. Ultimately, it is in his ability to change "community" from narrative to narrative that allows it to become so interesting, revealing, and powerful. Faulkner's writing also introduces the South and illustrates some aspects

of the South for the unaware reader, but Faulkner never says: this is the South. He says, here are some different angles, different views of the South, represented by a realistic, yet fictional world.

When he argues that in contemporary times community is being lost to impersonal society, Brooks again reveals how his strong, personal sense of the South effects his reading of Faulkner:

The reasons are obvious: the decay of religion, increasing moral relativism, the sheer growth of cities, industrialization, mechanization—all these factors tend to break up the cohesion generated by common background, traditional beliefs, close personal associations. (31)

While Brooks is bemoaning the passing of old ways and customs, I tend to see Faulkner's South as a more complicated and complex place.

Three early short stories -- "A Rose for Emily," "Dry September," and "That Evening Sun" -- begin to reveal Faulkner's complex view of southern community as well as his burgeoning interest in race and class difference. These are stories that set up a primary narrative force "community" in opposition to an excluded / other, but they also begin the work of breaking down cultural stereotypes and throwing open to question community action.

"A Rose for Emily," for example, conflates a narrative voice with a community consciousness in order to create the "communal we" -- a voice that represents a unified mass from which others are excluded.<sup>i</sup> As Faulkner allows the

communal we to tell the story, something of its personality is distinguishable. The communal we even speaks in dialogue.<sup>ii</sup>

At the beginning of the story, the narration seems fairly standard, a single voice referring to the individual members of the town and something that happened in the past:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house.

(119)

The narration here is typical, limited omniscient, revealing aspects of the group's mentality, especially a distinct distance that exists between Miss Emily, who is seen as a "monument," and the townspeople, the women not sad for her passing but curious about her big house. Even as the events related to the remission of Miss Emily's taxes are described, there is nothing atypical about the narration. By the end of the second section, however, the men, women, and the "theys" become one voice, one homogenized "we." Referring to Miss Emily's strange denial of her father's death, the narrative states,

We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.

(124)

The sympathetic voice seems to understand Emily and, for the moment, draw her into its realm and care. But as the story progresses, the narrative "we" ensures its

separateness from Miss Emily. This passage like any number of passages in Faulkner's texts shows how community is created in the narrative by degrees. First, individuals are recognized, yet then, in the most subtle and sudden way, individuals become conflated into one entity, acting with one mind and one consciousness. While this is fascinating in and of itself, it is all the more interesting when one considers who is not included in "community" and why.

In "Narrating the Community Narrating: William Faulkner's *Light in August*," a chapter of *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community*, Scott Romine focuses on the "interdependence of community, narrative, and black blood" in order to elucidate "how the community responds to racial symbols in such a way as to make a collective subjectivity not only possible, but darkly necessary" (152). Community cannot exist, according to Romine's assessment, without the presence of black blood against which it defines itself. In the recent study *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology, and the production of William Faulkner*, there is an intersection between what Brooks, Romine and I refer to as "community" and what Railey refers to as the "ruling class." In Railey's assessment,

[Faulkner] implies that both "black" and "white" are inventions, constructed identities. . . . Racial identity and race relations are not at all *a priori* givens. Rather they are social constructions formulated by the ruling-class policy for specific social purposes. In his explorations of these phenomena, Faulkner reveals severe limitations to the South's form of racial paternalism. (Railey 127)

Both Romine and Railey articulate well the kind of opposition that serves to designate and define a narrative community. But their analyses fall short of fully comprehending “community” for two reasons. First, not all of Faulkner’s narrative communities are “white” only. And, second, there are clear instances when a white community defines itself not only by setting itself against a character it designates as “black.” Community is defined by the way it opposes itself to certain social behaviors and class statuses as well. Evidence for both points can be found in *Light in August*, but the second point is especially evident in “A Rose for Emily.”

The narration, the communal “we,” controls and constructs a view of Miss Emily, but it ironically interacts with her very little. Instead, Miss Emily is given a place, designated above the “we,” but Miss Emily is also an oddity and curiosity, an outcast, thus placed paradoxically above yet outside of the communal “we.” This is nowhere more evident than when the narration describes the smell that emanates from her house, the smell that causes members of the town to make one respectful visit to Miss Emily during the day and another visit at night, unannounced, to spread lime on the grounds while Miss Emily looks on from an upstairs window “her upright torso motionless as that of an idol” (123):

That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her. People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, [Emily's] great aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. . . . We had long thought of them as a tableau; Miss Emily a slender figure in

white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her clutching his horsewhip. (123)

In this narrative moment the community at once acknowledges Miss Emily as upper-class and as odd. She is separate from them because of her history: her house, family name and familial ties. But she is also shunned and pitied by them. They sneak around her house not wanting to be seen, yet wanting to know the secrets of the object of their curiosity. The unified community has defined itself in opposition to Emily. The members of the communal "we" may not have an impressive heritage or big houses with which to represent themselves, but they elicit power by positioning themselves against Miss Emily. They marry and pay taxes, and their houses don't smell; therefore, they can justify and accept themselves and name their identity in contrast to the woman whom they've designated as "above" (upper class) and "other" (socially odd) from them.

The communal "we" is identified here primarily as it exists in opposition to a woman whom it designates as upper class--even though Miss Emily is probably destitute for most of her life. But it is also identified and defined in the way that Romine and Railey suggest, in opposition to those who are designated as the black characters of the story. The first sign of a white community's exclusion of black characters comes in the form of a proclamation made by Colonel Sartoris, the mayor, who "fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron" (119-120). Within the same sentence, readers learn that Colonel Sartoris has also declared that Miss Emily Grierson will not pay taxes, "the dispensation dating from the death of her father" (120), indicating her place as a lady. The mayor, as the

community's leader, thus establishes the place of an upper class white "Miss.," as one who shall be served, and the place of a black lower class "woman," as one who shall serve. The hierarchy, defined by Sartoris, is based at least in part on the unspoken kinship between Sartoris and Mr. Grierson, Miss. Emily's father, a relationship that also establishes the ultimate power of the male patriarchy within the white community.

Illustrating the "place" of black women, in contrast to the "place" of a white lady, is just one way the narrative defines a "white" communal we. Even more important to the plot of "A Rose for Emily" is the portrayal of Miss Emily's servant Tobe. In the narrative, Tobe is a mystery, and although the community has tried to find out information from him about Miss Emily, they clearly have a lack of interest in him, the man they call only "the Negro." Tobe is positioned as lower class and odd, a figure whom they have "watched . . . grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket," whom they have seen without knowing (128). The community in essence defines its identity and positions itself in opposition to those it constructs: Emily is an upper class member of the respectable Griersons and is above them; Tobe and Negro women are lower class and lack social standing and are below them. Together the white upper and black lower class characters make the white, "middle" class community possible.<sup>iii</sup>

In an earlier unpublished version of "A Rose for Emily," now published in *William Faulkner Manuscripts*, Faulkner experimented with the idea of creating a clearer connection between Emily and Tobe, emphasizing each character's individual identity separate from the community. In Faulkner's hand written draft,

rather than limiting the narration only to the community's point of view, Miss Emily and Tobe engage in a private dialogue. She is on her deathbed and calls Tobe by name. He has insinuated to her that he knows about Homer Barron's dead corpse:

"I know what's in that room . . ."

"Hah," Miss Emily said. "You do, do you. How long have you known?" Again the Negro made that gesture with his hand. Miss Emily had not turned her head. . . . "You should be glad. This house is to be yours. I made the [will] years ago. Colonel Sartoris has it. He'll see that you get it. What you going to do with it? Sell it and throw the money away?"

"I don't want any house," the Negro said. ( "A Rose" *Manuscripts* 196-197)

There are two important points to be made regarding Faulkner's unpublished manuscript. First, even though Tobe has full knowledge of what Miss Emily has done to Homer Barron, he does not abandon her. He stays with her, if reluctantly, to care for her, an indication that Faulkner had explored the idea of developing a private understanding between the two characters. Secondly, the relationship between the two was such that Miss Emily wanted Tobe to have her house. And while this need not mean that they were engaged in a romantic relationship, the willing of a house to a black servant alone would have been enough to outrage the community and upset the hierarchy of the town's constructed order: one who is white and designated "above" by the community would be significantly associated with one who is black



and designated "below," a subtle transgression of culturally constructed race and class boundaries.

In the unpublished manuscript version, Faulkner limits how far he'll go with such a transgression. Tobe denies wanting or needing anything from Miss Emily, by rejecting her offer of the house. Miss Emily's gesture can be read not as one of friendship but as one of noblesse oblige, making the relationship nothing more than a one of a typical mistress and servant. The gift of her house to Tobe may be payment for his years of work, or it may indeed help to make Miss Emily feel superior to Tobe. However one may read it, both the draft and final versions of the story support the notion that Miss Emily and Tobe have had a long term relationship, but finally there is no real transgression of race and class boundaries. What's important here, however, is the way Faulkner experiments with depictions of individuals who engage in race and class boundary transgression, a theme that he will rethink and make more explicit with future texts.

With the published version of "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner's decision to narrate solely from the community's point of view necessarily positions the reader as an accomplice with the communal we. Readers are prevented, as is the community, from truly knowing Emily's internal thoughts and feelings, from knowing any details of her relationship with Tobe, Homer Barron, or even her father. Readers learn even less about the Negro women, who are forced to wear aprons on the streets of Jefferson, or about the mysterious Tobe. At the end of the story, at Miss Emily's death, the ladies of the community gain access to Miss Emily's home, but no access to Tobe. After letting them in, the narrative notes how Tobe "disappeared": "He

walked right through the house and was not seen again” (129). Faulkner's community is excluded just as it excludes, and the narrative allows readers an affinity only with the white middle class communal "we."

I see in "A Rose for Emily" a burgeoning pattern that Faulkner will repeat again in his fiction. Community is everywhere present in Faulkner's work, and though it might never be defined in a complete way, it is a narrative force with which readers must constantly grapple. Faulkner will reveal truths about "the South," such as its ability to construct exclusive hierarchies, at the same moment that he problematizes "community." Readers must suspend stereotypical notions of southern community to let his language construct their understanding.<sup>iv</sup> Yet readers should also suspend preconceived notions about those excluded, as the victims and the downtrodden, for as Faulkner attempts to build bonds between individuals who are excluded, or exclude themselves, from larger communal norms, he also increasingly portrays them as highly complex individuals able to challenge community codes and norms.

The conflation of a white community with a narrative voice in "A Rose for Emily" illustrates the powerful "voice" and place of community in many of Faulkner's works, and although there is not another story where such a unified community narration exists, there are a number of narratives where "community" is a powerful force in the unraveling of the plot.

Published by *Scribner's* in January of 1931, "Dry September" delves more deeply into the psychology of the communal we while at the same time intensifying the nature of black characters' exclusion from it.<sup>v</sup> With "Dry September" Faulkner

also takes another step by showing how the community would react to a rumor of a relationship between a black man and a white woman. In fact, "Dry September" depicts what could have happened if there had been an acknowledged connection between Tobe and Miss Emily, or even the insinuation of it.

The character Minnie Cooper of "Dry September" is a single, aging, white woman who has had a brief affair with an older white man, who took her riding around town, causing the people of the town to say "Poor Minnie" (174). This description is not unlike the description of Miss Emily who rides about town with Homer Barron and is called "Poor Emily" (125). Although Faulkner never makes clear that either Minnie Cooper or Emily Grierson turns to a black man for help and comfort after an affair with a white man ended, he allows for the possibility of such a relationship in both narratives. Additionally, with "Dry September," Faulkner offers a close-up examination of how a particularly brutal white community becomes constructed. He explicitly details the process by which individual white males become unified in order to respond to the rumor of an interracial "affair."

The story begins in a barbershop where several white men are engaged in a conversation about a rumor they have heard about a black man's involvement with Minnie Cooper. The individual connections of the men to the town vary--from the barber's client, who is a white man just arrived to town and calls himself "only a drummer and a stranger," to the barber himself, who is a long time resident of Jefferson and says he knows the accused, and "I don't believe Will Mayes did it" (169-70). Another character is an angry young man sweating profusely into his silk shirt, who screams at the ambivalent barber, "Won't you take a white woman's word

before a nigger's?" (169). This uneasy balance between the argument of the barber who advises, "We'll get the facts in plenty of time to act," and the cries of the other men, who clearly have a vigilante response on their minds, is thrown off when the character McLendon enters. Described as having "commanded troops at the front in France and . . . decorated for valor" (171), the opinion of the group is swayed when McLendon asserts, "Happen? What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one actually does it?" (171-172). Soon after, a "here, here" and "who's with me?" drown out the last solitary appeal by the barber to "find out the facts boys. I know Willy Mayes. It wasn't him. Let's get the sheriff and do this thing right" (170-172).

McLendon's statement that they must act before "one actually does it" proves that the truth behind the rumor about Will Mayes and Minnie Cooper is not what is important to him. McLendon will use the rumor as an opportunity to engage in a ritual act to maintain a white over black hierarchy. McLendon, the barber Hawkshaw, Butch, and the drummer hold different "places" in Jefferson's white hierarchy. At one point when Hawkshaw and McLendon are standing face to face, the narrative even suggests that they "looked like men of different races" (172). They are representative figures, each embodying and voicing various views regarding segregation. But the characters are not only different because of their opinions. Faulkner also exposes and emphasizes their class differences. In "Dry September," anxiety over race difference seems to be linked to anxiety each man feels regarding his class status, and his security within the town's social hierarchy. Thus the young man Butch, who has not yet made his way in the world, the

drummer, who is an outsider, and McLendon, who has been decorated for valor in the first World War but who still lives in a house called a "birdcage," most vehemently argue to have Will Mayes killed.

When McLendon enters the barber shop and the individuals are persuaded to unite, the narrative illustrates a point made by Grace Hale in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*: the early twentieth century was plagued by post-Civil War, white class angst that gave rise to unprecedented racial hatred and violence:

A black middle class was rising, with its unhinging of black race and class identities, and hierarchies of personalized power were being subverted in the move to a more urban, less locally grounded, mass society. These threats made the ritualistic enactment of racial difference vital to the maintenance of white supremacy in the twentieth century. (284)

All indications are that Will Mayes has done nothing that would warrant his punishment. But he is employed as a night watchman, and this middle class "position" of responsibility, coupled with the insinuation of sexual impropriety with a white woman, might be enough of a threat to the barber's customers to take rumor as fact and initiate violence against him. In terms of Hale's argument, Will Mayes represents the black man rising, and his subsequent murder is due to, at least in part, a shifting economic environment. The fury of most of the white men in the barbershop is a response to Will Mayes's new place as a middle class citizen of Jefferson.

In the narrative, McLendon's rhetoric and anger ultimately persuade each of the individual men in the barber's shop that there can be no compromise, no law involved, only a pure defense of white power over black. Each must either comply with or reject a communal white supremacy. They must decide whether or not they will become not merely "community," but specifically a "white community" that will defend itself against the perceived threat of a "black" man. Faulkner emphasizes McLendon's actions, but at the same time he describes the reaction of the barber, Hawkshaw, to McLendon's unmitigated desire for violence. Arguably, part of Faulkner's purpose is to show how it happens that a reluctant Hawkshaw joins the horrible brood.

When the white men arrive to capture Will Mayes at his work place, Hawkshaw can see that Willie Mayes is dumbfounded and shocked by their actions, but Hawkshaw does not take a stand on Mayes's behalf. Mayes politely, subserviently, calls McLendon, "Mr. John" and Hawkshaw, "Mr. Henry," for he knows them well. Even when they have him in the car, and Mayes repeats his name, "Mr. Henry' . . . Mr. Henry" pleading for his life, the barber does not act (179). Physically close to one another, Hawkshaw's desire for separation from Mayes grows. He finally does act but only to jump from the car, perhaps to forgo participating in the murder of Willie Mayes, or maybe to avoid seeing the brutality which he does not feel he can prevent. In a pattern similar to the real life circumstances of the Patton lynching, McLendon, like Senator Sullivan, takes charge of the brutality, yet Hawkshaw's final weakness, like the meek voice of Judge Roane, stands out as a terrible offense of in-action.

This especially is evident when, after jumping from the car, the meekness of the barber's inaction is depicted. Hawkshaw sees the headlights of McLendon's car returning without Will Mayes from the completed mission:

He left the road and crouched again in the weeds until they passed. . . . They went on; the dust swallowed them; the glare and the sound died away. The dust of them hung for a while, but soon the eternal dust absorbed it again. The barber climbed back onto the road and limped on toward town. (179-180)

Like so many murders of black men in the South during the segregation era, the full truth about the murderous act by McLendon and the others disappears first in the "dust" of the present time, then in the symbolic "eternal dust" of forgotten history. Such images metaphorically suggest the probability that Hawkshaw will never reveal what he knows of Mayes's unjustified death.

In Faulkner's narrative, the barber's ultimate complicity with the lynching posits him as one who is too cowardly to stand up to the massive and powerful McLendon, but Hawkshaw also cannot risk defying the very system that has allowed him to rise as a business owner. Hawkshaw's weak response is motivated by economic factors, as much as any thing else. Hale theorizes that in the era from 1890-1940 one way for whites to ensure the continuation of segregation was to engage in ritual lynchings not only to terrorize members of the black community, but to unify whites behind a common cause:

Lynching . . . helped ease class tensions within white supremacy. No matter the economic strength of southern progressives, of the mill

owners and professionals, or of the new southern middle class that created segregation as policy. Any white man, and some white women, too, could “burn a nigger.” And white southern elites, even when they wanted to, could not stop other whites from lynching without threatening the system of segregation, itself based on white supremacy, that had helped secure their rise above their fellow farmers in the first place. (Hale 236)

While Hawkshaw can hardly be seen as a white southern elite, he is a business owner in a town where he must rely on his white customers for survival. In a subtle way, Faulkner is depicting Hale’s point. Hawkshaw cannot stand up to McLendon for such a stand would mean alienating himself from the white community that he is dependent on; he would be threatening a “system of segregation . . .that helped secure his ‘rise.’”

Hale’s assertion that the act of lynching by lower and middle class whites, “contradicted the inferiority of their class position” (236) is echoed in the last pages of the narrative when McLendon returns home, to a house which is described as “trim and fresh as a birdcage and almost as small” (182). The smallness of the house shows that while McLendon may have a powerful personality, he has little economic power. Additionally, while McLendon may justify his actions against Will Mayes because of Mayes's alleged impropriety with Minnie Cooper, McLendon is not depicted as a man who wishes to protect any woman. In the last scene, McLendon returns home and, upon seeing his wife, he catches her shoulder, “release[s] her and half [strikes], half [flings] her across the chair” (182). His earlier rallying cry, “Are



you going to sit there and let a black son rape a white woman on the streets of Jefferson?" becomes horribly ironic here (171). McLendon's mistreatment of his wife, as well as his position as lower middle class, suggests that his brutality against Will Mayes is ultimately not about protecting his wife or any white woman from a sexual threat. All indications are that McLendon is frustrated with his current economic position in Jefferson's hierarchy--a frustration that seems physical, almost sexual, in the final description. McLendon is an influential extremist who won't "let the black sons get away with it until one really does it"; he won't let Will Mayes or any of the "black sons" rise in his stead (172). In Hale's words, "Lynchings were about making racial difference in the new South, about ensuring the separation of all southern life into whiteness and blackness even as the very material things that made up southern life were rapidly changing" (203).

Trudier Harris examines the motivating factors for segregation-era lynchings in *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* and argues that the white male performed lynchings,

ostensibly . . .to protect his home especially the white woman who was the center of it. That immediate reason for punishing black men when they came into questionable contact with white women had as its basis the larger reason informing all black and white relationships in this country: the white man's craving for power and mastery as indications of his ultimate superiority not only in assigning a place to his women, but especially in keeping black people, particularly black men, in the place he had assigned for them. (20)

McLendon may use the insinuation of black on white "rape" as an excuse for his actions, but it is the economic "rape" that Mayes poses that may be the major threat of the story. McLendon should not be the only character implicated in the crime. The men in the barbershop and Hawkshaw also participate in McLendon's response either by their part in the murder or by their "eternal" silence after it. Ultimately, it is arguable that the whole white community of Jefferson in some way participates, by perpetuating a rumor of what they see as an illicit relationship, by their brutal actions, or by their inaction and silence, allowing for the maintenance of segregation through terror. Harris notes with some skepticism that critic John Vickery has argued, " 'The crowd [in "Dry September"] acts out the ritual . . .without understanding its significance. . . . The crowd destroys without fully understanding why, and there is no release for any at the end—no rain falls, no bountiful harvest is forthcoming'" (12-13). While I agree that there is no release at the story's end, I would assert that the community, what Vickery calls "the crowd," does know why it acts. It may act for different reasons--some because of a sexual threat, some because of an economic threat--but ultimately individuals are unified in a communal response, leading to one brutal act and one primary goal: the maintenance of white over black power.

Harris summarizes well the kind of stereotypical assumptions that segregation whites often made in regards to blacks, asserting that

it was very early conveyed to all Blacks . . .that full humanity was not to be granted to them. This lesson was taught in everyday incidents, reinforced by invoking the Bible, and solidified in images depicted

through the popular and literary imaginations. The black man became the harmless eunuch who could be tolerated if he accepted that role, or the raging beast who could be killed without conscience if he did not. The black woman became the lascivious slut when her sexual favors were desired and the matronly mammy when whites needed someone to care for their children. (29)

In many ways, Faulkner's character Tobe of "A Rose for Emily" is assigned the role "harmless eunuch . . . tolerated if he accepted his role." "Dry September" deals explicitly with another racial stereotype, yet in this narrative Will Mayes is not so easily assigned the role of "raging beast." Instead, readers witness the way that such an image of Mayes grows in the minds of some of the white men in the barbershop. Yet Faulkner's narrative in no way supports their assumptions. What readers see is Will Mayes acting stunned and pleading for his life. No evidence is ever presented to suggest he has done anything remotely related to what he has been accused of by the white community; he may be seen as a "raging beast," but this point of view is limited only to the white men in the barber shop, excepting the barber himself.

A close observation of the narrative technique of "Dry September" shows Faulkner's growing ability to challenge communal norms and to focus on issues of race and class difference by portraying the thought processes and actions of characters who perpetuate racial and class hatred. Part of his project is to contrast what is said about a character, a rumor, with a description of the character himself, in this case Will Mayes. That is, by depicting Will Mayes as innocent, Faulkner is able to emphasize the falsehood of the rumor, the deep-rooted racism of McLendon, and

the psychology of racism within the entire white community. Faulkner does not reveal the internal thoughts of Will Mayes in "Dry September." In fact, he does not even depict his actual murder. But Faulkner does take an important step with the narrative: he illustrates how various individuals of the white community, with McLendon as leader, construct a white supremacy to confront and subjugate the "other," allowing the community to uphold and strengthen white communal norms at a time when the economic landscape of Jefferson's society is shifting and changing.

The narrative of "Dry September" should be considered in light of the events leading to the Nelse Patton lynching in that it shows what happens when due process of law is ignored and replaced with a frenzied mob action. Faulkner's use of the rumor is a key element because it supports the notion that no white individual character, much less the entire white community, has reasonable cause to murder Mayes. They have constructed and interpreted a language act in such a way to justify their actions, but there is no clear connection between the "truth" of the rumor and the "true" nature of the character, Mayes.

According to Hal Cullen's account of Patton's alleged crime, someone felt there was enough evidence to lynch Patton because a piece of razor was found in the slit throat of Mattie McMillan, and a razor with the same piece missing was found in Patton's possession soon after her murder. But this evidence was never admitted for legal judicial review, at least not while Patton was alive. What replaced due process that day was the spread of a communal rumor, a language act, which the community interpreted and responded to. The implication is that in the same way the community is responsible for the brutality of Mayes's death in "Dry September," so too was the

whole community responsible for Patton's illegal lynching, even those—perhaps especially those—who, like Judge Roane chose not to take a stronger stand, even when he knew what was happening was illegal and unjust.

In "Dry September" Faulkner reveals the truth that lies beneath what Harris has called the "raging beast" stereotype, revealing Mayes's humanity in contrast to McLendon's construction of him as a massive threat to the townspeople. With another story, "That Evening Sun," published in March of 1931 by the *American Mercury*, two months after the publication of "Dry September," Faulkner examines another stereotype with his depiction of the character Nancy. As if conflating into one persona all of the worst gossip, false rumors, and bitter racist tellings he had ever heard about any black woman, Faulkner portrays the character Nancy as a "jezebel." But in the same way that he contrasts the rumor about Will Mayes with a portrayal of the man's "true" character, with "That Evening Sun" Faulkner portrays Nancy as a person who is much more than a fulfillment of what the community says of her. "That Evening Sun" shows a new dimension of Faulkner's evolving narrative patterns. Faulkner includes a close examination of Nancy as he had not done with the character Will Mayes. Then, he juxtaposes this portrayal of Nancy with a depiction of the middle class Compsons, who are identified as complying with "white" communal norms [Compson = complicity and/or compromise], rather than becoming too involved with their "black" part-time employee.

Arguably, there is a community presence in "That Evening Sun" that is not unlike the community of "Dry September," but in this narrative it has moved into the narrative background as a clear, yet less well defined presence. The theme of a

white, middle-class opting to turn away from injustice is repeated with this narrative. As Faulkner, himself said at a lecture at the University of Virginia, “the point I was making [with “That Evening Sun”] . . . was that this Negro woman who had given devotion to the white family knew that when the crisis of her need came, the white family wouldn’t be there” (*Faulkner in the University* 21). Nancy does not easily allow for this abandonment, however. Instead, she fights against communal norms and attempts to establish a significant association with the Compson children.

In the story, Quentin Compson narrates as a young adult looking back, recalling and recording his memory of a part-time maid that had worked for the family many years before. Quentin first remembers the time period when women carried bundles of clothing atop their heads, then he goes back further, remembering what he might have seen but what he certainly heard told about Nancy. Quentin recalls that as children, when Dilsey was sick, they would try to get Nancy to cook their breakfast. They would “throw rocks at Nancy’s house until she came to the door” (392). But

when she finally came it was too late for [Quentin] to go to school. So we thought it was whiskey until that day they arrested her again and they were taking her to the jail and they passed Mr. Stovall. He was the cashier in the bank and a deacon in the Baptist church, and Nancy began to say: “When you going to pay me, white man? It’s been three times now since you paid me a cent—“ Mr. Stovall knocked her down but she kept on saying, “When you going to pay me, white man? It’s been three times now since—“until Mr. Stovall

kicked her in the mouth with his heel and the marshal caught Mr. Stovall back, and Nancy lying in the street, laughing. She turned her head and spat out some blood and teeth and said, "It's been three times now since he paid me a cent." (392-3)

Following this horrific scene, Nancy attempts suicide, but she is prevented by a jailor who beats her instead. The jailer comments that "it was cocaine and not whiskey, because no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine" (393). Nancy more than fulfills the jezebel stereotype, and unlike the secretiveness surrounding the rumor of Will Mayes and Minnie Cooper, Nancy is haughty about her relationship with a white man, loudly announcing their interracial arrangement on the streets of Jefferson.

Remembering what has been said of Nancy, as well as what she has herself said, Quentin's narration enumerates Nancy's faults, her prostitution and her drug use, but the narration also clearly describes the horrific mistreatment she endures. In the street, Stovall is not prevented from beating and kicking Nancy, who is pregnant. Later, when she attempts suicide in jail, no one prevents the jailor from beating her again. In this narrative, however, Faulkner will once again shift the narrative focus so that what is revealed does not only come from the point-of-view or observation of the "white community." Instead, Faulkner moves the plot to the domestic setting of the Compson's home, an environment where the narrative can be told through the eyes of a child, who can see Nancy in a different light.

Quentin, Caddy, and Jason become close to Nancy, and this closeness not only transgresses the boundary lines between white middle-class and black lower-

class characters, but it also brings to the main plot line an alternative view of Nancy. She becomes much more than the rumors about her; she is more than a "jezebel" stereotype. Faulkner works to suspend the white community's view of her and also the reader's preconceived notions of her, finding in Nancy, through Quentin's point of view, what Faulkner would later call "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself."<sup>vi</sup> Faulkner reveals the brutality of the characters Stovall and the jailer, who resemble the extremist McLendon of "Dry September," but here Faulkner the focus is clearly on the one who is excluded and brutalized.

While at the story's beginning, Quentin observes the town's reaction to Nancy as well as his parents' reaction to her, during most of the narrative he recalls only his, and sister and brother's, interaction with her. Quentin, Caddy, and Jason respond to Nancy as children who have not been fully indoctrinated into the culture of difference that the adults of the community accept without thought, allowing for the possibility of "seeing" Nancy without the same filter of a segregation mentality. They see, for example, how Nancy's fear grows in the story, and they are more than curious. They become deeply involved with her in a way that no white adult is.

While the children are not excluded from the larger white community of Jefferson due to race or class, they are separate from the grown-up community because of their young ages. In "That Evening Sun," however, readers witness the children's burgeoning recognition of culturally constructed differences. Jason, especially, is depicted as one who is actively moving toward a complicity with segregationist customs and language. For example, when Jason hears Nancy say of herself, "I ain't nothing but a nigger," he begins a process of recognition and



announces out loud who in the room is a "nigger" and who is not. "Dilsey is a nigger, too," he recognizes. Yet he also sees that he is different: "I ain't a nigger" (297). If in "Dry September" Faulkner exposes the process by which the white men of the community become unified in their decision to murder Willie Mayes, then in "That Evening Sun" Faulkner is exposing another process: a child's early recognition of racial difference and his indoctrination into a racist mentality. That is, Faulkner defines and delineates through Jason's consciousness what "nigger" is—a definition that comes to mean "scared," black, poor, helpless and fearful in the narrative. Jason's racist mentality grows as he competes with Caddy who taunts him and pushes him to declare to his father, as if for reassurance, "I ain't a nigger." Caddy retorts, "You're worse . . . you are a tattletale. If something was to jump out, you'd be scairder than a nigger" (309).

Toward the end of the story, the children also have a growing sense of their class difference from Nancy, who coaxes them to visit her house. When she reaches for the popcorn popper, stored underneath the bed, it comes up broken. She cooks not over a stove, but over a hearth, and when the popcorn burns, Nancy admits that she has no more corn and sets about salvaging the kernels that can be saved from the burned remains. The children understand, perhaps for the first time, how a lower-class person lives.

The narrative shows how the children begin the process of understanding their "race" and class differences from Nancy, but for the most part they do not participate in the larger community prejudices. In fact, through their interactions with Nancy, readers come to see how the Compson children defy communal norms.

Leaving their home to visit Nancy's cabin without permission is just one way the children transgress a racial and class boundary. In other scenes, when Nancy spends time in the Compsons' home filling in for Dilsey who is out sick, Quentin's memories of Nancy stand in stark contrast to what has been said of her in town. In these scenes it is evident that the children transgress another kind of boundary: they gain access to Nancy's thoughts and feelings.

While the crux of Caddy and Jason's competition is about who is more scared and fearful, overcoming their fears is only a game for them. Fear exists in an entirely different and more realistic way for Nancy. Unlike the children who are afraid of the dark because it causes them to fear imagined things, Nancy's fear is founded upon a greater threat. Specifically, she fears her lover Jesus, who has found out about her pregnancy by a white man, presumably Mr. Stovall, and is outraged. She believes that he is seeking revenge for all of her affairs with white men, but he is most angered about her pregnancy.

Jesus' first impulse is to seek revenge against Stovall: "I can cut down the vine it did come off of" (292). But he then recognizes the impossibility of such a revenge. When he is asked to leave the Compsons' kitchen, he declares,

"I cant hang around white man's kitchen . . .but white man can hang around mine. White man can come in my house, but I cant stop him. When white man want to come in my house, I aint got no house. I can't stop him, but he cant kick me outen it. He cant do that." (292)

Literally, the "white man" is Mr. Compson, and Jesus knows that he indeed "cant hang around white man's kitchen." On another level, however, Jesus is referring to

the white men, like Stovall, who have “come in my house” and have had sexual encounters with Nancy, men of Jefferson who are literally too powerful for Jesus to challenge. In the narrative, he cannot seek retribution for Nancy's pregnancy by “cut[ting] down the vine it did come off of” or by confronting any white man—“ I can't stop him,” he declares--so he turns against Nancy. Throughout the rest of the narrative, Jesus does not appear, but clearly his anger and frustration over his position of powerlessness as well as the circumstances of his relationship with Nancy figure as a force to be reckoned with, an overwhelming presence that Nancy fears.

During the worst part of her fear, Nancy refuses to go home and is allowed to sleep in the Compson children's bedroom on a pallet. Her mysterious cries express her fear:

"Jesus," Nancy whispered. "Jesus."

"Was it Jesus?" Caddy said. "Did he try to come into the kitchen?"

"Jesus," Nancy said. Like this: "Jeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeesus, until the sound went out, like a match or a candle does."

"It's the other Jesus she means," I said. (296-297)

In the passage that follows, Caddy whispers, "Can you see us, Nancy? . . . Can you see our eyes too?" (297). The question implies that the children can see the fear in Nancy's eyes, and Caddy wants to know if such a recognition is reciprocated. Her question echoes an earlier recognition by Quentin who, after seeing Nancy's eyes, remembers that “they had got printed on my eyeballs, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun” (296). In the scene, the children gain some understanding of Nancy's fear and her “seeing.” While they may not have a

complete empathy with Nancy, Quentin at least recognizes that Nancy must call on the Christian Jesus for protection from the other earthly Jesus, an ironic use of the name. But key to unraveling the plot is a recognition that both forms of “Jesus” have abandoned Nancy—her lover who has only hatred for her, and Christ, too, who seems to have vacated her life. She relies on the meager protection she gets from the Compsons, but soon that too will end.

Arguably, the representation of “Jesus” holds another and more symbolic meaning in the narrative. In the children’s dark room, fear becomes transformed from that which is intangible and imaginary to something real with consequences, and fear is given the face of Jesus. On this symbolic level, the images of an angry Jesus may represent something akin to Christ’s anger evident in the biblical story of the moneychangers. In the book of Matthew, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and enters a temple, which should be sacred ground, where he finds people buying and selling goods. In one of the most violent and angry acts of his life, Jesus overturns the tables of the money-changers, and cries out, “Scripture says, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robber’s cave” (Matt. 21.12-13) Jesus then retakes the temple and resumes his ministry. The crippled and the blind come to him in the temple, and Jesus heals them, reestablishing the temple as a holy and sacred place. In this sense, the few words that a frustrated character, Jesus, speaks at the beginning of “That Evening Sun” are of utmost importance. When this Jesus declares, “White man can come into my house, but I cant stop him,” he is speaking of the white men who have come into his and Nancy’s house, corrupting it

by exchanging sex for money. Yet he, unlike the biblical Jesus, has no power to prevent this violation.

The "house" here may also represent Nancy herself, whose body has been invaded by white men. In both the biblical narrative and "That Evening Sun," the term "house" refers to a sacred space that has been violated. Like the sacred temple that is corrupted by the buying and selling of goods, Nancy's sexual exchange with the white men has corrupted her "house," her body. And as the story makes clear, she has no recourse for the violation of her body by Stovall.

Later in the story, in the Compson children's bedroom, Nancy's fear of Jesus may be read as a prayer, an acknowledgement of her participation in the sexual exchange and an expression of sadness over the sinfulness of her actions. Her cries to Jesus may be a call for forgiveness as well as for protection.

There is one other possible interpretation for the presence of an angry Jesus in this narrative and it is this: Faulkner could be suggesting that Jesus Christ does not find his "house" among the larger community of Jefferson. The moral behavior commensurate with a system of Christian beliefs has vacated the town, as has the figure of Jesus, "making it a robber's cave" (Matt. 21.12-13). Nancy may recognize this as well. Her moan may be a symbolic one of sorrow, in which she calls on a loving Jesus that she once may have known. Yet she also may recognize that this Christian Jesus has not only abandoned her, but the whole community of Jefferson as well.

It is important to note that at the time of its original publication, in 1931, the name Jesus had been changed to Jubah. It was not, however, Faulkner's idea to

change the name. He always intended Nancy's lover to be called Jesus, and when compiling the manuscript for *These Thirteen*, he changed it back to Jesus. The reason for the change in the first publication was that the editor of the *American Mercury*, H.L. Mencken, wanted Faulkner to ease up on his explicit language. Mencken asked Faulkner to change the character's name from "Jesus" to "Jubah" and to alter his treatment of the character Nancy's pregnancy, arguing that it was "somewhat loud for a general magazine" (Manglaviti 649). Faulkner's insistence that the name remain as Jesus, when the story was published a second time, supports the notion that the name Jesus holds a special significance for the story, both on literal and symbolic levels.

Whether one reads Nancy's call as a call to Jesus Christ for understanding and protection or as a call of pure unmitigated fear of her lover Jesus, the Compsons' final abandonment of her is made more poignant after the emotional night the children spend with her. All the children, but especially Quentin, have seen into her soul and come to understand her fear in a new way, but in the final scene they will watch as Nancy finds no way to protect herself.

Hans Skei points out that Faulkner revised the ending of "That Evening Sun" several times, ultimately deciding to leave out a final telling section. The published version depicts Caddy asking her father, "What's going to happen?" and Quentin remembering how they walked "up out of the ditch. We could still see Nancy's house and the door open, but we couldn't see Nancy" (308-9). The draft version, however, emphasizes how racially charged Faulkner felt the final abandonment of Nancy by the Compsons could have been:

“Then we had crossed the ditch, walking out of Nancy's life. Then her life was sitting there with the door open and the lamp lit, waiting, and the ditch between us and us going on, the white people going on, dividing the impinged lives of us and Nancy.” (Skei 92)

Skei points out the consciousness of the ending is still strongly connected to Quentin the boy who said, "Who will do our washing now, father?" and who understands that Jesus, Nancy's lover, will probably seek revenge that night. But there is, especially in the unpublished ending, a sense that Quentin comprehends the Compsons' abandonment of Nancy in a new, more profound way. Arguably, in both versions there is a sense that Quentin understands Nancy's struggle, her fear, as well as her prayer, but in the unpublished version, the conflation of the white Compsons with all "white people," emphasizes the fact that the adult Quentin might understand that their abandonment of Nancy is based largely on race difference. In the published version, Faulkner chose to leave out Quentin's recognition of the Compsons' connection to all "white people." But readers still get a sense that they are separated from Nancy by much more than a ditch. Faulkner's reasons for changing the ending may be similar to the reasons he left out the dialogue between Miss Emily and Tobe in "A Rose for Emily." At the time the stories were published, such close relationships emphasizing transgressions of race boundaries were just not accepted.

Critics tend to read Mr. Compson, and sometimes even Mrs. Compson, with a certain measure of sympathy. The Compsons allow Nancy to sleep in their children's room, and Mr. Compson walks Nancy home, in spite of his wife's cries,

"'You'll leave me alone, to take Nancy home? . . . Is her safety more precious to you than mine?'" (293). But Mr. Compson's actions are very much like Hawkshaw the barber's actions. In both cases, when a black person's life is threatened, it causes them to feel some concern, but ultimately each man is unable to make an important gesture that would prevent a death. Not acting, with full knowledge of a dire human circumstance, is often the most brutal "act" of all in Faulkner's work. At the end of "That Evening Sun," Quentin clearly sees that Nancy's life is at risk when he says, "'Who will do our washing now, Father?'" Mr. Compson, however, does not reply (309). I relate his silence to Hawkshaw's silence upon hearing Willie Mayes repeat his name: "'Mr. Henry'. . . . 'Mr. Henry.'" I also see a possible connection between these characters and the real life Judge Roane, who did not prevent the mob from lynching Nelse Patton when it clearly was an illegal act. Not one of these men acts to make a real difference in the outcome he foresees.

Later in his life Faulkner, would suggest recasting Nancy for a play he was writing called "Requiem for a Nun," later published as a novel, and in a letter he describes Nancy as "a 'nigger' woman, a known drunkard and dope user, a whore with a jail record in the little town, always in trouble" ("Letter" 298). Certainly, there are undeniable similarities between the two Nancys. Yet, Nancy's character in "That Evening Sun" is more complex than a common jezebel stereotype. When Nancy recognizes in the narrative she "ain't nothing but a nigger," the reality of her tragic position seems to wash over her like a final numbing medicine. The fiery strength of the woman screaming at Stovall at the start of the story is gone, and she is reduced to a fear-filled, shadow of her former self. Faulkner emphasizes her literal



de-humanization and shows her internalized racism in these final scenes. When toward the end of the story, wrought with fear, she places her hand on the hot globe of a lamp, she feels no pain. Several moments later she puts her hands into the fire, apparently without feeling anything. By the end of the story, a drug-addicted Nancy has assimilated the community's definition of her as "nigger." The racism against her has become actualized, and she in essence can no longer fight to be anything other than what language and cultural "community norms" have made her. Like "Dry September" there is no release at the end of "That Evening Sun" for any character. No rain, no sunrise, and finally, no miracle of God.

The process of writing "That Evening Sun" was a painstaking one for Faulkner. Not only did Mencken insist on changes, but Faulkner himself had enacted a series of changes, experimenting with his portrayal of Jesus and Nancy. In an earlier version, entitled "Never Done No Weeping When You Wanted to Laugh," for example, Jesus at one point says to Nancy, "I been good to you. I never won a dollar you never got half of it." ("Never Done No Weeping" 2). And Nancy is described at the start of the story not as strong and solid, as she is during the first passages of the published version, but as only "thin, with a high sad face sunken a little where her teeth were missing which, when she was cold or drunk, lost it smooth and shining blackness" ("Never Done No Weeping" 1). Ultimately, Faulkner decided to portray Nancy not as a heroine or saint. Perhaps the great tragedy of the story is that she that she recognizes how she has been "positioned" as "nothing but a nigger," but she is powerless to do anything about it. All her attempts to challenge

her culturally constructed place, “nigger,” are thwarted—first by Stovall and the jailer and finally by the Compsons themselves.

The very act of recalling Nancy’s life and the Compson family’s final abandonment of her, suggests that as an adult Quentin still has Nancy’s eyes “printed” on his “eyeballs, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun” (296). As an adult, his memory of Nancy suggests that he sees her as a sun in a darkening night, a sun that has now gone out.

In terms of Faulkner’s development as a writer Nancy represents one of Faulkner’s early and successful attempts at portraying the internal thoughts and feelings of a victim of racial hatred and violence. Nancy is like the fictional Mayes as well as the very real Nelse Patton, the character and the man, who individually become positioned as “nothing but a nigger.” Yet central to the plot is something hopeful: Quentin sees Nancy as more than what any adult has said of her. He sees her fear and her humanity in a way that no member of the Jefferson community does.

The citizenry of Faulkner’s fictional town Jefferson is defined and delineated in these early short stories. It is as if the more Faulkner thought about his characters, the more he could find ways to portray the mentality that lies beneath divisive actions which create and institutionalize class and race difference. Although his narratives are not historical fiction, not clearly based on real historical events, Faulkner’s representational characters are derived from the realities of segregation in the South. Faulkner’s narrative patterns position such characters and the community, leaving readers with images that challenge easy definitions of the South and provide a view of segregation that no history book ever could.

## Endnotes

i "A Rose for Emily" was sold to *Forum* magazine January 30, 1930 (Polk IX).

ii Cleanth Brooks, as well as many other scholars, has noted the importance of the community narration in "A Rose for Emily." See Chapter 3, "Faulkner and the Community" of *On the Prejudices, Predilections, and Firm Beliefs of William Faulkner*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1987).

iii This reminds me of the story "Revelation" by Flannery O'Connor in which Ruby Turpin believes that she is not too rich or too poor but just right. There is a kind of comfort-level that some characters associate with being firmly established as part of "the middle class."

iv I disagree with Cleanth Brooks' assertion that "if a reader was not aware of the kind of community to be found in Faulkner's Jefferson, he would probably have a difficulty in locating the theme of a novel or recognizing the fact of its unity" (29). Instead, the narrative form, establishing the "we" of "A Rose for Emily" for example, constructs Faulkner's particular perspective of southern community, the characteristics of which any reader, familiar with the South or not, could come to understand.

v According to Noel Polk's Introduction to the *These Thirteen* manuscripts, "Drought" was first sent to *American Mercury* in January, 1930. Although it was rejected and not published until 1931, it seems fairly clear that Faulkner had completed "Drought" only a few months after sending out "A Rose for Emily" for the first time to *Scribner's* on October 7, 1929. Thus the stories must have been written within months of each other.

vi Quotation taken from *William Faulkner's Nobel Prize Award Speech*, taken directly from the manuscript located in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

### CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVE PATTERNS OF RACISM AND RESISTANCE IN *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

In 1931, Faulkner assembled some of his best short fiction including “A Rose for Emily,” “Dry September,” and “That Evening Sun” into a book of short fiction called *These 13*. A year later, on October 6, 1932, he published *Light in August*, a novel that incorporates and expands a number of narrative patterns set forth in the earlier stories. Taken together the stories and *Light in August* portray important similarities, pointing to the possibility that again and again Faulkner struggled with certain issues related to racial strife and economic depression. With *Light in August*, Faulkner continues to contemplate and position “community,” as he had done with the earlier short stories, yet he also works to strengthen his portrayals of those who are the Nancys, even the Nelse Pattons, of his work: the excluded, often abused, characters.<sup>i</sup> The characters Will Mayes and Nancy, of the earlier texts, are not given clear, strong voices to articulate their fear, but with *Light in August* and the novels that follow, excluded characters are given clearer voices to express their positions in relation to narrative communities. Faulkner, also, is able to interpret social structure in a way not possible in the shorter narratives. Specifically, Faulkner “submits to thought” the tensions and dynamics between characters positioned within community, characters portrayed as extremists, and characters who are excluded.<sup>ii</sup> He examines this narrative pattern more closely by presenting a number of different character “types” interacting in complex relationships, and by again portraying the weaknesses of a white man who complies with communal norms rather than presenting a viable challenge to injustice.<sup>iii</sup>

In the 1963 critical work *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, Cleanth Brooks argues that community in *Light In August* is “invisible” and that no individual represents community: “the community itself . . . has no special representatives in the novel and need have none” (53). But as individual characters act, they in essence re-initiate and perpetuate community norms, and their individual actions are anything but invisible. Scott Romine and Kevin Railey, each in their own way, also define Faulkner’s community (what Railey calls the “ruling class”), but in their analyses, community tends to be seen as “white only.” While I do not think community is “invisible,” in *Light in August* or any other text, I also do not believe it necessarily to be white only. In *Light in August*, for example, those who gather after the death of Joanna Burden include a cross section of people. Certainly, those who hunt for Christmas are white, but even this is complicated by the assistance they receive from the church congregation made up of racially black characters. So how can community be defined, generally, as a presence in *Light in August* as well as in other texts? Community in Faulkner’s texts consists of a number of individuals who are always seeking origins, commonalties, and justification for their existence by continually trying to be “community,” yet because it is made of vastly different people, community is never fixed, but forever and always changing. Perhaps most importantly, it is through individual characters’ actions as well as their common desire for “community” that communal “norms” are brought into existence. Individual characters exclude so that they will have characters against whom they can bolster their own identities and create self-definition. By combining into common communities, such bolstering against an excluded other helps to create and

define “community.” Community is a result; it is not defined until individual characters act. Although it is not a given that a community is white only, quite often such is the case in Faulkner’s narratives. The first scenes of *Light in August*, for example, define and delineate what a “white” only community in looks like.

In *Light in August*, the character Armstid seems intuitively to understand how he is supposed to view the character Lena Grove. There are no overt descriptions of his religious faith or a moral belief system that would cause him to expect certain behaviors of a poor, young, white woman. These aspects at first seem invisible. Yet in the narrative, when Armstid acts, his actions suggest to the reader that he is indeed relying heavily some sort of specific cultural code, and by observing him, the reader can begin to comprehend an underlying belief system, the cultural norms that exist within this narrative community. The belief system may exist only as an unstated abstraction, but its power is made tangible when Armstid displays his desire to uphold it through action. What at first may seem like only an instinct is in fact a learned behavior cultivated from Armstid’s desire to conform to and maintain a perceived cultural and societal tradition. In this case, the tradition of a white community.

With Armstid, Faulkner exposes the preliminary symptoms of a predominate belief system specific to *Light in August* before exposing, later in the novel, the full power that the belief system will wield. Faulkner’s method shows the pervasiveness of specific culturally constructed codes of behavior while also showing how “white” individual characters adhere to, uphold, and reinscribe “acceptable” ways of being.

In a scene where Armstid gives Lena a ride on his wagon, Armstid carefully scrutinizes her and notices she is traveling alone. She is pregnant, “wearing no wedding ring,” and almost penniless. Faulkner renders Armstid’s thoughts this way:

From the corner of his eye he watches her profile, thinking *I don't know what Martha's going to say* thinking, ‘I reckon I do know what Martha’s going to say. I reckon womenfolks are likely to be good without being very kind. Men, now, might. But it’s only a bad woman herself that is likely to be very kind to another woman that needs kindness’ thinking *Yes I do. I know exactly what Martha’s going to say* (12-13).

In self-conscious thought, Armstid works to draw conclusions about how the “womenfolk” and the “men” will perceive Lena Grove, and his purpose here is to decide how to receive her on behalf of his wife, Martha, and other members of the white community. Part of Armstid’s purpose is to avoid a misstep of his own, acting in a way that would be perceived by community as inappropriate. He will either accept or reject Lena, in much the same way a member of a pack of wolves may accept a healthy outsider, but reject an unhealthy one, making sure to preserve his own position as well as the general survival of the pack. Moreover, Armstid is participating in the creation of Lena’s identity here. His perspective of her will literally constitute a view that will be disseminated and will position her in the community’s social hierarchy, as well as giving her a position in the narrative scheme.

Armstid relies on what he “knows” his wife will say at the same time that he is thinking about what society at large is “*going to say*.” He figures that the only one who might give true kindness to Lena is a woman who also has been “bad.” This reveals the community’s way of thinking: only a “bad woman” would be pregnant, alone, and penniless, and only someone like her would look after her, because like belongs with like.

The narrative language that Faulkner uses to show how Armstid scrutinizes Lena and positions her within the town’s social hierarchy is not unlike the language the communal “we” uses to describe Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily.” Arguably in Faulkner’s constructed symbolic world, a single woman dying “alone” – alone because she is without a husband or a family -- and a single woman, pregnant and traveling “alone,” are parallel phenomenon:

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house.

(119)

In both texts, the narrator’s voice contemplates how the white “men” and “women” of the town will respond to a single woman, and the focus of the community’s attention is on a woman whom they consider “fallen.” Miss Emily is “fallen” from her state of grace as a “monument,” or southern lady, because she has not married and ensured the continuance of her lineage. And although the word “fallen” is replaced with “bad” to describe women “like” Lena Grove, the assumption is that Lena too is fallen because she has had pre-marital sex and is without an evident



potential husband. In both texts, the member of the community may outwardly act with good manners toward Miss. Emily and Lena Grove, but the judgment inherent their internal thoughts is made clear by the narration.

While the narrative point of view of “A Rose for Emily” and Armstid’s point of view in *Light in August* both establish from the start a sense of community kinship codes of behavior – thus defining “community” in opposition to the excluded others Miss Emily and Lena -- the two female characters respond quite differently to the community. In “A Rose for Emily,” the narrative makes clear that Miss Emily comes to a point in which she herself rejects the communal norms. Miss Emily is said to have “vanquished” the members of the Board of Aldermen when they insisted that she pay her taxes. And when the last student of china painting leaves, the narrator reports, “the front door closed . . . and remained closed for good” (“A Rose” 128). With a tremendous strong will, Miss Emily Grierson shuts out the community of Jefferson in order to keep one grave, horrible, yet private, secret – the one thing that is truly hers and hers alone.

In *Light in August*, Lena Grove also has a strong sense of volition, yet her will is not to be left alone. Instead, she works to fit into the community. It takes no time for Armstid to decide that Lena is like all other “bad” women, yet Lena quickly turns his belief into a reason for him to feel sympathy for her. She is white, young, attractive, and she says to Armstid, “Folks have been kind. They have been right kind . . . . It’s a strange thing.” Armstid replies with a sarcastic and incredulous query: “How folks can look at a strange young gal walking the road in your shape and know that her husband has left her? And you aim to find him up here?”(*Light in*

*August* 12-13). As the wagon trip continues, however, Armstid begins to shift some of the blame he could assign to Lena for the “strange shape” she is in to the unknown man who has gotten her pregnant and abandoned her in the first place. He may even feel some embarrassment over the action of another poor, white man. In fact, when his wife Martha hears Lena’s story, she looks at her husband and says, “You men . . . you durn men” (16) indicating a kinship between Armstid and Lucas Burch.<sup>iv</sup> More likely though, Armstid’s eventual acceptance of Lena is due to Lena herself: the way she presents herself to the world by repeatedly speaking of the “kindness” of the community, but also by declaring her rightful place as a member of it.

Lena is tuned-in to some basic cultural codes that the community has constructed and ascribes to, and she plays up her connectedness to and understanding of communal norms. Although she has grown-up isolated, in rural Alabama, on the rare occasions her father would take her to town,

she would ask her father to stop the wagon at the edge of town and she would get down and walk. She would not tell her father why she wanted to walk in instead of riding. He thought that it was because of the smooth streets, the sidewalks. But it was because she believed that the people who saw her and whom she passed on foot would believe that she lived in the town too. (3-4)

From a young age, Lena envisions herself as a person who can enter town and be accepted easily, and her desire for fitting into town life goes a long way to persuading Armstid and others that she is not one to be excluded or scorned.

When, in the wagon, Lena says to Armstid, “ ‘Folks have been kind. They have been right kind’ ” she claims a kind of unexpected authority (12). She takes control of defining the treatment she has received from the community, and in essence she participates in constructing the community’s identity in a positive light, choosing to focus on its “kindness.” She takes control of her position as the “opposition,” and in what could be interpreted as a deconstructive gesture, she nullifies the system of opposition to which Armstid typically subscribes by directing Armstid to accept the notion that a kind community will be kind to her, especially in her state. It is no wonder that Armstid takes Lena home to Martha. He wants to see how Martha will react to Lena Grove.

The more Lena expresses a desire to comply with and uphold perceived communal beliefs and norms, the more she is rewarded. When Lena arrives at the Armstid’s home, she tells a skeptical Martha how her hope is to find Lucas Burch, the father of her unborn baby. Martha stands “her hands on her hips and she watches the younger woman with an expression of cold and impersonal contempt” (21). Yet Lena finds the thing to say that will soften Martha’s stance and any notion she may have of her as “bad.” In a voice “quiet, tranquil, [and] stubborn” Lena asserts, “I reckon a family ought to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord will see to that” (21). For the overt display of her religious notion that “the Lord will see to” her family being together when the baby is born, Lena is rewarded economically with Martha’s egg money. Lena Grove’s actions cause Martha and Armstid to feel sympathy for her, yet she in turn helps Martha and Armstid to see themselves as Christians and members of a “kind” community that

will look after even a “bad” woman like herself. She uses her position as excluded/other to her own benefit, and she is on her way to becoming part of the Armstids’ society. Finally, the characterization of Lena Grove does not present any opposition to the status quo; arguably, Lena Grove has positioned herself to become one of the community’s strongest advocates.

Armstid, Martha, and Lena Grove establish a communal kinship early in the novel, and I believe that they do indeed represent “community.”<sup>v</sup> The Armstids may be reluctant to accept Lena at first, but her desire to be a part of their society, marked especially by her outright willingness to uphold certain familial and religious beliefs, outweighs or negates all that she has done to defy communal norms. The fact that she is female, white and young has everything to do with the Armstids’ decision to accept her, and even support her, with a ride, a good night’s sleep, breakfast, and Martha’s egg money. Although she is like other “bad” women who have sex before marriage, racially she is “like” the Armstids and economically she hails from an agrarian background not unlike their own. In terms of the larger patterns at work in *Light in August*, the burgeoning relationship between the Armstids and Lena Grove reveals and establishes these larger economic, racial, and class expectations of the community.<sup>vi</sup> In the novel, Lena is having a baby, yet she is also reproducing deeply desired customs and traditions.

After depicting characters who establish a kinship that complies with and in essence reinscribes communal norms and traditions, thus defining community, Faulkner presents several characters who are less well-established within the community. Such characters do not have a desire for complicity with communal

norms per se. Instead, like the character McLendon of “Dry September,” on some level they recognize a possible threat of ending-up with only diminutive position within the community hierarchy. They implicitly fear their own exclusion from community. In order to bolster their community position, such characters declare an opposite and perpetuate a rumor as a means for negotiating a change to their perceived community identities. At the center of the threat that drives them to declare an opposite, there is an ego-centric fantasy asserted in the narrative as the characters’ extraordinary need for recognition and personal power. If they are able to bolster their perceived identity by expressing their differences from one another, then it is their hope that they will not only achieve new-found community status markers, but they also will receive a much desired acknowledgement and attention from the community, either in the form of an economic prize or a hero’s congratulations. When characters successfully establish a power binary, the result for their opposite is quickly made apparent. If the binary is structured along the lines of constructed notions of race difference, then the results will be devastating.

The most glaring example of a character’s desire to proclaim an opposite in order to bolster his own position is Joe Brown, Lena’s estranged lover. Brown is friend and roommate to the mysterious Joe Christmas. When the woman who has allowed the two men to reside in a cabin on her property, Joanna Burden, is found dead next to her burning house, Joe Brown is quick to point the finger at Christmas due in large part to the news that an award of one thousand dollars will be given to the person who apprehends the killer. It is common knowledge that Brown and Christmas have been partners in the illegal trade of moonshine for sometime, but

Brown is too fool-hearty to be aware of his obvious compromising connection to Christmas. In a narrative section that emphasizes the ever-presence of rumor and innuendo, Byron Bunch tells the town's gossip to the Reverend Gail Hightower. He recalls how after the murder,

“last night Brown showed up. He was sober then, and he come onto the square about eight oclock, wild, yelling about how it was Christmas that killed her and making his claim on that thousand dollars. They got the officers and took him to the sheriff's office and they told him the reward would be his all right as soon as he caught Christmas and proved he done it. And so Brown told. . . . And so Brown went on talking louder and louder and faster and faster, like he was trying to hide Joe Brown behind what he was telling on Christmas until Brown could get his chance to make a grab at that thousand dollars. It beats all how some folks think that making or getting money is a kind of game where there are not any rules at all.”  
(93-96)

Brown's motive for telling the sheriff about Christmas is portrayed primarily as an economic one. But there is also a sense that Brown is using his personal knowledge of Joanna Burden's death as a means for remaking his identity in the eyes of the community. Clearly, Brown's attempt to manipulate the way the sheriff and the others perceive him is transparent. The narrator Byron Bunch notes that Brown was trying to “hide” himself, his identity, “behind what he was telling on Christmas.”

Naively, Brown believes that his words are being understood and believed by the sheriff and others who listen. He continues to condemn Christmas by informing the sheriff that Christmas and Joanna Burden were having an affair. Brown recalls that when he spoke to Christmas about the affair, Christmas had gotten extremely angry, and according to Bunch's narration,

“He told then about how he was afraid that Christmas would kill Miss Burden some night, and the Sheriff asked him how come he never reported his fear and Brown said he thought how maybe by not saying nothing he could stay out there and prevent it, without having to bother the officers with it.” (95)

At this point, Brown's accusation of Christmas is not strong enough for the sheriff to believe it. Realizing this, Brown begins to embellish the truth:

It begun to dawn on Brown that he had a kind of rat smell too. Because he started in telling about how it was Miss Burden that bought Christmas that auto and how he would try to persuade Christmas to quit selling whiskey before he got them both into trouble; and the officers watching him and him talking faster and faster and more and more; about how he had been awake early Saturday morning and he saw Christmas get up about dawn and go out. (95)

When he realizes that his story has a “rat smell,” he takes another more drastic measure. Byron Bunch describes how “he was desperate by then. I reckon he could not only see that thousand dollars getting further and further away from him, but that

he could begin to see somebody else getting it” (97). In a key narrative turn, in the excitement of the moment, Brown uses a final point of persuasion to ensure he will be believed and will get the reward money. He proclaims, ‘That’s right’ . . . ‘Go on. Accuse me. Accuse the white man that’s trying to help you with what he knows. Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free. Accuse the white and let the nigger run.’ (97) At this moment, Brown’s rumor takes on a new meaning for those who hear it. He is now accusing a black man, Christmas, of having an affair with and then murdering a white woman, Joanna Burden. Brown uses his racial status as white to create an opposition between himself and Christmas whom he calls “nigger,” verbally inscribing a binary that positions him in a more powerful position not only over Christmas but in alliance with the rest of the white community.

In this narrative moment, culminating with the new information about Christmas’s race, Brown’s assertions are suddenly taken as legitimate by the sheriff and all who listen. Brown has a new found power to proclaim Christmas’s guilt; he has the currency of his racial status as white man accusing a black man. This scene reveals an especially ugly truth about “community” in *Light in August*. Brown’s accusation is not unlike McLendon’s attempt to persuade the men in the barber shop that they must destroy Willie Mayes because they cannot “let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?” (“Dry Sept.” 172). An individual who is white is subjectively positioned in a way that his or her word will always be believed when set against the words or actions of a black individual, even if what he what he says is only an unproved rumor. In *Light in August*, while Brown’s lower class status, his association with Christmas, his transient nature, as well as his over-all



demeanor lead to the sheriff's instant suspicion of him, his racial status as a white man accusing a black man lends credibility to all his statements, in the sheriff's point of view. The sheriff actually may believe that Brown has participated in the killing, yet when he declares the new information that Christmas a "nigger," he is believed. Christmas becomes the number one suspect, and others rally together to support a furious quest to capture Christmas. The marshal says, "A nigger. . . I always thought there was something funny about that fellow" (99). The unspoken ever-present kinship codes of white people, and their desire to bolster their position against the blacks of the town, trumps any doubt they have of Christmas' guilt, and as with the story "Dry September" soon this kinship will give rise to violence.

What's key here is that Faulkner devises the scene so that race becomes the final arbiter and the one thing that will turn the sheriff and the community's skepticism into belief. Christmas as a black man is suddenly seen as a different sort of man than Christmas as a white man. With a few words, the sheriff and other representatives of the community see him with a new, more negative perspective. While Lena Grove's race means that she can build upon similarities she has with the white people she comes in contact with – her race holds the potential for her safety and security -- Christmas, when perceived as black, will always be perceived as different, as "other." His race holds no real possibility for his safety and security. Brown sees an opportunity in the situation to bolster both his community identity and his economic position by being the first not only to recognize Christmas' crime, but also to reveal his race and his racial transgression with a white woman.

Percy Grimm is another character in *Light in August* who uses race difference as a means to declare an “other” and justify extreme actions in order to bolster his community position. Like Brown, Grimm’s “other” is also Joe Christmas. Unlike Brown, however, Grimm is not motivated by greed or revenge. Instead, he is motivated by an ego-centric fantasy to become a community leader, its hero.

At the end of the novel, when a Grand Jury has been assembled to prove that Christmas is guilty of Joanna Burden’s murder, Christmas escapes. The men of the town gather to capture Christmas, but Percy Grimm sees a special opportunity in the situation. Grimm, who also resembles McLendon of “Dry September,” takes control of massing the white men in order to ensure that the “nigger” will not go free. And as is the case with Brown, the desire for seeing Christmas as a black transgressor fuels the massing of the white men. Racism, with Christmas as its recipient, becomes the center around which the brood gathers.

With the language of religious salvation, the omniscient narration describes Percy Grimm as a man who seeks to be “saved” by military glory. Growing up in small town Jefferson, he carries within him a kind of anger due to the fact that he “had been born too young to be in the European War” (450). But as an adult “the civilian-military act . . . saved him” (450). Like McLendon, he is driven by a kind of military vehemence to personally institute a moral code of beliefs, a code that he feels God has in some way entrusted with him to protect. In the narrative, Grimm is described as one who is

like a man who had been for a long time in a swamp, in the dark. It was as though he not only could see no path ahead of him, he knew

that there was none. Then suddenly his life opened definite and clear. The wasted years in which he had shown no ability in school, in which he had been known as lazy and intransigent, without ambition, were behind him forgotten. He could now see his life opening up before him . . . as a barren corridor, completely freed now of ever again having to think or decide, the burden which he now assumed and carried as bright and weightless and martial as his insignatory brass: a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience, and a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American uniform is superior to all men.

(450-51)

Faulkner's language sets-up Grimm as one who does not "ever again" have "to think or decide" due to his belief that inherent within his race is all that he needs to be superior to men of all other races. His idealized religious "faith" and patriotism calls for a "blind obedience" that he is more than pleased to abide by. But clearly, he is not a Faulknerian hero, thoughtful and suffering; he is the representation of a coward, a character Faulkner would later refer to as a "storm trooper," a Nazi-like character he had created years before Hitler's rise to power in Germany.<sup>vii</sup>

Although Grimm is not a member of the American Legion, he speaks to the commander of the "local Post" and convinces him to assemble a civilian group which he calls a platoon. With some diplomatic language, Grimm, "without deliberate intent, . . . gained his original end: he was now in command" (453). Faulkner carefully describes the astounding response of the town to Grimm:

So quickly is man unwittingly and unpredictably moved that without knowing that they were thinking it, the town had suddenly accepted Grimm with respect and perhaps a little awe and a deal of actual faith and confidence, as though somehow his vision and patriotism and pride in the town, the occasion, had been quicker and truer than theirs. His men anyway assumed and accepted this; . . . they were almost at a pitch that they would die for him. (456-57)

This key narrative moment stands as a repetition of a moment in “Dry September,” when Faulkner writes how in the town barber shop,

Three men rose. The drummer in the chair sat up. “Here,” he said, jerking at the cloth about his neck; “get this rag off me. I’m with him. I don’t live here, but by God, if our mothers and wives and sisters --” He smeared the cloth over his face and flung it to the floor.

McLendon stood in the floor and cursed the others. Another rose and moved toward him. The remainder sat uncomfortable, not looking at one another, then one by one they rose and joined him. The barber picked the cloth from the floor. He began to fold it neatly. “Boys don’t do that. Will Mayes never done it. I know.” “Come on,” McLendon said. He whirled. From his hip pocket protruded the butt of a heavy automatic pistol. They went out. The screen door crashing behind them reverberant in the dead air. (172)

McLendon and Grimm use their “other,” Will Mayes and Christmas respectively, as a means to satisfy their own desire for power. But at what cost? There is the

obvious cost of the brutality that Mayes and Christmas must endure, but arguably there is another cost. When “community” accepts and then conforms to McLendon and Grimm’s perceptions, they are giving up their own ability to think, to react, and to understand, granting to a single man full power of volition to act on their behalf and with their support. As was the case with the Nelse Patton lynching, a few men’s tellings, their rumors, led to a mass action to enact a desired end: a brutal display of desire for racial segregation based on fear and hatred of change.

The portrayals of Brown and Grimm, like the portrayal of McLendon, show the astounding effect one man can have on the mass community, revealing Faulkner’s conception of what “community” can become. With these narratives, Faulkner in essence defines white supremacy, from its infancy to its full monstrous incarnation. It is Robert Penn Warren’s “massive immobility” writ large, showing the incarnation of a horrific communal movement raging against change.

The fear that fuels the communal desire to act in racist ways is not only due to the actions of individuals, however. In *Light in August*, before both Brown and Grimm make their proclamations regarding Christmas, before any character knows much about Christmas at all, Faulkner represents the community itself as having a desire for comprehending Joanna Burden’s death as the inevitable result of the way she lived her life, as one who acted as advocate and friend to black southerners, as a “nigger-lover.” As a living woman Joanna Burden exists apart from community, and she is ignored much like Emily Grierson is ignored by the community, even hated by it.<sup>viii</sup> But as a dead woman, a murdered woman, the community sees her as an almost

mythical creature; to those who gather at her death, her life becomes a series of events leading to a final horrible brutality.

In *Light in August* the community gathers at the home of Joanna Burden when they see flames from the fire that burns it, and when they find Joanna Burden, murdered inexplicably, a common consciousness is engendered and a common threat felt. In perhaps some of the best writing of the novel, Faulkner describes how the massing of the community occurs:

Within five minutes after the countrymen found the fire, the people began to gather. Some of them, also on the way to town in wagons to spend Saturday, also stopped. Some came afoot from the immediate neighborhood. This was a region of negro cabins and gutted and outworn fields out of which a corporal's guard of detectives could not have combed ten people, man or child, yet which now within thirty minutes produced, as though out of thin air, parties and groups ranging from single individuals to entire families. Still others came out from town in racing and blating cars. . . . Among them the casual Yankees and the poor whites and even the southerners who had lived for a while in the north, who believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward. (287-88)

Underlying such a description is human desire and a fear of death. Among fire and sex and death, the people who gather give into their natural base emotions: "They

looked at the fire, with that same dull and static amaze which they had brought down from the old fetid caves where knowing began, as though, like death, they had never seen fire before” (288). Without a spiritual leader or anyone willing to take a stand on behalf of any higher reasoning or logic, the base emotions give way to a unified action, almost a celebratory ritual:

So they moiled and clotted, believing that the flames, the blood, the body that had died three years ago and had just now begun to live again, cried out for vengeance, not believing that the rapt infury of the flames and the immobility of the body were both affirmations of an attained bourne beyond the hurt and harm of man. Not that. Because the other made nice believing. (289)

[The sheriff] returns to town and when the crowd realizes this, they depart in a “general exodus.” In a reversal of the Old Testament story, the community’s movements become the antithesis of Moses’ exodus and journey to the Promised Land. They leave in order to find the one whom they will recognize as the representative and cause of their fear and anguish. Capturing Joe Christmas, they believe, will somehow set them free:

It was as if there were nothing left to look at now. The body had gone, and now the sheriff was going. . . . So there was nothing left to look at now but the fire; they had now been watching it for three hours. Presently the fire truck came up gallantly, with noise, with whistles and bells. . . . So the hatless men, who had deserted counters and desks, swung down, even including the one who ground the siren.

They came down too and were shown several different places where the sheet had lain, and some of them with pistols already in their pockets began to canvass about for someone to crucify. But there wasn't anybody. (288-89)

With biblical language, the narrative suggests that like those who turned against Jesus, crying "Crucify, crucify him" (Luke 23: 21) so too does this community act of out of tremendous fear and ignorance without truly knowing Joe Christmas, without seeing him, or hearing his story, yet only being aware of his absence from them. The community needs his presence in order to justify their rage and fear, but also to act out their revenge, to take control of a fate they fear for themselves.

Parallels between key narrative scenes of "Dry September" and *Light in August* with the real-life circumstances involving a massing of a crowd to murder the accused Nelse Patton in 1908 are not difficult to discern. In John Cullen's account, he tells how soon after Patton is jailed, long before any kind of judicial hearing is held,

The news [of Patton's alleged crime] spread over the county like wildfire, and that night at least two thousand people gathered around the jail. Judge Roan came out on the porch and made a plea to the crowd that they let the law take its course. Then Senator W.V. Sullivan made a fiery speech, telling the mob that they would be weaklings and cowards to let such a vicious beast live until morning. . . . After Senator Sullivan's speech, the mob began pitching us boys



through the jail windows, and no guard in that jail would have dared shoot one of us. Soon a mob was inside. (Cullen 91)

Whether as a conscious action or an unconscious knowing Faulkner reveals the horror of the massing of people at Patton's lynching in his depiction of the massing community at Joanna Burden's death.

As is evident in the above passage, not all whites complied easily with racist mass actions, and Faulkner recognized such men in both his short fiction and *Light In August*. Specifically, there are a number of white, male characters, like Judge Roan, who are in positions to prevent the racism of the "community" – these characters comprehend that the community treatment of blacks is unfair and brutal. Characters like the barber Hawkshaw of "Dry September," Mr. Compson of "That Evening Sun," and Hightower of *Light in August* finally are unable to take a stand to challenge those who spread rumors and violently accuse an "other" to promote their own social position. Their inability to lead the community away from participation in unproved rumor and innuendo, results in a community, that when pushed, acts out communally held fears through violent white supremacist actions. Because Hawkshaw, Compson, and Hightower have economic security, they have no overt economic cause to challenge the community status quo; in fact, challenging the community might lead to a loss of economic security, and it may be this that prevents the men from acting. Hightower, however, is an interesting anomaly.

Hightower is the failed minister of the town, a visionary who at a young age sought a position in the world that would grant him glory not unlike that of his grandfather who fought and died valiantly during the Civil War. Yet in an unusual

twist, in terms of Faulkner's larger narrative schemes, Hightower also comes to represent one who is forcibly excluded from the community in much the same way Miss. Emily Grierson is excluded. He also experiences much of what Will Mayes endures -- he is beaten and abused after false rumors spread through the town of his sexual impropriety involving two members of another race. Hightower is finally not killed, however, as readers assume Will Mayes is at the end of "Dry September." Instead, his character lives to witness the repetition of such acts as they occur in the life of Joe Christmas. Hightower is in an unusually unique position. He has endured some of the torment that blacks and women often encounter in Faulkner's fiction, yet he is a white, middle class male. This, together with his religious beliefs, sets him up as a character who might intervene and act to alleviate or challenge the desire for separatism and revenge that the community comes to promote. Yet Hightower, who is in a subjectively more powerful position because of his race, class, and gender, again and again fails to take a stand on behalf of those treated unfairly. His refusal to assist Christmas until it is too late is made more significant than either the refusal of Hawkshaw, or even that of Mr. Compson in "That Evening Sun," because he has experienced the community's wrath himself. That is, even years after his abuse, when in a position to act on behalf of a man who will certainly suffer the kind of abuse he has suffered, he fails to act.

The repeated theme of a white, middle-class man who sees a wrong but refuses to intervene and prevent it, is key to understanding why community in Faulkner's work is not prevented from becoming destructive. The larger results of middle-class inaction are not only that Will Mayes, Nancy, and Joe Christmas suffer

unfairly, but also that “community” acts out its potential to become a massive, violent conglomerate. The white men who should speak up are ineffectual, while the ones who find cause for brutal acts are not stopped. In essence, both character types lend power to the creation and maintenance of a white supremacy.

After showing the power dynamic inherent in the massing of community, in a depiction that I believe defines white supremacy, Faulkner takes another step, one that few writers were brave enough to take during the segregation era. In an effort to understand another dimension to the story, he turns his point of view toward the opposite, the unknown, the man who is perceived as black and named “nigger.”

In *Light in August*, Joe Christmas is the character who is the recipient of the community’s racist signifying.<sup>ix</sup> He is the declared opposite, the one excluded, and the character without which there can be no clearly established power binaries. In essence, his identity has been designated and defined for him. To Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “signification” [little “s”] “denotes the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey” (46). And what I am suggesting is that community, Brown, and Grimm “signify” a communal identity for “Joe Christmas.” But it is not the end of the story. In the narrative, as several scholars have pointed out, Christmas resists the signifying of him by the community, and the result is that the narrative leaves open the possibility of Gate’s “Signification” [capital S].<sup>x</sup> “To Signify,” writes Gates, “is to engage in certain rhetorical games” (48). He elaborates saying, “Whereas signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification luxuriates

in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations” (49).

Early in the narrative, Christmas rejects a lunch pail that Byron Bunch offers, and by doing so makes the first in a series of narrative gestures showing that he will reject of the binary positioning of “have” vs. “have-not,” as he will reject the signifying of “white” vs. “black.” Christmas declares, ““I ain’t hungry. Keep your muck,”” dismissing the cultural and language scheme Byron has constructed: he won’t let Byron get away with being the generous white man giving to a “nigger” (*Light* 34).

In direct contrast to Lena Grove’s desire to conform to communal norms and codes, Christmas will abhor most “opportunities” he has to conform to the status quo and reinscribe popular binary constructs. Unlike the character Will Mayes of “Dry September,” who has little voice to speak up and act to defend himself, Christmas presents a tangible physical and vocal challenge to any attempt anyone has of signifying him.

Readers will recall that there are specific narrative moments in “That Evening Sun” and “Dry September” when characters become aware how their identities are subjectively determined by a larger social and cultural hierarchy. In “That Evening Sun,” Quentin Compson is sent into the family kitchen after dinner. He says to Nancy, “Mother wants to know if you are through.” Sitting next to a cold stove she responds,

“I done finished.” She looked at me.

“What is it?” I said. “What is it?”

“I aint nothing but a nigger,” Nancy said. “It aint none of my fault.”

(“That Evening Sun” 292-3)

In a key scene of “Dry September,” McLendon and his brood have captured Will Mayes and have got him packed into a car with them. The barber Hawkshaw sits next to Mayes:

The barber sat forward. The narrow tunnel of the road rushed up and past. Their motion was like an extinct furnace blast: cooler, but utterly dead. The car bounded from rut to rut.

“Mr. Henry,” the Negro said. (179)

Soon after Will Mayes’ gentle plea to the barber for his life, Hawkshaw escapes from the car by jumping, and Mayes, readers must assume, is taken to his death by his assailants.

In both scenes, characters who are the object of the community’s racist signifying have little room to challenge or disrupt a system of opposition that renders them powerless when faced with their deaths.<sup>xi</sup> In some ways, Nancy’s portrayal is more meaningful than Will Mayes because she lives with a sense of the signifying of her as a “nigger” and she can express her fear. For some readers it may seem that Nancy’s assertion that “it aint none of my fault” is nothing more than a hopeless relinquishment to the larger social and language forces in her life. However, I read this passage as a revelation, a comprehension on Nancy’s part of the limits and boundaries that she will always and everywhere have to face as a poor, black, woman, living in Jefferson – as a “nigger.” I read Nancy as a woman who always seeks to be more than language and society allow her to be. Unlike Dilsey, who

takes a safer path by acquiescing to her social position, Nancy seeks to find ways to construct her identity and garner some control over her selfhood. In her own way, she seems to be speaking to God and saying, “It aint none of my fault.”

Joe Christmas inherits the world of racist signifying of Nancy and Will Mayes, but with *Light in August*, Faulkner draws Christmas in a larger, more intricate way. Christmas does not become aware of the signifying of him by the community in one narrative revelation. His life is process of encountering racism and hatred again and again.

In one of the first passages that reveals Christmas’ internal thoughts, he is awake late at night in his cabin on the Burden property. Lighting a cigarette and “listening for the light, trivial sound which the dead match would make, . . . it seemed to him that he heard it.” Faulkner writes,

Sitting on the cot in the dark room, . . . he was hearing a myriad of sounds of no greater volume – voices, murmurs, whispers: of tress, darkness, earth; people: his own voice; other voices evocative of names and times and places – which he had been conscious of all his life without knowing it, which were his life. (105)

Christmas is acutely aware of what has been said about him during his life. All the rumors ever told of him seem to have been heard by Christmas himself. Yet in stunning language, Faulkner depicts Christmas as having an understanding of the rumors on another level: Christmas realizes that the words he has heard “were his life.” Christmas understands how his identity, his life, is what words have made of

him. As is the case with Nancy's acknowledgement "I aint nothing but a nigger," Christmas understands himself as caught in a language construct.

Following Christmas' recognition of "voices, murmurs, whispers," come two narrative turns. First, in a cry that resembles Nancy's cries to God and Jesus, Christmas cries out with a recognition that seems never to have occurred to him before: "*God loves me too . . . God loves me too*" (105). Following this Joe Christmas makes plans to murder Joanna Burden, yet the language he uses suggests that he has already killed her. Christmas declares, " 'It's because she started praying over me'" (105). Understanding the conundrum of this passage, the complexity of Christmas's spiritual revelation joined with a desire to murder Joanna Burden, requires unraveling the narrative of the rest of the novel, but clearly certain elements stand out as possible explanations.

Christmas cries out, "*God perhaps and me not knowing that too*" and the narration reveals, "He could see it like a printed sentence, fullborn and already dead *God loves me too* like the faded and weathered letters on a last year's billboard *God loves me too*. (105) Faulkner conflates the signification of language with a new kind of signification, one in which another larger existence is possible in God's love. The paradox is that Christmas can only comprehend God's love of him, a kind of pure signification, through language. God's love exists only as it appears in "a printed sentence, fullborn and already dead." It is a horrible recognition by Christmas; we only have ourselves insofar as language designates us. If there exists a greater comprehension of what it is to be "me," if there is God's love, then that comprehension is bound up in the smallness of language.

Language signification and religious practice in combination have plagued Christmas for much of his life beginning with a time when “memory believes before knowing remembers” (119). At his first “home,” an orphanage, most who know him ignore him, but those who hate him do so in an active way. The dietician and a janitor conspire against Christmas when he is only five, and in this early signifying of Christmas, the mysterious janitor, who later is revealed to be Christmas’ grandfather Doc Hines, tells the dietician who has engaged in an illicit affair with a medical intern, “I knowed he would be there to catch you when God’s time came. I knowed. I know who set him there a sign and a damnation for bitchery” (127). The dietician notices “it was the Bible” that sat upon [Doc Hines’s] knee, and she declares, “ ‘You hate him too. . . . You’ve been watching him too. I’ve seen you. Don’t say you don’t” (126). The dietician and Doc Hines incorporate biblical language into their twisted discussion and to justify their signifying of Christmas as “a sign,” as a “nigger.”

When McEachern comes to adopt the boy, Christmas listens as McEachern makes clear his view of the boy’s name by saying “Christmas” is “a heathenish name. Sacrilege. I will change that” (144). From McEachern’s point of view, he is offering the boy a good deal. Christmas will get a new name and a home in exchange for adhering to “the two virtues,” as McEachern calls them, of “work and fear of God” (144). In essence, Christmas is asked to give-up his identity in exchange for an identity as McEachern’s son. Yet, Christmas has no control over the exchange. It is forced upon him. As Christmas thinks back on that time as an adult, he realizes that as a child he “didn’t even bother to say to himself *My name aint*



*McEachern. My name is Christmas* There was no need to bother about that yet. There was plenty of time” (145). Christmas knows from an extremely young age that there are those who will force him to be something he is not, and he knows also that he will resist.

In the home of the McEacherns, Christmas begins a life of resistance from those who would rename him as well as to those forces that contribute to his misnaming and his misery. He resists those who, in my reading, cannot see a true Christ within Christmas, but who instead use the language of scripture as a means for their own desired ends.<sup>xii</sup> Christmas finds on McEachern’s table “an enormous Bible with brass clasps and hinges and a brass lock” (146). When Christmas refuses to learn the Presbyterian Catechism, Mr. McEachern whips him. When the boy continues to resist, McEachern takes Christmas and says,

“Kneel down” . . . The boy knelt; the two of them knelt in the close, twilight room: the small figure in cutdown underwear, the ruthless man who had never known either pity or doubt. McEachern began 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 lifting his hand against a child, an orphan, who was dear to God.

(152)

During the prayer, Christmas does not bow his head. Instead, “his eyes were open (his face had never been hidden or even lowered) and his face was quite calm; calm, peaceful, quite inscrutable” (153). After they have prayed, McEachern “looked down at the boy: a nose, a cheek jutting, granitelike, bearded to the caverned and

spectacled eyesocket. "Take the book," he said" (153). Christmas eventually escapes from McEachern, but only after he returns McEachern's violent blows with a few of his own.

Later in his life, as an adult, there are a number of years in which Christmas and Joanna Burden live side by side without conflict. During this time, Burden allows Christmas to live on her property, and she feeds him with both her food and an offering of her body, satisfying both her own and his physical hunger. And for many years, she doesn't ask that he be anything that she wishes him to be; she resists signifying him overtly as black or white; however, when they make love, she reveals her desire by crying out, "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (*Light* 260).

The tenor of the relationship changes some time after Joanna Burden realizes she will never bear a child. One day she insists that Christmas pray with her. The narrative parallels the scene with Christmas and McEachern and certainly the history of McEachern's brutality is reawakened in Christmas, contributing to his own brutality against Joanna Burden:

"Kneel with me," she said.

"No," he said.

"Kneel," she said. "You wont even need to speak to Him yourself.

Just kneel. Just make the first move."

"No," he said. "I'm going."

She didn't move, looking back and up at him. "Joe," she said. "Will you stay? Will you do that much?"

"Yes," he said, "But make it fast."

She prayed again. She spoke quietly, with abjectness of pride. When it was necessary to use the symbolwords which he had taught her, she used them, spoke them forthright and without hesitation, talking to God as if He were a man in the room with two other men. She spoke of herself and of him as of two other people, her voice still, monotonous, sexless. Then, she ceased. She rose quietly. They stood in the twilight, facing one another. This time she did not even ask the question; he did not even need to reply. After a time she said quietly: "Then there's just one other thing to do," he said.

'So now it's all done, all finished,' he thought quietly, sitting in the dense shadow of the shrubbery" (280-81).

Much spoken and written language as well as the language of the bible come to represent in Christmas' life all that has gone wrong since the early days when he was in the orphanage. Doc Hines uses biblical language in his expression of hatred. McEachern forces Christmas to relinquish what little identity he has by beating him until he will submit to reading the Presbyterian Catechism. Finally, Joanna Burden prays with him, making clear to him through words, and even "symbolwords," that *God loves even* him. Because of his childhood experiences with religious signifying, however, all religious language has undergone a transformation for Christmas. The revelation that God loves him comes in suspect language. It is paradoxical language that he wants to be true, but which is "already dead" to him. The news that God loves *even me* is too little too late delivered through language which almost mocks the Christ within himself.

When he confronts McEachern at a dance and knocks him unconscious, when he kills Joanna Burden, Christmas is presenting his resistance to those who would force him to submit to larger constructs, language and religious systems that do not represent him. Yet there is another kind of signifying that he is resisting too. He resists those who would name him “nigger.”

In addition to asking that Christmas pray with her, Burden has suggested that he attend a college for Negro students. For years, Christmas is fearful that Joanna Burden’s interest in him is due to his race, but with this overt suggestion Christmas believes without a doubt that it is his blackness that Joanna Burden desires.<sup>xiii</sup> Along side Christmas’ revelation of God comes the revelation that his being, his “self” with Joanna Burden is bound up finally her recognition of him as “Negro.” She wants a black man. In essence, Joanna Burden, has participated in the kind of signifying that Brown and Grimm perpetuate, the signifying that the community desires: she makes him black for her own purposes. In her case, her desire comes from a complicated family history, a guilt that she hopes to alleviate by engaging in a relationship with Christmas and having his child. And it is Christmas’ final revelation of Burden’s desire to make him black that contributes to his ultimate and final act, his killing of her. In Regina Fadiman’s estimation, “It is Joanna who, in the flashbacks forces Joe into the role of a Negro” but “it is also Joanna who is responsible for his final loss of innocence” (114)

Christmas will resist all actions to signify him, yet this resistance could be said to exist on yet another level. As he resists McEachern and as he resists Joanna Burden, he becomes the Faulknerian character who presents the strongest resistance

to larger binary social structures. He will not conform to institutionalized religion; he will not be a “nigger” or a white man. Christmas is aware from a very early age, in the way Nancy and Will Mayes become aware of only as adults, what it means to have your name changed from Christ to “nigger.” He is aware of the forces that will signify him and take from him a true selfhood by seeing him only as a race, and he realizes from an early age that there is more to him than words can say. His race does not determine his “self.” His God cannot be spelled in human language.

Faulkner’s portrayal of Christmas’ self-conscious resistance is itself a construction. “Joe Christmas” is Faulkner’s attempt at Signifying as he critiques language and the binary nature of oppositional structures. In James Snead’s assessment, “Joe Christmas resists signification, while showing that [readers] cannot tolerate anything that does not signify” (88). Christmas’s characterization points to the impossibility of fixing any human constructs, including language, religion, race, and social hierarchies at the same time it makes clear that, clearly, such constructs can never be done away with.

Faulkner characters exist realistically entirely within the realm cultural, social, and economic systems that construct difference, yet Faulkner, not unlike the theorist Jacques Derrida, had a sense of the “freeplay” inherent in any structure. According to Derrida, one can never be outside of systems that construct difference; however, one can come to interpret and gain a new conceptualization of difference in a system. I believe that with *Light in August*, specifically with the portrayal of Joe Christmas, Faulkner was seeking the “freeplay” in the system of difference that constructed Southern separatism and which resulted in the oppression of blacks.

Also, I believe that Faulkner and Derrida hold in common a key element for understanding and comprehending structures that construct human difference: basic human desire creates all structure. Ultimately, any structure exists due to a human desire for a center, “an origin and end of the game” (Derrida 242). The desired center is of course unattainable and allusive; it is imagined and desired but never realized. Finally, there can be no center or end to interpreting difference.

In *Natural Aristocracy*, Kevin Railey argues that with *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* “racial identity and race relations are not at all a priori givens. Rather, they are social constructions formulated as conscious ruling class policy for specific social purposes” (Railey 127). While I strongly agree that, in some way, Faulkner saw race as an arbitrary standard used by whites to establish power over blacks, I am not convinced that Faulkner’s “ruling class” had so much power and agency to itself construct racial difference. Community participates in the construction of difference. It promotes difference to bolster its own power and security, but community in Faulkner’s fiction does not create historical and cultural difference, language difference, race difference, and class difference out of thin air. The over arching systems of difference themselves are greater than any one “ruling class.” They were, and still are, entrenched in Southern and American culture. Undoing constructions of differences is akin to making language or Christian religion less patriarchal; it will take huge multi-cultural paradigm shifts to be accomplished, and with the characterization of Joe Christmas, I believe Faulkner sets the stage for just such a shift to occur.

The character Christmas becomes a means by which readers can begin to question easy significations as well as power systems that designate race, religion, and social standing. Finally, when Christmas resists, his actions may be read as Christ-like. The death of Joanna Burden and the subsequent death of Christmas, like the true death of Nelse Patton, may not result in a change to the community who perpetrates the crime; however, for those who remember, for those who read the tragedy, all the composite parts of a conglomeration can be recognized as a whole, terrible union that holds within it the power to oppress and kill. It is a tragedy with deeply resonating meaning in which we must recognize our own complicity with fixed notions ascribed by communal norms. Ultimately, through a tragic story, Faulkner asks readers to imagine new ways of thinking and using the structures of everyday life, yet he also implicitly asks, what are you afraid of? What do you desire? Why?

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The Nelse Patton lynching that took place in Oxford, Mississippi, when Faulkner was a boy there, is discussed more completely in the first chapter of this analysis. For more, see Joel Williamson's *William Faulkner and Southern History*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) and John B. Cullen's book written in collaboration with Floyd C. Watkins, *Old Times in Faulkner Country* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: U of North Carolina P, 1961).

<sup>ii</sup> I am referring to Derrida's important language theory here. See. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. Eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. New York: Longman, 1989.

<sup>iii</sup> In this instance, I am thinking of the character Hightower.

<sup>iv</sup> See also the passage where Armstid leaves Lena to catch a ride to Jefferson. He thinks to himself, "A man. All men. He will pass up a hundred chances to do

good for one chance to meddle where meddling is not wanted. He will overlook and fail to see chances, opportunities, for riches and fame and well-doing, and even sometimes for evil. But he won't fail to see a chance to meddle" (24).

<sup>v</sup> I have written more extensively about the relationship of Lena Grove with the Armstids in a chapter of my dissertation. While Lena Grove is presented as someone who may be positioned in the narrative as one who is excluded from "community," by an act of volition and a sense of the power of her race and herself as a mother-to-be, she works to fit into the community. Ultimately, she is accepted by the Armstids and then, the townspeople of Jefferson. She is similar to Joe Christmas in that she is orphaned and traveling to find something better for herself, but her journey leads her toward the establishment of her desire, to have a family, while Christmas, who may have the same desire, travels through a life that will end in a brutally way.

<sup>vi</sup> See also Cleanth Brooks' assertion that "the characters portrayed in *Light in August* are largely of poor-white stock" (17). *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963).

<sup>vii</sup> I am referring to the well-known answer that Faulkner gave to a student's question while lecturing the University of Virginia. The student asks, "Sir, in another one of your stories, "Percy Grimm," do you think that the type of person that is exemplified there is prevalent in the South today, perhaps in the White Citizens Councils?" Faulkner responds, "I wouldn't say prevalent, he exists everywhere, I wrote that book in 1932 before I'd ever heard of Hitler's Storm Troopers, what he was was a Nazi Storm Trooper, but then I'd never heard of one then, and he's not prevalent, but he's everywhere." See page 41 of *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* edited by Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph Blotner. (Charlottesville, Virginia: The U of Virginia P, 1959).

<sup>viii</sup> The community hates Joanna Burden in part because of what she and her family represent. They would be considered by many to be "nigger-lovers."

<sup>ix</sup> To Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "signification" [little "s"] "denotes the meaning that a term conveys, or is intended to convey" (46). But Gates also theorizes that in the black vernacular, there has been a long tradition of "Signifying" [capital "S"]. "To Signify," writes Gates, "is to engage in certain rhetorical games" (48). In *Light in August*, as characters position Joe Christmas in opposition to themselves, they are in essence constructing an identity for him, for the sign, "Joe Christmas." But in an extraordinary twist, the narrative will allow Christmas to be someone who does not easily fit that signification. The narrative challenges the easy notion that Christmas is black, thus a "nigger," and allow Christmas to tell his own story. Arguably, Christmas is neither black nor white. He is more than the signifying of the community and he struggles to find his true identity apart from the terms used to signify him. In this way, the narrative itself engages in a kind of Signification,



showing Christmas to be a man who will not fit the terms the community has assigned him. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g): Rhetorical Difference and the Orders of Meaning" in *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 1988).

<sup>x</sup> The scholar I am thinking of here is James A. Snead, who writes, "Christmas is the sign of resistance to fixed signs." See *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels*. New York: Methuen, 1986.

<sup>xi</sup> Faulkner does not end either "That Evening Sun" or "Dry September" with a death scene, yet I believe most readers assume that both Nancy and Will Mayes will die as a result of the events of the stories.

<sup>xii</sup> Faulkner assigns Christmas an identity that, as is the case with the character Nancy, connects him paradoxically to Jesus Christ. Perhaps the naming is a way for Faulkner to remind readers that within the character "Christmas" there is a suffering and divine being, there is a "Christ."

<sup>xiii</sup> Regina Fadiman makes this point in her book entitled *Faulkner's Light in August: A Description and Interpretation of the Revisions*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1975

CHAPTER FOUR: NARRATIVE ORIGINS, RESPONSES, AND RESISTANCE  
TO INJUSTICE IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

“When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.”

-Edmund Burke, 1770

*Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*

If with the short stories or *Light in August*, Faulkner had thought about portraying the white, middle class characters who choose to turn away from injustice-- characters including Mr. Compson, Hawkshaw, or Hightower – as expressing guilt for the brutality that such characters as Nancy, Will Mayes, and Joe Christmas endure, then ultimately he chose not to depict such a response.<sup>i</sup> If there was to be remorse, Faulkner could have hoped only that readers would imagine it themselves, filling in the blank spaces of his modern fiction. With these earlier narratives, Faulkner reveals little reaction to injustice. With *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, Faulkner gives voice to several characters brave enough and strong-willed enough to articulate something never before told in a Faulkner narrative: the results of what happens when moral men fail to act upon their deeply-held beliefs, allowing for the fear-filled actions of a radical fanatic capable of influencing whole communities. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the characters who work to comprehend injustice and then react to it include Rosa Coldfield, Shrevelevin McCammon, and finally an enlightened Quentin Compson.

In earlier narratives, the white, middle class men who foresee violence against excluded characters – who are often lower income, black characters – hold positions that would allow them to act to prevent brutality.<sup>ii</sup> Yet Faulkner’s middle

class white men ultimately take little or no stand. At the beginning of the narrative, Rosa Coldfield does not overtly take a stand on behalf of those abused due to race or class difference, but in her way, she does begin to break a code of eternal silence that prevails in the earlier narratives. She sees and articulates an incredible truth not acknowledged by any middle-class, white character of the earlier texts: the fruits of an individual's life labors can be destroyed and his children left barren due his complicity with those who act unjustly.

Although *The Sound and the Fury* gives its own narrative reasons for the deterioration of the Compson family, and it shows how Dilsey Gibson sees and articulates this decline, it is with *Absalom, Absalom!* that Faulkner portrays his clearest vision, the foundation, for the family's decline.<sup>iii</sup> While *The Sound and the Fury* gives an account of the Compsons' final chapter -- Quentin ultimately commits suicide, Caddy becomes estranged from the family, and Jason develops into a brutal, though ineffective, patriarch -- *Absalom, Absalom!* offers new ways of understanding the decline. When Miss. Rosa speaks, her account is more than an expression of emotion; it is the first detailed, if sometimes cryptic, composite description of the events that have lead to the Compsons's decline as well as a general decline in Jefferson, which extends to her own family the Coldfields. In fact, Miss Rosa Coldfield (read: cold field) is the last survivor of the family, and she too dies without bearing a child.<sup>iv</sup>

Sitting in the dark parlor of her father's house, Miss Rosa sends for Quentin Compson so that she might explain what has happened, the reason why the Compsons and the Coldfields have failed to reproduce a new strong generation of

southerners as well the traditions of a strong southern culture. Rosa chooses Quentin for the listening because she believes that with his Harvard education, he more than anyone else in the county will hear her story and remember it in his writing. She says to Quentin,

“So maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it. . . . Perhaps you will even remember kindly then the old woman who made you spend a whole afternoon sitting indoors and listening while she talked about people and events you were fortunate enough to escape yourself when you wanted to be out among young friends of your own age.” (*Absalom* 5)

With the embroidered language of southern prose, Faulkner’s Rosa sets up the story as one that Quentin should not want to hear of people he is “fortunate enough to escape” knowing due to his young age. Her “woe is me” language captures Quentin’s interest. Yet there are other reasons why Quentin listens as Rosa tells about herself, Thomas Sutpen, and Ellen her sister.

Not satisfied with Miss Rosa’s explanation of why he is the story’s sole listener, Quentin asks his father why she tells her story to him. Mr. Compson replies,

“She may believe that if it hadn’t been for your grandfather’s friendship, Sutpen could never have got a foothold here, he could not have married Ellen. So maybe she considers you partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family through him.” (*Absalom* 8)

Posited as the family's representative, Quentin is the inheritor of this history. He is old enough to understand the story about his forebear's friendship with Sutpen, yet still young enough to feel guilt about that which he himself did not do.<sup>v</sup> He becomes the off-spring responsible for the emotive response, for feeling the guilt that his grandfather should have felt but did not.<sup>vi</sup>

In terms of larger narrative patterning, Quentin Compson is also an important choice for the listening because he is the narrative offspring of Mr. Compson, Hawkshaw, and Hightower. He is positioned in the much the same way as they are – as the thoughtful, middle-class, white male whose family has resided in Jefferson for many years; he is a would-be pillar of the community. But in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin also becomes a distinctly different character from the characters who precede him, for when he learns Rosa Coldfield's story, he gains knowledge about the outcome of silence and inaction in the face of injustice. I have always read Quentin's suicide as a result of the events depicted in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* He is more than merely frustrated by the decline of his own family, by Caddy's loss of innocence especially; Quentin is haunted by the decisions of generations of men who have caused a general decline in his homeland. If Quentin begins to comprehend racial boundaries, as well as injustice, in the narrative of "That Evening Sun," then it is with the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* that Quentin gains full knowledge of the destructive nature of racial relations in his homeland. When Quentin learns of his grandfather's support of Sutpen, then his motives for the suicide are made more clear for readers.<sup>vii</sup>

Unlike Mr. Compson, Hawkshaw, or Hightower, Quentin will feel guilt for past injustices, yet what is different about Quentin's response is the way it is a sympathetic guilt. He himself has done nothing that would warrant his psychological anguish, and this same insight might be extended to the anguish he feels regarding his relationship with Caddy. He is tormented by his feelings for Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, but he has not actually done anything wrong.

In reiteration of biographical and critical work on Faulkner, I must agree with those who feel that Quentin is the receiver of Miss Rosa's story in much the same way that Faulkner was the bearer of his own family's history.<sup>viii</sup> Although Rosa Coldfield and Quentin are not related by birth, she tells him details about his family that they themselves might avoid revealing to him. Faulkner too spent time on the town square in Oxford listening to the tales of his home's history, hearing from neighbors what his family would not tell.<sup>ix</sup> Yet Quentin and Faulkner are not the same, and I do not mean to imply that they are. What the character Quentin and the boy Billy Faulkner do have in common is that they are more than just listeners; they are participants in the careful construction of "the truth" about their families and their communities. And, to a large extent, both bear the terrible burden of their familial and community history.<sup>x</sup> Faulkner, the oldest son of an alcoholic father and heir to an ancestry of both extraordinary achievements and massive failures, resembles Quentin mostly in his desire to comprehend the full expanse of both the greatness and depravity within his history. Faulkner devises the character of Miss Rosa as a spokesperson who will tell what she knows, offering her knowledge, and Quentin, with Shreve's assistance, cannot resist filling in the blank spaces of her

narrative. He is portrayed as one who is obsessed with the past, and his desire is perhaps parallel only to William Faulkner's own desire to make sense of history and his place in it.

In terms of Faulkner's ever-changing, ever-evolving narratives, the fictional interaction between Quentin and Rosa shows how the writer himself may be comprehending white, middle-class complicity in a new way, or at least, depicting it in a new way. In the narrative, Faulkner's South has become a place where no person can stand by passively as injustice is done and not be profoundly effected by it in some way. Unlike "That Evening Sun," "Dry September" or *Light in August*, injustice has consequences in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and the ramifications extend to all those who participate by their knowledge and complicity with injustice. I read much of *Absalom, Absalom!* as Faulkner's first attempt to own up to white, southern, middle class complicity with the extremist actions of Slave and Civil War era fanatics, and more implicitly, Reconstruction and Segregation era fanatics. Through the characters of Miss. Rosa Coldfield and Quentin Compson, Faulkner is finally able to render a kind of confession. The stream of consciousness elements of the narrative are like long releases of breath, as if what Rosa begins Quentin extends, as if our speaker is exhaling a truth that had been stifled far too long in southern life and literature.<sup>xi</sup>

There are a number of narrative elements of *Absalom, Absalom!* that are clearly derived from earlier patterns set forth in "That Evening Sun," "Dry September," and *Light in August*. In the earlier texts, Faulkner sets in motion plots in which an excluded character, a "black" character, is abandoned "when the crisis of

[his or] her need came” by a white male character who could be called a “moderate” (*Faulkner in the University* 21).<sup>xii</sup> The driving force behind the brutality against the black character is often a white, male extremist who incites the community of the narrative to violence, or who at least convinces the community to allow him to act violently.<sup>xiii</sup> Once the community is mobilized behind the extremist, there is no stopping him, or if there exists a possibility of stopping him, no character does. Faulkner’s narratives emphasize different elements of this pattern according to which character holds the primary narrative focus. With “That Evening Sun” and *Light in August*, the narrative focus is on Nancy and Joe Christmas, respectively, so these narratives could be said to emphasize the position of the one who is poor, black, and excluded.<sup>xiv</sup> With “Dry September” the narrative focus is on Hawkshaw, the barber, so the narrative emphasizes the ineffectual, white middle class male.<sup>xv</sup> With *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner again shifts the focus, and this time, the narrative emphasizes the character who occupies the position of the white, male fanatic: Thomas Sutpen. While *Absalom, Absalom!* is in many ways Quentin’s story, Thomas Sutpen holds the narrative’s primary focus.

In the earlier narratives, Faulkner provides clues and possible motivating factors for an extremist character’s actions.<sup>xvi</sup> McLendon lacks economic and perhaps sexual power, and he becomes fanatical due to these lacks. Yet McLendon also can be read as a white supremacist, a man who has a well-articulated personal desire to institute a code of separatism in Jefferson.<sup>xvii</sup> In *Light in August*, Percy Grimm also expresses a desire to uphold white supremacy in his hometown due to his “belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races” (*Light in August*



450-51). But Grimm's fanaticism seems tied less to an economic or sexual lack and more to an almost painful desire he has for power – a power he believes is his birthright as a white, American male. With the characterization of Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner conflates McLendon and Grimm into one character, but he also adds a more complex account of how Thomas Sutpen becomes fanatical in the first place. Then, the narrative does something else that the earlier narratives do not. It portrays a certain justice, a payment, Sutpen must pay for his crimes. In keeping with its mission to reveal the results of injustice, the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* shows how the character of Thomas Sutpen will owe a debt not only to a creditor, but “The Creditor” (*Absalom* 145). “Payment” is not due as a punitive sentence passed down by a man-made system of justice. Instead, because most of his actions are more immoral than they are illegal, in the novel's Civil War setting, this payment becomes the sentence of a higher system of justice: God's own justice.<sup>xviii</sup>

Because Sutpen's debt is owed for moral injustice, because it is owed to God, it will not be paid solely by him alone. It will be paid by his children, by his wives, and by the families of all those who have participated in his crimes either by their action or their inaction. It will even be paid by some who had the misfortune of merely crossing their paths with his.

There are a number of other specific reasons why Sutpen's character should be compared to Faulkner's characterizations of Captain McLendon and Percy Grimm. First and foremost, each of these characters gains power by opposing himself to one who is socially or economically vulnerable. In the case of Thomas Sutpen, there is not only one “other” that he will oppose himself to. In order to gain

his extensive power, Sutpen manipulates and brutalizes a whole series of people in order to gain a powerful identity as the “*Be Sutpen’s Hundred*” (*Absalom* 4).

Sutpen gains his first fortune by marrying the daughter of a wealthy planter in the West Indies. When he learns, however, that his wife has “black” blood, he abandons her as well as his son, Charles Bon. He does so because, he says, “I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside.” Quentin’s grandfather remembers Sutpen also saying, “He had put his first wife aside like eleventh and twelfth century kings did” (*Absalom* 194).

As with the characterizations of McLendon and Grimm, Sutpen actions are motivated by his desire to uphold a code, called a “design,” which allows him the possibility climbing to the top of the socio-economic-cultural hierarchical heap. The code he envisions is strongly influenced by class constructions that would have been prevalent in the South during the Civil War period, and Sutpen is able to become powerful due to a southern agrarian class system that is largely based on racial difference. When he learns that his wife and son are partially black, he knows that such an association will disrupt his social climbing, preventing him from attaining his place as a primary patriarch, a position he imagines to be like that of the “eleventh and twelfth century kings” of England. But this is not all. Even if he loved his wife, which seems doubtful, Sutpen still would have to end his association with her because such a relationship would render obsolete the absolute boundary between black / white, an opposition his increase in power depends upon.

When Sutpen leaves the West Indies abruptly, to escape Eulalia and Charles Bon, his sole desire is to make a fresh start, rebuilding his fortune and re-establishing the credence of his code. Historically, Faulkner is accurate when he envisions New Orleans as a place where Sutpen could gain a quick fortune. In the early 1800s, the small city endured the “immigration of gamblers, criminals, and riffraff from all over the world, lured to New Orleans because of its reputation as a lawless river town” (*WPA Guide to New Orleans* 25) At this time, New Orleans was also a major center for the North American slave trade.

While Thomas Sutpen’s massive gambling success, in New Orleans as well as on the riverboats of the Mississippi, is almost too good to be true even for fiction, finally the result is that he obtains a “hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country” (*Absalom* 25-26). Yet, the land is obtained not only by the success of Sutpen’s gambling. Sutpen takes land belonging to a Native American tribe because, as Malcolm Cowley has said, “the Indians were psychologically unable to place a cash value on it” (*The Portable Faulkner* 1). The leader of the tribe, Ikkemotubbe, is duped into surrendering the lands and then has little judicial recourse to contest the inequitable exchange.

After winning, or swindling, his enormous track of land, Sutpen takes twenty Haitian slaves to Jefferson, where he will work them in the most deplorable conditions in order to erect his grand plantation house. Achieving his goal to buy land and to begin building a plantation has come at a price that even the clever Sutpen can’t afford, however, and he arrives in Yoknapatawpha county with no money to feed, clothe, or provide shelter for the slaves, or for a refined French

architect whom he has also apparently “won” along the way. All of the men, and two women, sleep on the ground and eat whatever they can find or catch in the ancient, untamed forest surrounding the plantation. But starving his mud-covered slaves is not the worst of Sutpen’s follies.

Acting on impulses not made completely clear in the narrative, but which could be greed and lasciviousness, Sutpen engages his female slaves in sexual intercourse, resulting in the birth of a daughter, Clytemnestra. This is an especially ironic, terrible action in light of the fact that Sutpen has come to Mississippi to escape his wife and son’s “black” blood. While some might argue that during the pre-Civil era in which the novel is set it was not uncommon for a plantation owner to bear off spring with his female slaves, I think it wrong to assume that Faulkner was merely representing an historical truth when he reveals Sutpen’s actions. In the history of the South that Faulkner represents, he shows, arguably, that Sutpen’s action is one terrible wrong among many that Sutpen commits, and it is specifically this type of action by Sutpen that will transform the potentially gracious plantation home he erects into a “Dark House.”<sup>xix</sup> In the narrative, Sutpen’s daughter, Clytie, is a constant reminder of Sutpen’s mysterious and dangerous passions, passions realized by means of a “design” that is constructed by Sutpen in the most cold-hearted, logical way devoid of human sympathy, compassion, or love. Clytie is one of Sutpen’s longest surviving children, living out her life at Sutpen’s Hundred, yet never openly accepted as a member of the family.

During his first penniless years in Yoknapatawpha county, Sutpen displays other mysterious passions such as engaging his slaves in boxing matches and inviting

local men to watch and place bets. When Sutpen himself steps into the ring to fight, readers must assume that he collects some portion of the money that is bet against him, and in this way, he finds another way to capitalize on the investment of his human capital. But Sutpen does not seem to hold the boxing sessions merely for economic gain. There is something in the display of strength, especially his personal display of strength over and against black men, that he finds self-satisfying.

In these scenes, and throughout the narrative, Sutpen takes full advantage of non-whites in order to construct his powerful identity, what Hale would call his “whiteness.”<sup>xx</sup> He seeks out those whom he can take advantage of and then, he brutally builds his plantation by capturing and exhausting the resources of their strengths. Such narrative depictions reveal the machinations Sutpen’s “design,” a code that is not unlike that of Captain McLendon or Percy Grimm. Yet unlike earlier depictions of radical fanatics, the depiction of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* provides an even more complete insight into the development of his design, a belief system which could be interpreted as a code of white supremacy.

A story within a story is included in the narrative, an account of Sutpen as a boy who is “innocent” about class and race difference until a crucial experience causes him to “fall” into an understanding of culturally constructed social differences.<sup>xxi</sup> It is this experience that will initiate his brutal grand design (*Absalom* 178-180). In the account, which is told by Thomas Sutpen to General Compson and retold by Mr. Compson to Quentin, Sutpen reveals that he was born in West Virginia, an environment where

the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say, 'This is mine' was crazy; and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only that crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for powder and whiskey. (*Absalom* 179)

Sutpen's "innocence" here is not unlike the pre-lapsarian innocence of Adam and Eve. There is enough of everything for all people: enough land, enough food, enough shelter.

When Sutpen's mother dies, however, the family fall is initiated. Sutpen remembers several significant things about this time in his young life. The first memory he has is of his sister inexplicably giving birth. The narrative insinuates Sutpen's father has committed incest with his sister during this time when the family is moving from place to place.<sup>xxii</sup> The depiction of this repulsive childhood experience may be devised in the narrative to create a psychological backdrop for Sutpen's cavalier attitude toward fathering children with any woman who happens to be in close proximity to him.

Sutpen's other primary memory from this time is his entrance into the Tidewater region of the South where he observed for the first time a part of the country where the land was

all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be

and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others, they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices such as pouring the very whiskey from the jug and putting the glass into his hand or pulling off his boots for him to go to bed that all men have had to do for themselves since time began and would have to do until they died and which no man ever has or ever will like to do but which no man that he knew had ever anymore thought of evading than he had thought of evading the effort of chewing and swallowing and breathing. (*Absalom* 179-180)

In stark contrast to the West Virginia pre-Civil War South, this is an environment that teaches Sutpen about the webs of power that make some men wealthy, but which keep most others in state of poverty or bondage. Sutpen comes to learn that his “place” in this new hierarchical social scheme is nothing like his place of equality in West Virginia. He discerns clues as to where he stands socially among other men, women, and boys of the plantations, but there is one specific moment of revelation that awakens him to his impoverished status.

Sutpen is sent by his father to take a message to the owner of the plantation house. The boy looks forward to delivering the message because he imagines that he will be allowed

to see the inside of [the plantation house], see what else a man was bound to own who could have a special nigger to hand him his liquor and pull off his shoes that he didn’t even need to wear, never for one

moment thinking but [that] the man would be as pleased to show him the balance of his things as the mountain man would have been to show the powder horn and bullet mold that went with the rifle.

Because he was still innocent. (*Absalom* 185-6)

Instead of being invited into the plantation house, however, Sutpen remembers that he

“stood there before that white door with the monkey nigger barring it and looking down at him in his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes. . . . [The boy Sutpen] never even remembered what the nigger told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back.”

(*Absalom* 188)

In this moment, Sutpen realizes he is not only a “boy,” but in the eyes of a black house slave as well as all others who look upon him, he is a poor, filthy dirty, white boy with no status even to walk in the front door of another man’s house. In this paradigm shift, the paradise of West Virginia is exorcised from his consciousness. Land, houses, clothing, and most importantly human beings are now objects which one either possesses or not, and those who don’t have such possession are of little worth. If, implicitly, the incest of his father with his sister has obscured Sutpen’s definitions of father/husband, mother/sister, even sister/wife, then the oppositions of owner/owned, white/black, rich/poor, worthy/unworthy are created as constants, constructed in an instant in the mind of the boy, and his life will never be the same. His innocence is lost.



Sutpen realizes that he is bound to a working position, a social position lower than that of a black slave whose main responsibility is as door-keeper for a powerful white patriarch. Yet Sutpen believes he can overcome the social position provided for him by birth, and this belief is closely tied to his knowledge of himself as white and male. For the author of *Natural Aristocracy*, Kevin Railey, when Sutpen “leaves the Tidewater it is with a distinct awareness that being white means something. When he decides to go to Haiti, it is clear he has come to realize both that his whiteness means something and that it is all he has to offer” (131). Railey understands that Sutpen has a vital sense of his own ability to rise in social and economic standing largely because of his race. Even as a boy Sutpen has a sense of his own power, a feeling that guides him throughout his life. Railey theorizes that Sutpen’s sense of his powerful whiteness is a clear sign of the character’s inherent “liberalism.” Railey writes, “As Protestants believing that all were equal in the eyes of the Lord, Sutpen and his family reveal their connection to the bourgeois, liberal ethos as it originally entered the South” (Railey 115). Yet what begins as Sutpen’s competitive desire to challenge those who see him as poor and worthless, arguably becomes an obsessive, destructive, ego-centric desire to rise above all other men.

Railey’s analysis does not consider the language of the fall that Faulkner uses in his description of Sutpen’s early life. Sutpen does not in fact initiate a Protestant ethic, but rather he abandons the ideals of human equality. What’s crucial in the above scene is that Sutpen not only falls from a state of divine grace into a state of human desire, but also as a result of this fall, he will create life-long brutal conquest to obtain a fortune build from the labor of others. What for most boys would be

nothing more than “knee-jerk” response to life’s unfairness, becomes the foundation of Sutpen’s monomaniacal grasp for power.

In an environment that resembles Plato’s cave, Sutpen contemplates his rejection at the door of the plantation house, and clearly his thoughts are influenced by what his father has taught him about the importance of maintaining racial separatism. He remembers his father lashing out at Pettibone’s slaves, bragging about how he and other white men “whipped one of Pettibone’s niggers tonight.” When Sutpen asks his father “which one of Pettibone’s niggers” and “what [had] the nigger done?” the father replies, “Hell fire, that goddamn son of a bitch Pettibone’s nigger” (*Absalom* 187). Thomas Sutpen’s father sees Pettibone’s “nigger” in much the same way McLendon sees Will Mayes in “Dry September.” From the point of view of these men, it is not important that one particular “nigger,” an individual human being be killed; what is important is the assertion of white power over the black race of men, the “Nigger.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

The rage that Sutpen’s father feels is also clearly the result of his feelings about Pettibone himself. Since the father is powerless to strike out at Pettibone he takes out his anger on the black man who is forcibly positioned as a bolster to the white man’s power. This projection of anger onto Pettibone’s “nigger” is not unlike Jesus’ projection of anger on to Nancy for the rage he feels for Mr. Compson as well as the other white men who have abused Nancy. Neither Supten’s father or Jesus can fight the more powerful white characters, so they take revenge on those who are less powerful, those black characters who they perceive as participating and supporting the white man’s power.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In his cave and then later at his home, with its “rough partly rotten log walls, the sagging roof whose missing shingles they did not replace,” Sutpen contemplates his response to his newly identified knowledge. Instead of choosing his father’s brutal, overt show of white over black power, or killing Pettibone himself, Sutpen devises a plan that will become the design directing all the actions of his adult life, and it is this design that most clearly operates as a code of white supremacy akin to the codes that drive McLendon and Percy Grimm.

In the narrative retelling, first to General Compson, then to Mr. Compson, and finally, to Quentin Compson, the boy Sutpen is remembered as thinking:

“If you [are] fixing to combat them that had the fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make . . . . But this aint a question of rifles. So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You see?” (*Absalom* 192)

Upon his realization that the best revenge will be a revenge in kind, Sutpen leaves his home and “he never [sees] any of his family again” (192).

The result of Sutpen’s childhood experience is that his identity is bound inextricably to his desire to be superior to most men, especially those who are like the men who have insulted him, the black male servant and Pettibone himself. Thomas Sutpen has become not only Faulkner’s most powerful white character; he is Faulkner’s strongest depiction of an extremist. He holds deeply to a belief that quietly drives him to oppose himself to those he deems “other,” and he justifies his

brutal acts by considering the model of his father, and then choosing instead to become just like Pettibone, the man who, as a child, he had hated more than any other.

Addressing the issue of whether or not the character of Thomas Sutpen can be read as a white supremacist, Railey adds a chapter note:

Despite the fact that Sutpen's allegiance to white supremacy is obvious in his treatment of Eulalia and Charles Bon, his interactions with those characters, as with most of his interactions with people of African heritage, reveal his ultimate liberalism. First, Sutpen feels as if his conscience is clear after "buying off" his first wife and their son. He does not recognize Bon's need to be identified with his father; Sutpen feels no paternalistic responsibility. Also, in his interaction with his slaves, Sutpen wants somehow to demonstrate his superiority to them through fighting. He does not simply assume his inherent right to rule. . . . Sutpen's actions generally are consistent with an ideological heritage that does not assume *inherent* superiority. (Railey Note 9 191)

While I agree that that some of Sutpen's attempts to "pay off" those characters whom he has wronged could associate him with Railey's descriptions of "liberalism," over-all Railey dismisses too quickly the code or "design" Sutpen lives by, a code that is not unlike the belief systems that drive the characters McLendon and Grimm. Sutpen is a monomaniacal fanatic who uses many people, but especially non-whites, in order to build his plantation, and ultimately he offers little in return to

those whom he takes advantage of including the twenty slaves, Ikemotubbe and his tribe, his daughter Clytie, or even the French architect. They provide the resources for his fortune, but they in no way benefit from Sutpen's amassed wealth.

Railey's analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!* breaks important new ground when he theorizes and then investigates the idea that it is with this text that

Faulkner explores in much greater detail and in a much more conscious manner the ways in which characters become "black," and he understands that this process is inextricably connected to the ways in which characters become "white." [Faulkner] implies that both "black" and "white" are inventions, constructed identities. (Railey 127)

The fact that characters, such as Eulalia and Charles Bon, become "black" due to Thomas Sutpen's desire to become "white" is only part of the story. With this narrative, Faulkner takes another step when he portrays the intricate nature, the man-made advantage, and the full power potential of the "white" position. Becoming "white" for Thomas Sutpen is not merely a move towards equality; it is a conscious conquest to become the most powerful white man, a decision born out of fear and greed. He is not just another Protestant "white" man that has made some unfortunate choices. The fact that much of Faulkner's fiction repeatedly depicts the brutal actions by white men against blacks, shows Faulkner worked on his portrayals of the white fanatic. He wanted to get it just right. Categorizing McLendon, Grimm, and Thomas Sutpen as white supremacists is one way for readers to fully comprehend

and express in contemporary terms the full destructive nature, the brutality, of these characters.

I do not believe Sutpen's vision akin to the "liberalism" of the characters Jason Compson or Anse Bundren, as Railey has suggested.<sup>xxv</sup> Sutpen is more extreme. A narrative indicator that Sutpen's character should be read as that of an extremist can be found in an examination of the community of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner departs from his earlier portrayals of the communal "we" in order to show that in this narrative the community cannot easily support or even ignore Sutpen's unjust behavior.

Inaugurating a significant shift in the identity of narrative "community," Faulkner establishes a new set of norms when he portrays the people of Jefferson standing up against Sutpen. Although the community of *Absalom, Absalom!* does in some ways resemble the earlier communities of "A Rose for Emily," "Dry September," and *Light in August* -- because it presents a unified communal whole acting according to a system of unspoken beliefs and also because it eventually will acquiesce to Sutpen -- it must also be seen as significantly different from the earlier depictions.

According the story Miss Rosa tells Quentin, Thomas Sutpen arrived in Jefferson seemingly devoid of social standing and status. Looking back retrospectively she says of him,

"He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own anymore than the horse was his

own or even the pistols, seeking some place to hide himself.”

(*Absalom* 9)

Sutpen is positioned, not unlike Lena Grove or Joe Christmas, as the outsider who arrives in Jefferson to escape the past, find an identity, and seek an idealized fortune. He comes to town with an obsessive desire to belong and to be somebody, the “*Be Sutpen’s Hundred*” (*Absalom* 4). Like Lena, Sutpen has an almost innate sense of what one must do to be accepted by certain members of the Jefferson community. That is, Sutpen is able to overcome the realities of who he actually is by setting up the façade of what he hopes to become. Largely due to his race and gender, Sutpen is able to earn respect in much the same way that Lena Grove earns the respect of the Armstids. The difference is that Sutpen’s methods are geared toward feeding the desire of certain men of the town, men such as General Compson and Mr. Coldfield, giving them what they need to find him acceptable.

In *Light in August*, Lena Grove must first ingratiate herself to the Armstids before she can form other relationships and finally be accepted by the community. With *Absalom, Absalom!*, Thomas Sutpen works to establish relationships with all men of the town by inviting them both to hunt on Sutpen’s Hundred and to watch his slaves in boxing matches. Yet, clearly the most important relationship is the one that he craftily establishes with General Compson.<sup>xxvi</sup> The reason why Compson accepts Sutpen is not so well-drawn as is the Armstids’ acceptance of Lena Grove in *Light in August*. The relationship between Sutpen and General Compson is told as a memory of something that happened many years before, a past relationship that no speaker can fully comprehend or know the details of. But even so, there are indications in

the narrative that Sutpen presents himself to General Compson in order to further his connection to and power within the Jefferson community.

General Compson learns after the fact that Sutpen had arrived in Jefferson with no actual money to grow his plantation, yet Compson is privy to this information long before anyone else:

“It was General Compson . . . who seemed to know him well enough to offer to lend him seed cotton for his start . . . to whom Sutpen ever told anything about his past. It was General Compson who knew first about the Spanish coin being his last one.” (*Absalom* 30-31)

In addition to loaning Sutpen seed for cotton, Compson also “offered to lend Sutpen the money to finish and furnish his house” (*Absalom* 31). When Sutpen refuses Compson’s second loan, Compson is not convinced that he doesn’t really need the loan, but only that Sutpen has found another means for acquiring the money. Mr. Compson explains to Quentin, “So doubtless General Compson was the first man in the county to tell himself that Sutpen did not need to borrow money with which to complete the house . . . because he intended to marry it” (31). General Compson understands Sutpen’s dire financial circumstance, yet he also is also aware of Sutpen’s powerful ability to rise economically. This knowledge may be linked to his realization that Sutpen adheres to a strict code of racial and class divisions. That is, when General Compson hears the story of Sutpen’s life, and he understands how Sutpen uses his slave capital to its greatest advantage, he must to some extent come to admire him. He chooses not to hear how the story also reveals Sutpen’s tyranny. Instead, General Compson perceives only Sutpen’s economic power, and this fact



alone is enough to convince him to support Sutpen in any way he can. As with Lena Grove's initial establishment of a relationship with the Armstids, once Sutpen secures General Compson's acceptance of him, he has a strong base from which to operate.

Quentin as a retrospective listener understands all the reasons why his grandfather should have opposed Sutpen. Years later, sitting in his frigid Harvard dorm room, Quentin tells Shreve, "He told Grandfather about it" (177). The "it" here is Sutpen's design and the origins of it. Quentin tells Sutpen's story, as it has been passed down to him by his father, but Quentin in essence hears elements of the story that his grandfather does hear, or at least, elements he chooses not to hear. Quentin knows that his grandfather knew about Sutpen's poor beginnings, the trip to the West Indies to make a fortune, and how he "put his first wife aside." (*Absalom* 194) Although the reason that he did so is not revealed to the grandfather until 30 years later. Quentin knows also that his grandfather understood the core of Sutpen's philosophy: "To accomplish my design I should need first of all and above all things money in considerable quantities and in the quite immediate future" (*Absalom* 196). Quentin also realizes that when both men were still quite young, before any damage had come to Jefferson, his grandfather must have known that Sutpen's fortune could only have been attained by immoral, if not criminal, actions.

Rather than seeing Sutpen's crimes, Quentin's grandfather holds to a memory of his friendship with Sutpen, and this memory eclipses any and all of the more dangerous truths Sutpen's story reveals:

That was how grandfather remembered it: he and Sutpen leading their horses . . . and the dogs and the niggers . . .with their pine torches smoking and flaring above them. . . . And he said how Sutpen was talking about it again . . . how he thought how there was something about a man's destiny to shape itself to him like his clothes did, like the same coat that new might have fitted a thousand men, yet after one man has worn it for a while it fits no one else and you can tell it anywhere you see it even if all you see is a sleeve or a lapel: so that his . . . destiny had fitted itself to him, to his innocence, his pristine aptitude for platform drama and childlike heroic simplicity. (*Absalom* 198)

General Compson's memory is a romantic vision; it is the material of classical, dramatic poetry, depicting two young men confiding their hopes and dreams to one another and describing the power of becoming the best heroes of their own journeys through life. As with the words that Lena Grove speaks to the Armstids, it is with Thomas Sutpen's story that he ultimately gains support from General Compson. Quentin, however, can see through his grandfather's romanticized vision of Sutpen, and in the narrative, he is not the only one.

Faulkner portrays an important shift in his narrative patterning when the Jefferson "community" in *Absalom, Absalom!* mistrusts Sutpen in spite of General Compson's acceptance of him. Community here will not easily conform to Sutpen's extremist attitudes and comply with his design just because he has gained the camaraderie and support of Mr. Compson, as is the case with "community" in "Dry

September” and *Light in August*. In the earlier narrative, *Light in August*, the community is

so unwittingly and unpredictably moved that without knowing that they were thinking it, the town had suddenly accepted Grimm with respect and perhaps a little awe and a deal of actual faith and confidence, as though somehow his vision and patriotism and pride in the town, the occasion, had been quicker and truer than theirs. (*Light in August* 456-57)

The community of *Absalom, Absalom!* is more quick-witted, more pragmatic and skeptical when it come to an extremist in their midst. It will not so easily accept Sutpen; instead, it will act in a way more attuned to what is morally justifiable.

Like the earlier depictions of community, the community of *Absalom, Absalom!* does gather en masse. It does so, however, not to follow through with any brutal directive devised by Sutpen, but instead to challenge Sutpen himself in an attempt to extinguish him as a threat to the town. This new attitude is not formed quickly, however. It takes years of watching and investigating Sutpen before it becomes truly outraged to the point of massing against him.

Through Rosa’s narrative, Faulkner makes clear that initially the community is overwhelmed with curiosity about Sutpen not unlike the way community is absorbed with the circumstances surrounding Miss Emily Grierson’s life after she is dead in “A Rose for Emily.” Sutpen is mysterious, and to them, he appears to have a secret fortune. Upon his arrival in Jefferson, the town feels it must learn all about

him. Sutpen stays at the town's rooming house at night and disappears during the day. Miss. Rosa's narration describes how the community, the "they"

would catch him, run him to earth, in the lounge between the supper table and his locked door to give him the opportunity to tell them who he was and where he came from and what he was up to, whereupon he would move gradually and steadily until his back came in contact with something – a post or a wall – and then stand there and tell them nothing whatever as pleasantly and courteously as a hotel clerk" (25).

Sutpen reveals as little as possible about himself, but when he publicly takes possession of the deed to a "hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country," bought with Spanish coin, the community gains enough information to be suspicious (*Absalom* 25-26). The town watches as Sutpen brings a French architect and "wild Negroes," who speak in strange voices, to his land to build a huge plantation house. Then, it watches, and some of its members even participate, as Sutpen "pitted his negroes against one another" in brutal boxing matches "even at this time participating now and then himself" (30). The community may even suspect that Sutpen is using his slaves not only for the crowds that such a sport draws, but also the for bearing his own off-spring. Despite all the brutality against his slaves that the community witnesses, it is not moved to communal rage yet. However, it will take only one thing more to inspire their wrath.

The Jefferson community takes note of Thomas Sutpen's actions, and although it seems to accept him with a disaffected interest for years, when he attempts to seek a wife within their society, all of their knowledge of him comes into

play. The wife that Sutpen seeks is Rosa's older sister, Ellen, who hails from the hard-working, honest, middle-class, Methodist Coldfield family. In pursuit of Ellen Coldfield, Sutpen goes to church, visits the Coldfields' home, and gains the trust of Mr. Coldfield, but the community at large is increasingly skeptical of him. When he leaves and returns with what he needs to richly furnish the interior of his massive house, Miss. Rosa Coldfield tells how,

his position had subtly changed, as you will see by the town's reaction to this second return. Because when he came back this time, he was in a sense a public enemy. Perhaps this was because of what he brought back with him this time, as compared to the simple wagon load of wild niggers which he had brought back before. But I don't think so. That is I think it was a little more involved than the sheer value of his chandeliers and mahogany and rugs. I think the affront was born of the town's realization that he was getting it involved with himself; that whatever the felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it. Heretofore, until that Sunday when he came to church, if he had misused or injured anybody, it was only old Ikkemotubbe, from whom he got his land – a matter between his conscience and Uncle Sam and God. But now his position had changed, because when, about three months after he had departed, four wagons left Jefferson to go to the River and meet him, it was known that Mr. Coldfield was the man who hired and dispatched them. (33)

The community's sense "that he was getting it involved with himself" is not mere paranoia. In fact, the narrative describes how the upright citizen Mr. Coldfield alters a "bill of lading" in order to appease Sutpen, and while the community may not act solely to protect Coldfield, it does act in order to prevent being tempted into Coldfield's position, a position of having to comply with, or acquiesce to, Sutpen and thereby to participate in his immoral behavior. Community here understands that "whatever the felony which produced the mahogany and crystal, he was forcing the town to compound it." The *Absalom, Absalom!* community senses that a no-good Thomas Sutpen will be no-good to them, and he might even force them into a complicity which will spread his immoral behavior among their ranks.

While there are narrative similarities here between the reaction of the community to Sutpen and the reaction of the community, of *Light in August*, to Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, both are mysterious outsiders whose actions are slowly exposed as unjust, the disdain the community feels for Sutpen is not due to race difference; it is due to a different kind of recognition. When Sutpen returns with all the lavish furnishings to complete his house and to become engaged, the town learns of the return from "that same Akers who had blundered onto the mudcoughed negro five years ago" (33-34). Coming into the Holston House bar one evening, Akers announces, "'Boys, this time he stole the whole darn steamboat!'" (34)" This statement is striking when compared to Faulkner's depiction of the barbershop, in "Dry September," where McLendon incites the men to violence against Will Mayes in order to protect women and children. This time the lower income white man who

rushes in wants to protect women and children from the powerful white patriarch of the county.

As with McLendon's announcement to the men in the barbershop, once the townspeople decide how they feel about the news, they confront the object of their disdain in a unified, yet quietly powerful mass. According to Miss. Rosa's telling of it,

“At last civil virtue came to a boil. One day with the sheriff of the county among them, a party of eight or ten took the road out to Sutpen's Hundred. They did not go all the way because about six miles from town they met Sutpen himself. He was riding the roan horse, in the frock coat and the beaver hat.” (*Absalom* 34)

The language used to describe Thomas Sutpen's attire is important because, here and throughout the narrative, the community notices that he wears the same frock coat again and again, which is not only a sign of his lack of money but also a symbol of his lower class status. General Compson either ignores this outward sign or chooses not to see Sutpen's impoverishment. What General Compson chooses to see, instead, is Thomas Sutpen's potential for power and for gaining a great fortune, a fortune that can benefit the whole county.

The community believes it has formed a clear picture of who Sutpen really is. And on the day that Sutpen asks Ellen to marry him, more than fifty people gather to arrest him. In a significant contrast to earlier narrative depictions, this massing is not done to persecute a character positioned as black, but to capture the man who has presumed to take too far his position as a white man of the town. Miss. Rosa

exclaims, “Sutpen had a larger following than if he were a runaway slave” (*Absalom* 36).

The community masses itself in *Absalom, Absalom!* not to bolster and support the ravings of a fanatic, but to prevent Sutpen from continuing his interaction with them. Sutpen, however, is not one who will be easily swayed to give up what he has worked so furiously to gain. As he has bought and built Sutpen’s Hundred, so too has he bought and built a relationship with General Compson, and because of this association, he has established a camaraderie with Mr. Coldfield. Although the community has a clear sense that Sutpen is no good, and such character traits could easily taint their society, when General Compson loans Sutpen seed cotton, Mr. Coldfield offers up his daughter in holy matrimony, and both men sign the bond after Sutpen’s arrests, the community can not help but step back in acquiescence. The *Absalom, Absalom!* community will surrender its battle against Sutpen, but only because of its powerlessness to stand up to Mr. Coldfield and General Compson. The narrative thus reverts to the earlier narrative patterning. The *Absalom, Absalom!* community’s relinquishment becomes reminiscent of the way community gives in to McLendon, Brown, and Grimm with one caveat. Sutpen the fanatic wins the day not only because of the support of the white, middle class “moderate,” but because such men, General Comspon and Coldfield, support him actively and overtly.

Part of Miss. Rosa’s outrage is that the community of people who gather to arrest Thomas Sutpen and who glare as he marries Ellen Coldfield are right to be suspicious. But the “good” men, General Compson and her own father Mr. Coldfield, allow for the marriage to occur. She seems most upset that these strong,



white, middle class men should have known better than to accept and support Sutpen.

When community takes a stand against Sutpen, they symbolically resist all the things he and his life stand for. When the white, middle class men support him and the way he lives his life, Compson and Coldfield comply with Sutpen's design, his code of racial and class separatism. Yet in *Absalom, Absalom*, this is not the end of the story. Unlike earlier narratives, the white men of this narrative who comply with the actions of an extremist will suffer for not resisting injustice. The result of their complicity comes to a terrible fruition as they and their families experience social and economic decline.

The results of Thomas Sutpen's extremism form a litany of terrible occurrences, which would be well suited for the most tragic of operas. His initial misdeeds are directed toward non-whites and constitute the first destructive results of his design. Not only does Sutpen abandon his first wife and his son, Charles Bon, due to their "black" blood, but according to what Quentin surmises, Sutpen also has his white son, Henry, kill his "black" son, Charles, in order to prevent his marriage to Judith, his daughter. Not only is this crime done to prevent a half brother and sister from marrying, but clearly, to prevent a white daughter from engaging in marriage and in sexual intercourse with any "black" person.<sup>xxvii</sup> Charles's son, Charles Etienne De Saint Valery Bon, born to a mistress comes to live on Sutpen's Hundred with Clytie, Judith, and Rosa. He bears a "black" son Jim Bond. These grandsons are never acknowledged by their grandfather, Sutpen, but instead live on and off at Sutpen's Hundred, largely shunned by both the black and white people of the

plantation. After the killing, Henry Sutpen disappears until many years later when he returns to Sutpen's Hundred to die.

Sutpen "misused" and "injured" Ikkemotubbe, stealing his inherited lands due to a cultural difference in the way the two men value property (*Absalom* 33), and he amasses more power not only by obtaining slaves and by forcing them to live and work in squalid conditions, but also by taking sexual advantage of the women. His child, Clytie, also suffers through life with no father that will acknowledge her. Clytie never leaves the decaying plantation, but grows old there, shrinking to a small size due in part to years of near starvation.

Beyond the results of Sutpen's earliest actions against non-whites are the results of that come later when he feels powerful enough to manipulate the population of Jefferson. Mr. Coldfield, for example, agrees to allow Sutpen to "use his credit" for a deal involving a "bill of lading," earning Sutpen a wagon load of riches (*Absalom* 208). Yet, when the deal is successful, the effect it has on Coldfield, according to the narration, is that the character begins to hate himself: "It was his conscience he hated, not Sutpen" (209). Coldfield's hate, a hate that transforms "a man of uncompromising moral strength" into a shadow of himself, extends to a hatred of the entire country (65). Coldfield "hated that country so much that he was even glad when he saw it drifting closer and closer to a doomed and fatal war" (209). In addition, to the fact that he has participated with Sutpen in an immoral venture, Coldfield has approved of the marriage of his daughter to the criminal –one assumes he is persuaded by General Compson as well as Sutpen himself – and he has watched as the same daughter dies during wartime, weakened

by a year of eating “bad food” (67). All of this, leads Coldfield to lock himself in his attic, where he starves himself to death.

When Mr. Coldfield commits suicide, the Coldfield family falls apart. Rosa Coldfield does not immediately go out to Sutpen’s Hundred, but when called to help, four years later, she agrees to go. When asked, she even accepts a proposal of marriage from Sutpen. The proposal never becomes marriage, however, because Sutpen wants to try to conceive a son with Rosa first. If it’s a boy, then he will marry her. This action by Sutpen is one that Miss. Rosa finds especially unforgivable.

When Rosa cannot or will not even try to conceive with Sutpen, he turns his attention to the next family in line for destruction, the family of his faithful overseer, Wash Jones. Sutpen’s gaze turns toward Jones’ young granddaughter, and when her child by him is born a girl, Sutpen rejects her and the baby, saying, “Well, Milly; too bad you’re not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall” (229). Sutpen’s fanaticism ends with this betrayal of Milly Jones. Wash Jones picks up his scythe and finally strikes the Sutpen dead.

In many ways it is appropriate that Wash Jones is the one who will end Sutpen’s life. Jones is a white male positioned in a similar social, cultural, and class position as Sutpen’s father, and it is as if Sutpen has come full circle and now takes advantage of his own people when he takes advantage of Milly. In a way, Sutpen’s sexual encounter with Milly and the birth of her baby are reminiscent of Sutpen’s father’s relationship with his sister. Both sexual encounters are inappropriate and ultimately destructive. Wash Jones, in essence, stops dead the cycle by striking

down the catalyst for such familial decline. It is an act that signals a narrative power that Faulkner often grants to his poorer white characters.

What begins as Sutpen's plan to make a great deal of money and rise in the ranks of social class, as well as his desire to seek some revenge against those whom he perceives to be the ones who initiated his "fall," becomes in the narrative that Quentin and Shreve contrive more than a "design" that will manipulate and take advantage of a few. Sutpen's actions extend outward, covering the full expanse of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county and creating decline among a whole host of people. Clearly though what Quentin understands as the spark for Sutpen's actions is not only the influence of men like Sutpen's father or Pettibone, the plantation owner, but also the support of men who hold a romantic vision of the South and their place in it, men like his grandfather, General Compson. Finally, the catalyst for decline is a man not so different from Quentin himself.

#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The exception here may be Hightower who tells an apparent lie in a last minute effort to save Joe Christmas' life. Yet after Christmas is dead, Hightower's remorse seems to be projected onto the death of his wife and his indirect participation in it. He expresses guilt for his wife's death, and while he may implicitly feel terrible guilt for Christmas' death, Hightower is not clearly and overtly depicted as experiencing this guilt. This is in contrast to Quentin's experience of guilt after hearing Miss. Rosa's story.

<sup>ii</sup> In the narrative of *Light in August*, Joe Christmas comes to occupy the position "black," but it would be false to assert that there is anything in the larger narrative indicating that he is indeed a black man. He is perceived as black largely due to the story Joe Brown tells, and this enough to cause the community of *Light in August* to see him as guilty.

<sup>iii</sup> In regards to the way that Dilsey sees and articulates the decline of the Compsons, I am referring to the end of the novel when Dilsey, walking home from

church with Frony and Ben at her side, says with tears in her eyes, “I’ve seed de first and de last . . . . I seed de beginnin[g], en now I sees de endin’” (*Sound* 297). Readers typically attribute this passage to Dilsey’s feelings about the Compsons. While her emotional response to the family’s deterioration is moving, it is not as intricate and detailed as Miss. Rosa’s response to the general decline that has occurred in Jefferson.

iv The most obvious decline in *Absalom, Absalom!* is that of Thomas Sutpen’s family. And let me make clear that his “family” consists not only of Ellen, Judith, and Henry, but also his first wife and his first son Charles Bon as well as Charles Etienne Bon and Jim Bond. There are others who suffer a decline because of Sutpen. The slaves that he takes advantage of sexually in order to increase his “holdings,” and the children he bears from these actions, children like Clytie, suffer a myriad of offenses because of Sutpen. The decline extends also to Wash Jones, his daughter Millie and his granddaughter. Beyond these immediate familial ties, *Absalom, Absalom!* also shows how the decline that Sutpen initiates extends to all of the Compsons as well as the Coldfields.

v This fairly obvious point has been made by a number of critics and most recently, by Don Doyle in *Faulkner County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*. Doyle writes, “Quentin learns that he was probably summoned by Rosa Coldfield . . . because of some inherited guilt she may think the Compson family bears for aiding Sutpen” (Doyle 19)

vi Of course this sense of responsibility is like the delayed emotion felt by a number of other characters’ off-spring. Most significantly, Isaac McCaslin who upon viewing the commissary ledgers, realizes if only his father had acknowledged his mixed race son, things might have been different. See *Go Down, Moses*.

vii In *William Faulkner and Southern History*, Joel Williamson cites an important passage from a letter Faulkner wrote to Harrison Smith (Feb. 1934) regarding the relationship of the two novels to Quentin’s suicide. Faulkner writes,  
I use [Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*] because it is just before he is to commit suicide because of his sister, and I use his bitterness which he has projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people to get more out of the story itself than a historical novel would be.  
(Williamson 244)

See also Note 98 on page 469.

viii See especially Blotner’s *Faulkner: A Biography*. One volume edition. Blotner reveals that Faulkner had told a friend, “Ishmael is the witness in Moby Dick . . . as I am Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*” (Blotner 213). Arguably, Faulkner’s identification with the character would be extended to *Absalom, Absalom!* See the rest of this section in Blotner as well, pages 213-221.

<sup>ix</sup> In Singal's account of Faulkner's young life, he describes how a friend had said of Faulkner that had an "ability to lose himself in his own private world." He "would seem to retreat into obliviousness for hours, either wandering the woods, or sitting on the floor of Mac Reed's drugstore absorbed in a magazine" ( 54). Whenever I read biographical passages about Faulkner like this one, I am always aware that Faulkner spent a great deal of time in town, engaged in the art of sitting around. Arguably, Faulkner may have only seemed oblivious to what was going on around him. More likely, he was covertly absorbing all that went on, all the happenings that would become the substance of his fiction.

<sup>x</sup> Joel Williamson writes that in 1928, when he began writing *The Sound and the Fury*, "Faulkner was intimate with declining fortunes and failing families" (211-212). See *William Faulkner and Southern History*.

<sup>xi</sup> I refer here to the definition of "stream of consciousness" as defined in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. It is "the flow of inner experiences" and "that technique which seeks to depict the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind." Originally, a term "coined by William James in Principles of Psychology (1890),"

<sup>xii</sup> I am of course thinking of Will Mayes, Nancy, and Joe Christmas. Joe Christmas may be the exception here. He is designated as "black" by members of the white community of *Light in August*; therefore, they react to him in the same way as they react to Will Mayes and Nancy.

<sup>xiii</sup> In the case of Nancy, I am thinking specifically of her treatment by Mr. Stovall and the jailer, although she also endures the ultimate threat of her black lover, Jesus.

<sup>xiv</sup> Again, I see Christmas in the "position" black in the narrative patterning, but clearly, he is a character who exists to challenge such racial positioning.

<sup>xv</sup> The narrative also explores the character of McLendon, a character who I also categorize as a white fanatic, but arguably, McLendon is not the primary focus of the story. McLendon is a precursor to Thomas Sutpen's character, a point I explore and develop later in this chapter.

<sup>xvi</sup> Perhaps the exception to this assertion is the narrative of "That Evening Sun" where the jailer, Mr. Stovall, and Jesus act fanatically, but there is only a slight recognition by Faulkner about why one of them acts brutally. In Jesus' case, his craziness is caused because he is not allowed into a white man's house, and more implicitly, because Nancy may be pregnant by a white man.

xvii I find proof of McLendon's white supremacy in the statement he makes to the men in the barber shop when he announces, "'Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?'" ("Dry September" 172). McLendon clearly is not threatened by any actual sexual impropriety on the part of Will Mayes; he is instituting a code of behavior, based on the desire of the white males of the town, that will use violence to ensure that no such impropriety will ever occur in the future.

xviii Note that in the narrative, it is Quentin's college roommate Shreve, that makes the observation that Sutpen must pay "The Creditor."

xix "Dark House" was the original title Faulkner had chosen for *Absalom, Absalom!* See Chapter 1 "Dark Houses," page 24 in *Children of the Dark House: Text and Context in Faulkner* by Noel Polk (Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 1996)

xx Kevin Railey and other scholars have written extensively about Thomas Sutpen's "whiteness," especially as it is contrasted against constructions of "blackness." For Railey, both Joe Christmas and Thomas Sutpen must necessarily be read in terms of racial, as well as class, constructions. Railey makes a key point regarding Faulkner's writing when he asserts that it shows how "the white race is socially constructed" (128). In this analysis, I will articulate my own view of the construction of Thomas Sutpen's "whiteness" and relate it to the larger project of this dissertation, which is to decipher repeated narrative patterns of racism and resistance in Faulkner's work. I will discuss Railey's views of Thomas Sutpen later in this chapter. See Kevin Railey's "*Absalom, Absalom!* and the Southern Ideology of Race" in *Natural Aristocracy: History, Ideology, and the Production of William Faulkner* (Tuscaloosa and London: U of Alabama P, 1999)

xxi For this section on Thomas Sutpen's "fall" and my subsequent discussion of Thomas Sutpen, especially his design, see John T. Matthews's *The Play of Faulkner's Language*. Matthews writes,

Sutpen's reliance on the innocence of phallic, singly insinuated meaning governs at least three phases of his career: (1) Sutpen accepts without adjustment his nostalgic memories of perfect coherence, equality, and order in childhood; (2) Sutpen believes that there was a discernible moment in space and time when he "fell" from innocence into knowledge, from a fully significant world to a contradictory and indecipherable one; and (3) he constructs his design expecting to annul this loss, confident that some word or gesture will reappropriate the original state. (153)

In my discussion, I suggest that Sutpen is not merely trying to relocate that which was lost to him as a boy. There is a kind of revenge inherent in Sutpen's actions too. He also symbolically wishes to punish those who ushered in his "fall," those who are like the Negro who turns him away and Pettibone himself.

xxii In the narrative, Thomas Sutpen works to figure out how long he, his father, and his sisters have traveled before arriving in the Tidewater region. He has two insights. First he remembers that much of the time his father was, “flat on his back in the cart, oblivious among the quilts and lanterns and well buckets and bundles of clothing and children, snoring with alcohol.” Then he realizes that although he doesn’t know how long they have traveled, he does remember that “one of the older girls who had left the cabin unmarried was still unmarried when they finally stopped, though she had become a mother before they lost the last blue mountain range” (Absalom 181). I think readers may assume that since his wife is dead, Sutpen’s father, in a state of inebriation, has engaged one of the daughters sexually. The reference to her unmarried state seems to support this interpretation.

xxiii See Thadious Davis’ *Faulkner’s Negro: Art and The Southern Context*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983). Davis asserts that in much of Faulkner’s fiction, the writer presents a sense of “Negro” without significantly developing any individual black character. While I believe Faulkner does create specific, individual, fully developed black characters, in this section of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Davis’ assertions are apt. For Sutpen’s father, and then subsequently for Sutpen himself, blacks are not individualized; they are merely “Nigger.” From the point of view of both father and son Sutpen one black person is just a representation of the whole race.

xxiv Railey makes a similar point in *Natural Aristocracy* when he writes, “Black slaves became an abstraction to poor whites and in dealing with them white folks’ reactions and behaviors had more to do with repressed anger toward the upper class and the reification of this repression than they did with anything black people actually said or did” (132).

xxv See Railey’s assertions on page 115-116 of *Natural Aristocracy*.

xxvi Actually, when Sutpen and Compson first meet, the Civil War has not occurred, so Compson is not a “General” yet. For the sake of making a distinction between General Compson, Quentin’s grandfather, and Mr. Compson, Quentin’s father, I will refer to the former as General Compson in this analysis.

xxvii Numerous scholars have contemplated the racial implications of Charles Bon’s death at the hand of Henry, thus preventing a “white” sister’s marriage to a “black” brother, So I will not labor to restate their theories.



CHAPTER FIVE: NARRATIVE PATTERNS OF RELINQUISHMENT AND RESISTANCE IN *THE UNVANQUISHED* AND *GO DOWN, MOSES*

In the first chapter of his ground-breaking critical study *The Play of Faulkner's Language*, John T. Matthews examines the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* in light of recent language theory: "That language plays," he writes, "suggests that there may be no actuality or truth behind the text's words that can be fully presented" (16). To Matthews, Faulkner's language "*faults*;" it loses its way to a final truth.<sup>i</sup> Yet this is not necessarily a bad thing. Following in the footsteps of other modern writers and anticipating the work of some contemporary and postmodern theorists and writers, Faulkner seems to accept the conceptualization that written language can never lead to a final truth.<sup>ii</sup> Matthews makes his point about Faulkner's language "faulting," however, only after asserting in the introduction that "Faulkner displays a preoccupation with the way in which language *produces* idea, sense, meaning, and personality"(9). For Matthews, then, language's inability to produce a final "truth" is not incompatible with language's ability to *produce* meaning. It's the "trail," the "hunt," the journey that is the thing for Matthews as he reads Faulkner. And, he adds, "storytelling for Faulkner is serious play" (16).

Two of Faulkner's later texts, *The Unvanquished* (published as one text in 1938) and *Go Down, Moses* (1940), demonstrate Faulkner's play with language, yet such "play" should not be seen as existing only for sport. Within the language of these narratives, as with Faulkner's earlier texts, there lies the raw material that challenges readers to ponder constructs of society and culture, and by extension, subjective conceptualizations of "race," class, and power. Faulkner is scrutinizing language as closely as ever with these later texts, and the result is narratives that not

only look back at the South's past, but through language "play," anticipate new ways of perceiving the South's future. *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses* deserve an in-depth examination for a number of reasons, but most significantly for this analysis, because they are texts that signal a new direction for Faulkner's narrative patterning.

In terms of narrative structure, what is at stake with Faulkner's revisions of the stories of *The Unvanquished* and the creation of *Go Down, Moses* is different from what had been at stake with the composition of earlier stories and novels. Rather than creating an oppositional narrative structure in which a community is swayed by the actions of an extremist to persecute one whom it names as excluded—a structure which, arguably, is contrived to display injustice—with these later texts, Faulkner's narrative structures work to construct then break down, even erase, language oppositions, especially oppositions that spring from perceived racial differences. These texts display the seeds of justice and equality at work.

Undeniably, *The Unvanquished* depicts a nostalgia for southern history, which in all honesty is not unlike the nostalgic vision of Faulkner's southern predecessors including Page or Harris. For Joel Williamson, who does not dwell on *The Unvanquished*, it is merely "a series of stories in which the child Bayard Sartoris [grows] from youth to manhood during the Civil War and Reconstruction" (6). Daniel Singal's view is more scathing. "How," he asks, "could the same author who has just risen to the heights of Modernist insight [with the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*] be responsible for such a vintage Civil War potboiler?" (221). Searching for an answer, he concludes that Faulkner revised and assembled the previously

written short stories, which comprise *The Unvanquished*, because of his “perennial need for money” (222). But “equally important,” in Singal’s estimation, was Faulkner’s “need to restore the ever delicate psychic balance between his traditional and Modernist selves after writing *Absalom*” (222). Singal assumes readers will understand that *The Unvanquished* satisfies Faulkner’s “traditional” self.

One problem readers may have with the narrative is Faulkner’s attempt to create Bayard, the plantation owner’s son, and Ringo, a slave of the plantation, as equals. Certain narrative passages that attempt to show Bayard and Ringo engaged in a competition as equals, instead, often reveal an imbalance in power between the boys primarily because Bayard controls the narration. The following passage is a good example:

We were almost the same age, and Father always said that Ringo was a little smarter than I was, but that didn’t count with us, anymore than the difference in the color of our skins counted. What counted was, what one of us had done or seen that the other had not, and ever since Christmas I had been ahead of Ringo because I had seen a railroad, a locomotive. (81)

The friendly rivalry between the boys originates with Colonel Sartoris’s actions to set one against the other. Sartoris goads his son by suggesting that Ringo is smarter than he is. Bayard counters by declaring, “That didn’t matter with us.” Speaking for the pair, Bayard creates his own rules of engagement for the competition, saying, “What counted was, what one of us had done or seen that the other had not.” Not only does Bayard speak for the two boys, apparently assuming control over the

rivalry, but he also positions himself a little above Ringo. In this instance, Bayard seems to dismiss the notion that Ringo is smarter, replacing a competition based on intelligence with a competition based on experience: a question of what one has “done or seen.” Of course, Bayard has experienced more than Ringo because he has seen a railroad, so he’s in the lead. Singal writes that “Ringo emerges as well endowed with both initiative and intelligence. Yet he remains a faithful retainer,” and ultimately Ringo “knows his place” as the family’s slave (223).

Another disturbing element of the text is the way that the primary plot is set against a backdrop of a mass exodus of slaves, who at the end of the Civil War attempt to escape north in order to realize their freedom. The slaves do not complete their journey, but are forced to return to the plantations from which they have come. For Singal,

Faulkner . . . [is] painting the familiar picture of southern slaves blissfully dependent on their masters who, moved by an “inexplicable” impulse, allow themselves to be deluded by the Yankee’s false promise of freedom, only to become trapped in “misery and starvation.” The lucky ones find their way back home, deeply grateful to be home; those less fortunate end up living in “caves and hollow trees” with “no one to depend on.” (223)

Ringo is portrayed not as sympathizing with other slaves, but as somewhat annoyed by them. At one point, when given the chance to hear a story about what happened as the slaves attempted to cross a river, Ringo declares, “‘I have been having to hear about niggers all my life’ . . . ‘I got to hear about that railroad’” (*The Unvanquished*

91). Reading these passages, it is clear that the slaves' search for freedom is less important to Ringo than his own "game" with Bayard to see a railroad. The narrative is flawed because it fails to focus on what is truly important in the historical moment that Faulkner creates.

*The Unvanquished* represents a text that seems to lose its way in its search for a final meaning. Yet, the text is fascinating, if for no other reason, because it reveals Faulkner's process of revising the language of racial difference. There are alternative possibilities for reading and interpreting Bayard and Ringo's relationship in *The Unvanquished*, and key for accepting such a reading is being open to the possibility that as Faulkner revised, he was less concerned with plot development and more concerned with what he could make happen on a deeper level of language. He sets up a representation of racial difference, with his characterizations of Bayard and Ringo, in order to question its logic and to work to erase difference.

Examining what Faulkner added to the original stories, to create the final text, reveals early indications of his new narrative approach. In the first story version of "Ambuscade," published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, the narrative begins,

Behind the smokehouse we had a kind of map. Vicksburg was a handful of chips from the woodpile and the river was a trench we had scraped in the packed ground with a hoe, that drank water almost faster than we could fetch it from the well. This afternoon it looked like we would never get it filled. (12)<sup>iii</sup>

An association between the boys, forming what could be considered a narrative communal “we,” is present here, and clearly, the character Ringo is denied any separate identity at all. In the revised version, however, Faulkner’s words not only delineate Ringo’s character, but also create a stronger sense of the purposefulness for the boys’ union, a union that increasingly isolates them from the pervasive fighting of the Civil War. (The italics here indicate Faulkner’s additions):

Behind the smokehouse *that summer Ringo and I* had a *living* map.  
*Although* Vicksburg was *just* a handful of chips from the woodpile  
and the River a trench scraped *into* the packed *earth* with *the point of*  
a hoe, *it (river, city, terrain) lived, possessing even in miniature that*  
*ponderable though passive recalcitrance of topography which*  
*outweighs artillery, against which the most brilliant of victories and*  
*the most tragic of defeats are but the loud noises of a moment. (The*  
*Unvanquished 3)*

In these first few sentences, Faulkner enlivens the boys’ play by finding within it a world of meaning that comes not only from the Civil War game itself, but from their vital interaction with miniature constructions of “river, city, terrain,” formed from woodchips and the age-old earth. The boys interact with the earth, acknowledging it, rather than the war, as a powerful force of timelessness and endurance “against which the most brilliant of victories and the most tragic of defeats are but the loud noises of a moment.” In the next few sentences, Faulkner’s revisions extend an alternative way of perceiving the boys’ play. (Again the italics indicate the revisions):

*To Ringo and me it lived, if only because of the fact that the sunimpacted ground drank water faster than we could fetch it from the well, the very setting of the stage for a conflict a prolonged and wellnigh helpless ordeal in which we ran, panting and interminable, with leaking bucket between wellhouse and battlefield, the two of us needing first to join forces and spend ourselves against a common enemy, time, before we could engender between us and hold intact the pattern of recapitulant mimic furious victory like a cloth, a shield between ourselves and reality, between us and fact and doom.* This afternoon it seemed like we would never get it filled. (3-4)

It is easy to read the nostalgia of these lines due to the way that the boys “join forces” against the “the common enemy, time,” the time when the northern troops will approach and the “real” Civil War fighting will disrupt the plantation system, which has brought the boys together in the first place. Yet, the boys’ allegiance is not clearly with the South or plantation system here. In the scene, they are instead devoted to their game and its environment, the earth, which “outweighs artillery.” The boys are not actually participating in fighting the Civil War, here; they are instead battling against the “reality” of the Civil War or anything else that will disrupt their childhood play. They work furiously to join forces in an act of volition, striving for a “furious victory” of friendship that will be “like a cloth, a shield, between [themselves] and reality, between [them] and fact and doom.” It is the survival of their most basic instinct for elemental friendship that is at stake here.

They are not opposed to one another, but fighting a larger social order on behalf of their union. The “it” that “lives” in the passage is their friendship.

Not satisfied that he has made his point clear regarding the sanctity of the boys’ childhood alliance, Faulkner continues the revision with these words. (Again, the italics indicate added words):

*Ringo and I had been born in the same month and had both fed at the same breast and had slept together and eaten together for so long that Ringo called Granny 'Granny' just like I did, until maybe he wasn't a nigger anymore or maybe I wasn't a white boy anymore, the two of us neither, not even people any longer: two supreme undefeated like two moths, two feathers riding above a hurricane. (7)*

According to language binaries and their culturally constructed social roles, Bayard is the white plantation owner's son; Ringo is the black plantation owner's slave.

Although the boys are both twelve years old and constant companions, their differences according to the social design are undeniable. Bayard is the privileged one, the teller of the story, and the primary decision-maker; Ringo is the oppressed one, the "nigger." Yet, as the boys "play" with their differences, they create alongside their "real" cultural roles an imaginary alliance in which color and class status are erased. In the idealistic world of the inseparable boys, Bayard imagines them as outside of or "undefeated" by the social order. The narration asks its readers to imagine that these characters are not "people"--not a "nigger," not a "white boy" any longer --acknowledging the impossible as "maybe" possible.



Each boy is more than slave or free or white or black. In the above quote, Bayard's narration searches for other, better words to describe himself and Ringo. He says they are the "two supreme undefeated like two moths, two feathers . . ." Light and gray or multi-colored--never merely "black" or "white"--the moth or feather are not easy to define as they float above reality, float above the "hurricane" of the Civil War.

Faulkner is playing with language when the narration suggests that the two boy characters are not "people" any longer. If they are not people, what are they? Are they actually moths? This play with meanings does not leave a void or a blank space in the narrative, however.

In another example from the first story, the boys' play is interrupted by the character Loosh, a young black slave who is aware that the war may be almost over. Loosh enters the arena of Ringo and Bayard's game, and "with his hand he swept the chips flat. 'There's your Vicksburg,' he said" (5). In this cryptic act, Loosh lets the boys know that the "real" battle of Vicksburg has been lost. He announces that Bayard's father is on his way back home. Instead of abandoning the miniature game, however, Bayard insists that they keep playing, "I stooped and set Vicksburg up again. 'There it is.'" (6) The real fighting is not so far away, the war is almost over, and the South will lose. This last fact will insure Loosh's freedom, and Ringo's. At this moment Ringo pauses, stunned and probably a little confused by what he is hearing.

In order to save the game and sustain his friendship with Ringo, Bayard scoops up handfuls of earth and throws them at Ringo. (*Italics indicate revisions*):

*“You can be General Pemberton.” Because it was that urgent, since negroes knew . . . I would have to be Grant once so Ringo could be General Pemberton or he wouldn't play anymore. (7)*

Bayard's gesture covers them both with dust, covers their skin color, in an attempt to use the symbolic earth as a means to literally erase their difference. Then, desperate to keep the game going, Bayard suggests a role reversal, allowing Ringo to be the South's general while Bayard will be the Union's general--then they will switch again. In Bayard's revisioning of the Civil War game each boy will have a chance to win.

When Faulkner writes that Bayard and Ringo are the “two supreme undefeated,” who are “not even people any longer,” and when he depicts the boys' skin literally covered up with dust, he is not only depicting an imaginary alliance. He is taking another in a long line of narrative steps in which he attempts to question, to challenge, and to erase racial difference. It is a continuation of his process to comprehend language and cultural racial difference begun early in his career with “That Evening Sun” where he depicts Jason Compson in the kitchen asking who is a “nigger” and Nancy internalizing the racism she has endured declaring with resignation, “I aint nothing but a nigger” (293). Bayard and Ringo are not altogether unlike Joe Christmas who, as a solitary figure, struggles to live separately from language and culture's arbitrary assignments of his race. Unlike Christmas, however, these two characters will be strong-willed and optimistic partners in the endeavor. Moreover, for a good portion of the narrative, Bayard and Ringo prove largely more successful at joining forces to challenge race and class constructions

than all of their textual predecessors including Hawkshaw and Henry, Quentin and Nancy, Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas, and even Charles Bon and Henry, or Charles Bon and Judith.

As long as Faulkner maintains Bayard's narrative control in the text, unfortunately, a "real" equality between the two characters is all but impossible, but it is Faulkner's journey, his attempt with the revisions, that is important here. The revised text illustrates what Matthews has asserted about Faulkner's language "faulting," while also demonstrating how Faulkner successfully calls into question language oppositions. Matthews writes, "Faulkner would feel comfortable with Derrida's temperamental fondness for paradox, and it should prove significant that their reading included such shapers of modern paradox as Nietzsche and Freud" (32). Both Faulkner and Derrida, in their own way, realize that difference can not merely be done away with, but difference within language can be exposed for what it is: an impossible absolute. This is the truth that language play reveals.

This play here is not unlike Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s description of Signification, or Signifyin', with a capital "S." Gates writes that the African Americans' "complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established at least officially, by middle class white people" (47). In his way, Faulkner is playing with particular words "white boy" and "nigger" in order to suggest that these terms do not describe how Bayard and Ringo "see" or Signify each other in the text. By extension, readers should attempt to see or Signify Bayard and Ringo not only as representations of a particular race. Ironically and paradoxically, Bayard's narration requires both points-of-view of the

reader. That is, in the very act of trying not to signify the characters as “white boy” and “nigger,” the reader must first acknowledge their racial difference. The reader must signify in order to Signify.<sup>iv</sup>

In *The Unvanquished* the game the boys’ play belongs only in the realm of their childhood. Yet because of the societal upheaval of the Civil War and because of their involvement with Granny’s horse trading, Bayard and Ringo have a unique opportunity to prolong their childhood’s imagined existence and as a result, extend their time of resisting social, cultural, and language assignments. In other words, the game continues even as they become young men. In the last story, however, the inevitable happens. With their adulthood, the game played between two equals, between friends, ends.

When Granny is brutally murdered by Grumby, the boys avenge her death together, but when Bayard’s father dies, Bayard reluctantly becomes initiated as the new patriarch of the family, and with his new role, come all the responsibilities expected of a white male land owner during the time of the post-war South. He is responsible for his family, his community and, whether he likes it or not, the perpetuation of a particular way of life that will place Ringo in an oppressed position.

For most of the narrative, Bayard desires interaction on equal terms with Ringo. At the end of the novel, however, the alliance between the boys brings glory only to Bayard. In fact, in this story-telling South, the boys adventures--culminating with the boys’ killing Grumby--will be remembered in terms of Bayard's actions only. Uncle Buck begins the trend when he tells the story for the first time and

excludes Ringo's participation entirely. In the final scenes, nowhere is there any glory for Ringo. The narration acknowledges, instead, how Ringo rides forty miles without food to tell Bayard about Colonel Sartoris's death and how Ringo turns around to ride back without stopping to eat. When Ringo first arrives at Bayard's college, the Professor says, "Your boy is downstairs in the kitchen" (212). With this one statement that names Ringo, who is now a man, "boy," all of the language of equalization that has come before is destroyed. Significantly, Bayard echoes the professor's name for Ringo. When the professor asks if there is anything he can do to help, Bayard says, "A fresh horse for my boy" (213).

At the end of the text Faulkner suggests Bayard's identity has been shaped largely by his friendship with Ringo. When he is given the opportunity to avenge his father's death, an act that will ensure his heroic, white male status, Bayard confronts the murderer, B.J. Redmond, unarmed. George Wyatt, in his disbelief, questions Bayard in an attempt to understand Bayard's non-violent action:

"My God!" George Wyatt cried. "You took the pistol away from him and then missed him, missed him *twice*?" Then he answered himself . . . "No, wait. You walked in here without even a pocket knife and let him miss you twice. My God in heaven"(250).

If Bayard and Ringo present a challenge to cultural constructions by the maintenance of their friendship, a childhood friendship that seeks to erase difference between them, then in this passage, Bayard continues to challenge cultural constructions of difference. He will not oppose himself to his father's killer. Instead, he faces him unarmed, defenseless, but his action is an act of volition, a disruption of the social

conventions for avenging the death of a father. Bayard is challenging yet another patriarchal opposition of “us” versus “them,” and this is not the only instance in one of Faulkner’s later texts where a character who resists an easy acceptance of racial difference will then relinquish power in a confrontation that should, according to cultural norms, require a show of strength and violence. The characters Isaac McCaslin and arguably Lucas Beauchamp will also follow this pattern of relinquishment and resistance.

In the process of confronting his father’s killer, who leaves town immediately, Bayard causes a number of people to gather in the town square, but this time the community will have no extremist or extreme act of volition to rally behind. They go about their regular routines instead. When Bayard decides to leave this gun at home, it is no small gesture. It is a sign in the narrative that this young patriarch will not participate in the white cultural rituals of his forefathers. Bayard’s process of giving up the power associated with his race and class could be said to hinder the development of other power binaries. In this case, no community will rally to avenge a death.

At the end of *The Unvanquished*, what is left are the reverberations of the game--memories and unresolved paradoxes. Bayard is not bathed in glory, and he has lost his best friend. In the last story, there is only one brief comment made by Bayard about his relationship with Ringo:

Ringo was waiting; I remember how I thought then that no matter what might happen to either of us, I would never be The Sartoris to him. He was twenty-four too, but in a way he

had changed even less than I had since that day when we  
nailed Grumby's body to the door of the old compress. (215)

Ringo can never imagine that they are not equal. He has learned otherwise. At the same time, it is impossible for them to be equals. In the end, both Bayard and Ringo are left without a way to understand their identities and their roles, in the society of the South.

With *The Unvanquished*, Faulkner's narrative pattern sets up a binary relationship between Bayard and Ringo: one boy is white and privileged; one boy is black and enslaved. Together they create a narrative space where Faulkner can experiment with language and cultural constructions and suggest that human friendship is what should prevail. In terms of contemporary language theory, as Faulkner revised *The Unvanquished*, he "submitted" to thought the oppositions black/white and slave/free. He worked with language to erase difference and dismantle opposition. But finally, the opposition between Bayard and Ringo--the difference that their "game" works hard to dismantle--is not only re-established in the final story, it becomes obvious that it was never lost. When Ringo is shown in a position of inequality with Bayard--in an oppressed position as "boy"--it is a narrative admittance that equality between Bayard and Ringo in the social system of the South is an impossibility. Faulkner, through Bayard's narration, can "submit" the oppositions to thought but he cannot change a whole system of language and culture in which these oppositions exist.<sup>v</sup> This does not mean, however, that the act of trying to equalize the two has no function or result in the narrative.

Readers of *The Unvanquished* come to comprehend the destructive nature of constructions of racial difference when such differences are the arbiters of individual fate. “Reality” and “fact and doom” do destroy the boys’ play, yet by placing the actual opposition of the Civil War outside the realm of the boys’ play, at least for a time, Faulkner suggests that Bayard and Ringo have found, with each other, their own haphazard way to racial harmony.<sup>vi</sup> Racial harmony, the text suggests, happens not only by challenging oppositional schemes of language and culture, but also by acts of imagination and acts of individuals committed to making harmony happen.

Faulkner does not forget the position in which he has left Ringo at the end of the narrative, and he certainly does not give up his over-all project to question, challenge, and erase difference. With the narrative pattern of *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner again sets up two primary characters who represent race difference in the South: Isaac McCaslin is the would-be white patriarch, heir to the McCaslin plantation, and potential leader of the white community; Lucas Beauchamp is a strong black man, an occupant of a “postage stamp” of soil, and a prospector, who will seek his fortune in “the bottom,” by digging for gold in an old “Indian” mound. A close genealogical study reveals that these two grown-up, well-defined versions of Bayard and Ringo are both the grandsons of a brutal, white patriarch, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin. Unlike Ringo and Bayard, they are not friends; they in fact do not even appear together in any story of the narrative, but as first cousins, they are kin. Like Bayard and Ringo, they have a relationship that allows them to work against easy definitions of who they are based on what their societal and cultural



roles should be. Each poses a challenge to anyone who defines them solely according to race or class.

Within the narratives that comprise *Go Down, Moses*, Isaac and Lucas, not unlike Ringo and Bayard, each in their own way ally themselves with some elemental force of earth and spirit, and then they each question and challenge status quo social, cultural, and language constructions. They move in from the realms of their opposing polarities to break down boundaries of racial difference, and they do so with the assistance of other characters including, Sam Fathers and Molly Beauchamp. While for most of the narrative of *The Unvanquished*, Bayard and Ringo fight for an equality only within the “play” of their childhood, Isaac and Lucas fight small battles within a “real” world setting to initiate changes which, taken as a whole, begin to transform the social environment of Yoknapatawpha county. In the text, the old wilderness dwindles from a vast wild landscape, giving way to a modern world, but characters in *Go Down, Moses* find ways to interpret its secrets and to pass them on. Isaac becomes an interpreter of the old earth’s truths by listening to Sam Father’s wisdom, and Lucas gains access to a similar wisdom through a final acceptance of Molly’s more biblical, spiritual understanding of the earth.

Deep within the narrative layers of *Go Down, Moses* is a story of a white southern man who had power and prestige, but who used his power in an unseemly and destructive way. Old Carothers McCaslin purchases a “quadroon” slave, Eunice, for \$650.00, and then, he has sexual intercourse with her. When a daughter from this action is born and grows, in an act of miscegenation and incest, he has sexual intercourse with her. Tomasina, his daughter and his victim, bears the lineage that

will eventually produce Lucas Beauchamp. While much of the narrative is contrived to slowly reveal to readers these horrific actions by Carothers McCaslin, in much the same way as Thomas Sutpen's misdeeds are slowly revealed in *Absalom, Absalom*, the narrative also, like *Absalom, Absalom*, reveals the destructive results of patriarchal injustice.

Within stories told of this complex tragedy, Faulkner finds a means to create some humor, in the story "Was," but he also creates a means to offer something hopeful and forward looking. The character Isaac McCaslin engages in a project that is all too familiar in Faulkner's narratives: he seeks to understand his past, to question what went wrong, and then to do one thing more. Unlike Quentin Compson or even Bayard Sartoris, who as adults find it difficult to challenge or change the circumstances of their birth, Isaac begins a life-long process of relinquishing what in contemporary terms could be called his white patriarchal privilege. Faulkner draws Isaac carefully; significantly, he creates no hero with the character, and he limits the changes he will allow Isaac to make. Faulkner also attributes much of Isaac's wisdom to the character Sam Fathers, whom he befriends as a boy.

In the story "The Old People," Sam Fathers is a vital presence in Isaac McCaslin's initiation into adulthood. He teaches Isaac how to do the one thing that, more than any other, will literally mark him as a man; he teaches him to hunt: "So the instant came. He pulled the trigger and Sam Fathers marked his face with the hot blood which he had spilled and he ceased to be a child and became a hunter and a man" (171). Then, Isaac remembers that Sam had said that "he had done all right" (171). Becoming a hunter for Isaac means "forever" becoming "one with the

wilderness” (171).

Later, at age sixteen, Isaac comes to appreciate that a hunter is seen as “not white nor black nor red.” He comprehends that it is the union of some ancient instinct in a male being that draws them together in a common pursuit “with the will and hardiness to endure and the humility and skill to survive” (184). But what for most men would be the final fulfillment, the reason for being, and the end of the game, is only the beginning for Isaac. Contemplating the “doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness” Isaac learns from Sam Fathers that the next step in his maturation is understanding that once one has achieved the title “hunter,” he must give it up. He must surrender the very thing that he has worked so hard to attain, and he must do so in order gain a knowledge that comes not from conquering an all-too-powerful other, but from communion with one who is all-powerful.

The paradigm shift that Isaac experiences as he travels into the wilderness, in “The Bear,” is more than the significant enlightenment of a young boy. In terms of Faulkner’s narrative patterning, it is the narrative space where Faulkner shows how language and cultural oppositions break-down in a scheme of an alternative ontology, an existence which reaches back to a time on earth before there was language as we know it, before there was culture they way we know it.

As if drawing the boundary lines of a hermetically sealed space, Isaac’s footsteps move him in a circular pattern in the wilderness. His overt purpose is to face down the massive bear, called Old Ben, yet this journey is different from other

hunting trips he has made into the old forest because, from the start, Fathers has told the boy that he cannot have his gun with him. In an act that could be said to replicate Faulkner's gesture with Bayard, who leaves his gun home when he faces Redmond, Isaac comprehends that in order to see the bear, to achieve a next level of understanding, he must be neither "hunter" nor "hunted:"

He had left the gun; by his own will and relinquishment he had accepted not a gambit, not a choice, but a condition in which not only the bear's heretofore inviolable anonymity but all the ancient rules and balances of hunter and hunted had been abrogated. He would not even be afraid, not even when the fear would take him completely: blood, skin, bowels, bones, memory, from the long time before it even became his memory. (198)

In this scene it is not merely an opposition, a language binary, which is being questioned, but a whole system, a whole way of thinking that is challenged. As with his final description of Bayard Sartoris facing down Redmond, Faulkner tips the easy balance of the opposition hunter vs. hunted, and arguably by extension all other oppositions of us vs. them, including powerful vs. powerless. What Isaac learns is that there are other, better ways of perceiving human existence, perceptions based not on shoring up one's power, bolstering one's self, against an other. There are other better ways to hunt, and in this narrative, one experiences the ultimate "hunt" by giving up power:

He stood for a moment – a child, alien and lost in the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness. Then he relinquished

completely to it. It was the watch and the compass. He was still tainted. He removed the linked chain of the one and the looped thong of the other from his overalls and hung them on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and entered it. (199)

The question that any reader must ask is why should the compass and watch “taint” Isaac? On one level, these are the tools a hunter uses to figure his way, by keeping track of time of day and location in relation to the sun. On another level, however, these are the objects of a culture in which control, in which not getting lost, is vital for basic survival. By giving up these objects, along with his gun, Isaac is in essence giving up all control, his security, and his way home. He allows himself to get lost, and once lost, he can be truly open to the wisdom of the wilderness. Moreover, he knows instinctively that he is not alone. The symbolic incarnation of being, the one who lives in the wilderness and who also will not be “hunter” or “hunted” is present with him.

Lost, Isaac relies only on what Sam Father’s has taught him. He “made a cast to cross his backtrack” (199). When he does not find his way, he makes yet another “circle in the opposite direction and much larger so that the pattern of the two of them would bisect his track somewhere” (199). In his act of moving forward to find his way back, Isaac finds that he is not retracing his steps: he was “crossing no trace nor mark any where of his feet or any feet, and now he was going faster though still not panicked” (200). He remembers the final lesson Fathers has taught him: when lost, sit down, and wait. Within the same sentence of the words “he sat down,” a total giving up of power, are the words “seeing” and “the crooked print” (200). At

the precise moment when Isaac completely relinquishes to the wilderness, he is rewarded with the object of his desire: he sees the bear: “It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon’s hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him (200).

In Thomas Merton’s now well-known lecture on “The Bear,” the moment when Isaac realizes the bear is looking at him—the bear is the object of Isaac’s desire, faith, and hope—is a great moment of spiritual revelation. He realizes that his existence is acknowledged by one who is all-powerful. The bear looks at Isaac, and Isaac realizes that he now belongs to a community that is older than “ancient,” older than language, older than culture, and this communion with the wilderness is the reason why the “rules and balances” of “hunter and hunted” had to be “abrogated” (198)

The exchanged recognition, the mutual understanding, between Isaac and Ol’ Ben is not the only significant result of the bear’s presence in Isaac’s life at this specific moment. The bear also has led Isaac back to “the tree, the bush, the compass, and the watch glinting where a ray of sunlight touched them” (200). Ol’ Ben brings Isaac back to all those things that are familiar to him and that will ensure his safety as well as his way home. With the, albeit roundabout, completion of the circle, Isaac can leave the hermetically sealed space and travel home. But he travels home with a new, deeply felt knowledge.

In the narrative, Isaac McCaslin lives to learn of the death of Ol’ Ben, and then, to learn of the symbolic death of the wilderness. Then, he is faced with an end

of another kind of era. In John T. Matthew's assessment of *Go Down, Moses*, he recognizes the rituals of loss that are prevalent in the text: "As *Go Down Moses* (1942) mournfully broods on the shrinkage of the Mississippi wilderness and remorsefully chronicles the eradication of the McCaslin lineage, it presents us with a fresh configuration of the crisis of loss" (212). While so much of Isaac's story is based on what he has lost, there is also great hope that can be derived from Isaac's relinquishment and new found understanding of communion.

In "Delta Autumn" when Isaac discovers his forefather's ledgers, he discovers finally the truth about his grandfather's brutal begetting of a lineage by his daughter and slave, Tomasina. The full acknowledgement of this truth will trigger something in Isaac that will change him and his family forever. In the ledger, Isaac reads

Old Carothers' bold cramped hand far less legible than his sons' even and not much better in spelling, who . . . made no effort either to explain or obfuscate the thousand-dollar legacy to the son of an unmarried slave-girl, to be paid only at the child's coming-of-age, bearing the consequence of the act of which there was still no definite incontrovertible proof that he acknowledged, not out of his own substance but penalizing his sons with it, charging them a cash forfeit on the accident of their own paternity (257-8)

When Isaac learns about his grandfather's initial brutal actions as well as the way he attempts to "pay off" his perceived debt, at the symbolic and literal expense of his sons, Isaac "reads" through a lens of perception invested with all of the wisdom he

has gained from Sam Fathers and his experience in the wilderness. Isaac understands, in a way that Bayard understands, that power oppositions, oppositions that oppress some so that others may be empowered, lead only to destroyed lives and unnecessary violence. Isaac's reaction is expressed as a stream of consciousness thought process;

*So, I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger he thought. Even if My son wasn't but two words. But there must have been love he thought. Some sort of love. Even what he would have called love: not just an afternoon's or a night's spittoon (258)*

Faulkner is not only exposing a brutal truth in Isaac's life; he is again exposing a terrible truth of the oppression of blacks by whites during the pre-Civil War South. Isaac cannot believe that there wasn't love in their sexual union, but he as begins to comprehend the reality, the "fact" and "doom," he may comprehend that there most likely was no love. Then, he simultaneously makes a revolutionary decision regarding his own life. Isaac McCaslin will no longer be the patriarch of his family; he will give-up his rightful ownership of the family plantation, and he will bear no offspring. In essence, he will give up entirely what Matthews calls the "will to power."

I read this relinquishment as a direct result of Isaac's experience in the wilderness, his attempt to be neither "hunter" nor "hunted," and Isaac's self-conscious decision to abandon his power resonates with the most profound of modern and contemporary language theory:



Derrida . . . is inspired by Nietzsche's efforts to undo the will to power by dissolving opposites and reversing perspectives repeatedly in order to unsettle the (impossible) distinction between truth and error (xxviii); and he extends Nietzsche's destruction of usual oppositions such as good and evil, truth and error, theory and practice, purpose and accident, death and life (to cite Spivak's list [xxviii-xxix]). Nietzsche anticipates the gesture of erasure, then, in attempting to speak the destruction of metaphysics within the language of metaphysics. (33)

While it is in some ways extraordinary for Matthews to assert that Faulkner was, with his narrative patterning, participating fully in the metaphysical questioning described here, I think it quite possible to suggest that Faulkner's narratives begin to create and depict an ontology in which race and class difference are overthrown in a pursuit of other, greater truths of human existence. With his profound portrayal of Isaac McCaslin, Faulkner depicts a break down of the opposition "hunter" vs. "hunter" and by extension in the narrative "white son" vs. "black son." Why should any son not be called "My Son," Faulkner seems to ask. Why should race have mattered at all?

Of course the real paradox of Faulkner's portrayal of Isaac McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* is that when he is faced with the mixed race offspring of his grandfather's lineage, who embodies a future where race is non-distinguishable, Isaac does not seem to embrace the child. Tennie's Jim's granddaughter presents Isaac with her child, a child that not only represents the mixed race McCaslin line,

but also the (“woman made”) Edmonds lineage, the two sides of the family now combined in one child. Isaac’s response to the child is cryptic and disturbing. But finally, despite all of his grumpiness, he gives the child, a boy, a hunting horn that had been his father’s, and, readers can assume, his grandfather’s, Carothers McCaslin’s, before that. The hunting horn is the symbol representing the hunt and the journey, but the concept of “hunt” in the narrative is shaped by Isaac’s ultimate experience of the “hunt.” That is, the horn can be read as a representation of the final break down of the oppositions powerful/ powerless and white/ black in the McCaslin family. Truly, this child is neither black nor white, and, the text seems to suggest, his life will be a journey of discovering a new world where race is indeterminable, where the races exist in communion with one another.

Both Bayard Sartoris and Isaac McCaslin have early childhood experiences that cause them, as adults, to challenge oppositions inherent in southern white patriarchal culture. In both cases, readers and scholars may comprehend their actions to relinquish power, finally, as ineffectual. Yet while these characters fail to accomplish great deeds of human courage in terms of narrative plot, each character presents a challenge to language and cultural identity definitions, especially to their class assignments which are based largely on their family names. With his depictions of Bayard and Isaac, Faulkner could be said to be Signifyin’ upon conceptualizations of “plantation patriarch.”

In terms of the larger narrative patterns I have discussed, characters such as Bayard and Isaac hinder oppositional characterizations, the pitting of one character of a particular race or class against another character of a different race or class.

Simply put, Bayard and Isaac resist bolstering power at the expense of another. Also, each character, in his own way, takes a stand on behalf of justice, rather than “turning the other cheek” to injustice. They are not heroes, however, but instead they act due to what they have fortuitously learned from interactions with Ringo and Sam Fathers (and Ol’ Ben), respectively. Bayard and Isaac should be set in contrast to Hawkshaw, Mr. Compson and General Compson, Quentin Compson’s father and grandfather, for they do not comply with the actions of an extremist, but instead, work to find ways to confront injustice.

Another character who does not fit earlier narrative patterns is Lucas Beauchamp. Unlike Nancy, Lena Grove, Joe Christmas, or even Thomas Sutpen, really unlike any of Faulkner’s earlier characterizations, Lucas Beauchamp is keenly aware that his grandfather is Carothers McCaslin, and although he is positioned as “black” by the language and culture of Yoknapatawpha county, he is mixed race. He also is not one who is an outsider or one that is excluded by community due to his heritage. Instead, throughout *Go Down, Moses*, he lives as a man that is respected. While he seems deeply to hate his grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, he acknowledges his blood in him. Because they are of the same blood, Lucas works in the narrative to transform the possibility of his own patriarchal power into something he and his wife, Molly, can be proud of. As with depictions of Bayard and Isaac, Lucas will present his own challenge to the white patriarchy, but his challenge will be to live independently from the white patriarchy, to live as a man, not as “white” or “black.” Yet, interestingly, he also seems to struggle with the white patriarch that IS him because of his white heritage. Thus he works in several ways to transform white

patriarchy. He too is a character who could be said to be Signifyin' upon "plantation patriarch."

At first, his ambitions lead him to search for gold in the bottom. He seeks personal power through economic viability. Yet because of Molly's influence Lucas will have to struggle to find other, arguably even more difficult and unlikely ways to realize his true identity and proud manhood. In the story, "The Fire in the Hearth," Lucas ignores his family, his crops, and his health, and becomes consumed with a desire to find hidden gold. When his wife Molly finds out what Lucas is doing, she is scared. She goes to Roth Edmonds, who is also aware of Lucas's actions, and complains that her husband is "doing a thing the Lord ain't meant for folks to do. And, I'm afraid" (99). Roth Edmonds believes at first that Molly is afraid for Lucas's physical well-being, but this is not the case. Molly is afraid for another reason. She believes that Lucas can find the gold and will commit a serious spiritual crime. She describes it this way, "Because God say, "What's rendered to My earth, it belong to Me unto I resurrect it. And let him or her touch it, and beware." And, I'm afraid. I got to go. I got to be free of him" (99). Throughout *Go Down, Moses*, characters such as Sam Fathers and Isaac McCaslin assert that the earth should be owned by no one. It is a powerful force to be respected. In this crucial statement to Roth Edmonds, Molly makes it clear that she also believes this. She will have no part of her husband's attempt to extract gold from the sacred Indian mound. Also, in this statement, Molly uses the word "free" as if she is Lucas' slave, and her desire is to be "free" of him if he acts in opposition to God's laws. Molly will give up her family and the fire in her hearth before she will let her husband rape the land to find gold.

Molly makes this statement to Roth as a sort of public declaration letting Lucas know that she is not his slave; she is his wife. Lucas won't listen to her, but perhaps he will listen to the white, plantation owner, Roth Edmonds.

Molly's brief yet powerful statement provides a glimpse of how her mind works. Her moral code is quite different from Lucas's and from others who live on the plantation and desire power over and possession of the land. Molly lives a life that, because of its spiritual nature, aligns her with an understanding not unlike that of Sam Fathers, or that which Isaac comprehends in the wilderness. She finds her center not within patriarchal social hierarchies of class and race, but in communion with her God and the earth. Lucas, at this point, is inspired by his almost insatiable desire to find gold and live, finally, as an empowered man. Molly's statement to Roth Edmonds is not the only evidence that Lucas "is doing a thing the Lord aint meant for folks to do." The gold Lucas is searching for is supposedly buried in or around an Indian mound, and this lends narrative support to Molly's belief. The Indian burial ground is a sacred place that should not be disturbed. In a fascinating scene, the earth, personified, toys with Lucas as he digs through the Indian mound. The narration describes Lucas's encounter this way:

[It] sounded to him louder than an avalanche, as though the whole mound had stooped roaring down at him--the entire overhang sloughed. It drummed on the hollow kettle, covering it and the worm . . . striking him a final blow squarely in the face with something larger than a clod--a blow not vicious so much as merely heavy-handed, a sort of final admonitory pat from the spirit of darkness and solitude, the old earth,

perhaps the old ancestors themselves. Because, sitting up, getting his breath again at last, gasping and blinking at the apparently unchanged shape of the mound which seemed to loom poised above him in a long roaring wave of silence like a burst of jeering and prolonged laughter, his hand found the object which had struck him and learned it in the blind dark--a fragment of an earthenware vessel which, intact, must have been as big as a churn and which even as he lifted it crumbled again and deposited in his palm, as though it had been handed to him, a single coin.

(38)

The earth, like Molly, reacts to Lucas' quest for the gold not in a "vicious" way but as one who seeks to show Lucas that he is doing something wrong. The earth, however, is not scared of Lucas's actions, and instead, laughs heartily at him. In a taunting way the earth gives Lucas one single gold coin as if to say, "You want gold? Well here you go. Here is one gold coin," and Lucas will never get more from the earth.

The allegiance between the earth and Molly gives Lucas access to the same sort of wisdom that Isaac realizes in "The Bear." Although the earth, personified, gives Lucas a gold coin, it seems more concerned to laugh at him with "jeering and prolonged laughter" and to challenge Lucas's attempt to gain power via gold with a "heavy-handed, a sort of final admonitory pat from the spirit of darkness and solitude, the old earth." Molly too uses her own method of showing Lucas he is doing something wrong by threatening to divorce him.

At the end of "The Fire and Hearth," despite all warnings, Lucas is ready to go through with his divorce from Molly in order to continue his search for gold, but, at the courthouse, there is an interesting twist of events. Just as the divorce papers

are about to be signed, a clerk looks at Lucas and says, "You nigger! Take off your hat!" (123) There is no explicit explanation to describe Lucas's emotions here, but indications are that he comprehends that no amount of gold can change the clerk's view of him. In this segregation era setting, Lucas will always remain a "nigger." The narration continues, "Then Lucas thrust Molly aside and came to the table, removing his hat as he did so. 'We aint gonter have no contest or no voce either,' he said" (123-124). Faulkner's use of the word "contest" is key to Lucas's relinquishment. Not only will Lucas not divorce Molly, he also will not conform to the rules and regulations of a system that names him "nigger." One could interpret this not only as Lucas's relinquishment of his search for gold, but also as his relinquishment of a "contest" based on a status quo social and economic quest for power. Lucas says, "'That money's there. . . . But I am near to the end of my three score and ten and I reckon to find that money aint for me'" (127). Lucas is not joyful about his relinquishment; however, the reader feels a sense of relief that Lucas gives up his greedy quest for gold, power, and possession. Lucas, in large part because of Molly's actions, has escaped participation in and perpetuation of the patriarchy of his forefathers. Molly could not have known that her decision to divorce Lucas would cause him to change his behavior, but her actions force him to give up a fantasy and face the harsh realities of Yoknapatawpha county

Following the courtroom scene, Lucas reaffirms the fact that he has given up his search because of Molly's influence. Roth speaks to Lucas as an equal, as if for the first time he acknowledges Lucas as a member of his family, and he tries to convince Lucas to keep searching for the gold. Lucas, however, holds fast to his relinquishment and gives up the divining machine:

"No. Get rid of it."

"For good?"

"Yes. Clean off this place, where I wont never see it again. Just dont tell me where. Sell it if you can and keep the money. But sell it a far piece away, where I wont never see it nor hear tell of it again."

"Well," Edmonds said. "Well." He thrust his chair back from the table and sat looking up at the other, at the old man who had emerged out of the tragic complexity of his motherless childhood as the husband of the woman who had been the only mother he ever knew, who had never once said "sir" to his white skin and whom he knew even called him Roth behind his back, let alone to his face.

"Look here," he said. "You dont have to do that. Aunt Molly's old, and she's got some curious notions. But what she dont know --Because you aint going to find any money, buried or not, around here or anywhere else. And if you want to take that damn thing out now and then, say once or twice a month, and spend the night walking up and down that damn creek---"

"No," Lucas said. "Get rid of it." (126)

Roth's purpose is to have Lucas continue his search for the gold, and thereby participate in a kind of male patriarchy of power, but Lucas again and again refuses to participate in Roth's plan. Finally, Lucas says to Roth, "'Man has got three score and ten years on this earth, the Book says. He can want a heap in that time and a heap of what he can want is due to come to him, if he just starts soon enough. I done waited too late to start'" (127). This statement to Roth by Lucas shows that Lucas now finds a perspective for and an understanding of his life in Biblical lessons--the same source for Molly's beliefs.

Not so coincidentally, in this scene, Roth looks back on his life and thinks of Molly, "the only mother he ever knew." Roth's effort to have Lucas take up the



divining machine is a way for Roth to hold on to Lucas and Molly. Roth wants to continue a sort of game between himself and Molly and Lucas, not unlike Bayard and Ringo's competition between equals. Roth knows there is no gold, but he still wants Lucas to look for it. Plantation patriarchy may give power to the white, male, land owner, but this position can be lonely and confusing for Roth who seems pitiful in this scene.

In *Go Down, Moses*, both Isaac McCaslin and Lucas Beauchamp make significant relinquishments based on old wisdom they glean from those who love them. But Faulkner creates another character in the text whose actions are stronger and more sure than either of these men. Molly Beauchamp, who finds a source in the real life Caroline Barr, makes no relinquishment but instead realizes the moral strength of her convictions at the end of the novel.

In the article, "Crying in the Wilderness: Legal, Racial, and Moral Codes in *Go Down, Moses*," Thadious Davis acknowledges that Molly pushes Lucas to give up his search for the gold and his participation in the patriarchy of his forefathers; but according to Davis, Molly's actions stifle Lucas. He writes, "Ironically, however, [Molly] also causes him to abandon his hopes for a change in his condition, and to acquiesce to his subordinate place as a black on the McCaslin plantation" (144). However, Lucas does make a change, a spiritual/psychological one. In the end, because of Molly's act condemning his behavior and threatening divorce, as well as the moment when he is called "nigger," Lucas abandons his attempts to secure wealth and ownership and becomes a character who, like Isaac McCaslin, attempts to live another way.

Molly disrupts the plantation patriarchy in "The Fire and the Hearth," but in the last story of the text called "Go Down, Moses," Molly leaves the McCaslin-Edmonds plantation altogether, with no intention to return, in order to walk to town

and enlist the support of the most well-respected attorney she can find. Her mission this time is to bring home her grandson, Samuel Worsham Beauchamp, who many years before was separated from her when he was thrown off the land, "sold" as she says, by Roth Edmonds.

In the narrative, the account of the transformation that has taken Samuel Beauchamp from a small town Mississippi boy to a dangerous criminal and death row prisoner is told. Samuel had not been a well-behaved child. As a young man, he was a petty thief who robbed Jefferson's grocery store. The local officials had locked him up as they needed to, but the most harsh punishment came not from the local police but from the owner of the land where his grandmother lived. We are told that when Roth Edmonds caught Samuel stealing from his commissary, he "ordered him off the place and had forbidden him ever to return" (355). This abandonment of Samuel by Roth is made more significant in the narrative when one realizes that Roth and Samuel, like Isaac and Lucas, also can trace a common ancestry to Carothers McCaslin. Samuel differs from Lucas in that his determination to gain power causes him to act in a way that is fierce and risky. Yet, despite this, to Molly, Roth has separated a family, and all these years later, she takes a stand in defense of her grandson. She of course is not present at Samuel's sentencing in Joliet, but she reacts nonetheless.

In the office of Gavin Stevens, "Phi Beta Kappa, Harvard, Ph.D., Heidelberg," Stevens introduces himself to "a little old negroid woman with a shrunken, incredibly old face..."(353). Molly demands that Stevens find her grandson and bring him back home. Using a biblical-like chant, she sings out, "It was Roth Edmonds sold him. . . . Sold him in Egypt. I dont know whar he is. I just knows Pharaoh got him. And you the Law. I wants to find my boy'" (353-354). Molly uses her almost instinctive understanding of the biblical passages to frame her

perspective of the world, and amazingly, Gavin Stevens hears her and understands. However, if Stevens has any doubt as to whether he wants to assist Molly with finding her grandson, the person he meets next will strike them from his mind. The old, white matriarch of the town has taken up Molly's cause. She says, "Can nothing be done? Mollie's and Hamp's parents belonged to my grandfather. Mollie and I were born in the same month. We grew up together as sisters would" (357). In this town, Stevens might be able to get away with ignoring the wishes of a little old black woman, but he would never get away with objecting to the wishes of Miss Worsham. In the same way that Sophonsiba Beauchamp can manipulate the patriarchy in "Was," Miss Worsham manipulates the unspoken rules of patriarchy, and in a subtle way, she demands that her desires, as an elderly lady of the town, under no circumstances be denied. Molly Beauchamp and Miss Worsham present a powerful force to be reckoned with.

Another way to read the importance of what is happening here, at the end of *Go Down, Moses*, is that a strong white woman and a strong black woman combine to take on the white male patriarchy. And Faulkner does not stop there. What they accomplish together will secure a new definition the communal "we" by the narrative's end.

In order to bring Samuel home, Stevens is persuaded to raise two hundred and fifty dollars by going to every shop and business in the center of Jefferson:

And during the remainder of that hot and now windless afternoon, while officials from the city hall, and justices of the peace and bailiffs come fifteen and twenty miles from the ends of the county, mounted the stairs to the empty office and called his name and cooled their heels a while and then went away and returned and sat again, fuming, Stevens passed from store to store and office to office about the square--merchant and clerk,

proprietor and employee, doctor dentist lawyer and barber--with his set and rapid speech: "It's to bring a dead nigger home. It's for Miss Worsham. Never mind about a paper to sign: just give me a dollar. Or a half dollar then. Or a quarter then." (360)

Miss Worsham and Molly, with the reluctant Stevens at their mercy, together help get Samuel home to be buried in Yoknapatawpha County. Yet Molly's work is not yet complete. In the next scene, Molly makes a mournful and angry declaration by chanting the words of an old spiritual called "Go Down, Moses."

The night of Samuel Worsham Beauchamp's execution, all are assembled at Miss Worsham's home. Molly, and her brother begin to chant:

"He dead," she said. "Pharaoh got him."

"Oh yes, Lord," Worsham said. "Pharaoh got him."

"Done sold my Benjamin," the old Negress said.

"Sold him in Egypt." She began to sway faintly back and forth in the chair.

"Oh yes, Lord," Worsham said.

"Hush," Miss Worsham said. "Hush, Hamp."

"I telephoned Mr. Edmonds," Stevens said. "He will have everything ready when you get there."

"Roth Edmonds sold him," the old Negress said. She swayed back and forth in the chair. "Sold my Benjamin."

"Hush," Miss Worsham said. "Hush Mollie. Hush now." (361-362)

As Molly and Hamp begin to become embraced by the words that they speak, Gavin Stevens begins to feel nervous, as does Miss Worsham herself:

"I better go," Stevens said. He rose quickly. Miss Worsham rose too, but he did not wait for her to precede him. He went down the hall fast,

almost running; . . . It was not far now; now he could smell and feel it: the breathing and simple dark, and now he could manner himself to pause and wait for Miss Worsham as she followed him to the door. . . . Now he could hear the third voice, which would be that of Hamp's wife--a true soprano which ran without words beneath the strophe and antistrophe of the brother and sister:

"Sold him in Egypt and now he's dead."

"Oh yes, Lord. Sold him in Egypt." (363)

As Molly and Hamp chant the words to the hymn, Hamp's wife sings "without words" her voice running "beneath the strophe and antistrophe of the brother and sister."

Molly's voice, and the voices of her family, are heard not just by Gavin Stevens; they are also heard by the people of Yoknapatawpha County. Her grandson's death has called her to action and now she calls the people of the county to witness his burial. This is how Samuel Worsham Beauchamp's funeral is described in the scene directly following Molly's song:

There were more than a dozen cars, but it was not until the train came in that Stevens and the editor began to notice the number of people, Negroes and whites both. Then, with the idle white men and youths and small boys and probably half a hundred Negroes, men, and women too, watching quietly, the Negro undertaker's men lifted the gray-and-silver casket from the train. . . . [T]hey followed the hearse as it swung into the long hill up from the station. . . . [I]t slowed into the square, crossing it, circling the Confederate monument and the courthouse while the merchants and clerks and barbers and professional men who had given Stevens the dollars and half-dollars and quarters and the ones who had

not, watched quietly from the doors and upstairs windows. . . . (363-364)

With the words of a spiritual called "Go Down, Moses," Molly calls the people of Yoknapatawpha county to witness the devastating results of the power structure that they have participated in and sustained. While it was Roth Edmonds alone who "sold" Sam Beauchamp, he could not have acted in this way if a whole community of people had not supported his action. Molly could have changed or influenced the course of her grandson's life if she had been allowed to. She was just not given the chance.

This final passage of *Go Down, Moses* is extraordinary because the one who, according to language and cultural constructions, should have no social power is depicted as a powerful force. The passage not only inverts a hierarchy of race, class, and power, however. It also provides a new vision of the "communal we" as a community that gathers not to act out of hatred, fear, and revenge, but instead, to act in communion, to acknowledge a son that was its own. The passage signifies the evolution of the communal we by showing its capacity for recognition and unity, and by revealing what can happen when race and class differences, at least momentarily, are replaced with communion and ritual mourning. In terms of Faulkner's life and work, it also shows, if idealistically, how the author might want the people of his own hometown to respond to one of its black sons, even a black son that was lost.

With *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner challenges both language and cultural constructions of racial difference. In his artistic response to segregation era oppression of blacks, Faulkner reveals that individuals can find the courage to confront and challenge difference when they attempt to exist in a new and spiritual way with fellow human beings. It is when we participate in a communion with others that real community is possible.

## Endnotes

- i The emphasis here is mine
- ii In “How to Approach Language,” Matthews refers to Freud and Nietzsche as “shapers of modern paradox” (32), and cites Jacques Derrida and his contemporaries, including Gayatri Spivak. His reading is also informed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan.
- iii The first version of the story was published September 29, 1934, in *The Saturday Evening Post*.
- iv The fact that readers must acknowledge racial difference in order to signify upon it can be considered a flaw of *The Unvanquished*, a flaw that does not exist in *Light in August* because Joe Christmas’s “race” is never announced in the text. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*: 44-49.
- v The language I use here to suggest that Faulkner was working to “erase difference” or “dismantle opposition” between Bayard and Ringo is drawn from Derrida’s lecture entitled “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in the text *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Derrida’s description of oppositions within a sign system provides the best way to understand the ironic function of Bayard and Ringo’s opposition:  
For there are two heterogeneous ways of erasing the difference between the signifier and the signified: one, the classic way, consists in reducing or deriving the signifier, that is to say, ultimately in *submitting* the sign to thought; the other, the one we are using here against the first one, consists in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned. (233)
- Faulkner shows, in the end, that a whole system of difference, of language and culture in the South, constitutes difference; therefore, as adults, Bayard and Ringo really have no choice but to re-enter the world that will see them as “white” and “black.” They cannot escape a world of signs and symbols that subjectively determines their identity.
- vi In the story, Bayard and Ringo get involved in illegal horse trading largely due to Granny Sartoris’s participation and justification of the trading. Granny, who is the picture of southern womanhood, sees the boy’s actions as well as their partnership as necessary for survival, and she encourages them in their endeavor. Soon after she dies, so too will the “game” as well as the boys’ relationship.

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## VITA

Janet Barnwell received her bachelor of arts degree from Emory University and her master of arts degree from the University of New Orleans. She will receive her doctorate in English from Louisiana State University in December 2002. While attending LSU, Ms Barnwell edited a collection of interviews held by the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History. The resulting publication is entitled, *Louisiana Voices: Remembering World War II*. She is currently a nominee for the MLA Delegate Assembly and a full-time Instructor at the University of New Orleans.