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STRUCTURAL PATTERNS

IN

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S MAJOR NOVELS

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PART ONE

Introduction

The Seeds of Technique: Mosquitoes

Introduction

William Faulkner wrote nineteen novels. Continually experimenting with the structure of the narrative, he produced a few superbly successful technical achievements, an intermediate body of works that are fascinating for what they attempt and the ways they attempt it, and more than several outright failures. With an experimenter, even a failure is usually of some interest.

"(I)t was simply because to me that seemed the most effective way to tell that story,"[1] Faulkner would answer to questions about his use of a particular unorthodox structure. But in spite of that disavowal, and in spite of the fact that it is undoubtedly true, that the novels were certainly first and foremost independent units, with structures selected as purely as possible to present most effectively the given story and theme; still, there are connections to be made among the various novels. At least eight of the major works, in fact, are built on the pattern of two types of structure, which might be given the labels <u>contrapuntal</u> and <u>centripetal</u>.

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1. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, edd., <u>Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958</u> (New York: 1959), p. 122.

"To what extent does Faulkner work in terms of polarities, oppositions, paradoxes, inversions of roles?" Robert Penn Warren asked, reviewing Malcolm Cowley's compilation of The Portable Faulkner, in August, 1946. "How much does he employ a line of concealed (or open) dialectic progression as a principle for his fiction? The study of these questions may lead to the discovery of principles of organization in his work not yet defined by criticism."[1] Such a study has yet to be systematically done.

"The story I was trying to tell was the story of Charlotte and Harry Wilbourne," Faulkner said of The Wild Palms. "I decided that it needed a contrapuntal quality like music. And so I wrote the other story simply to underline the story of Charlotte and Harry. I wrote the two stories by alternate chapters. I'd write the chapter of one and then I would write the chapter of the other just as the musician puts in--puts counterpoint behind the theme that he is working with."[2] Two weeks earlier, also at the University of Virginia, referring to "those interludes, the prefaces, preambles, whatever they are,"

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1. Robert Penn Warren, "William Faulkner," from William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, edd. (East Lansing: 1960), p. 124.
2. Faulkner in the University, p. 171.

in Requiem for a Nun, which alternate with the three acts of the drama, he called them "necessary to give it the contrapuntal effect which comes in orchestration, that the hard give-and-take of the dialogue was played against something that was a little mystical, made it sharper, more effective, in my opinion."[1]

This contrapuntal pattern, which Faulkner admitted his use of and which Warren earlier[2] felt in the "polarities" and "oppositions" in his works, is not only the explanation behind the structures of The Wild Palms and Requiem for a Nun, but is the organizing principle in the less schematic Light in August.

The five other most famous novels all conform to another pattern. As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!, The Hamlet and Go Down, Moses are each, in structure, centripetal. Their various elements radiate about single center points. In each, the magnetic quality of one character forces some order out of the four, or five, or seven, or (in the case of As I Lay Dying) fifty-nine fragments. Of Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner said, "It's incidentally the story of Quentin Compson's hatred of the bad qualities in the country he

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 122.

2. Five years before the publication, in 1951, of Requiem for a Nun.

loves. But the central character is Sutpen, the story of a man who wanted sons."[1] Equally the hubs of their respective wagon-wheel structures are Addie Bundren, Caddy Compson, Flem Snopes and, less obviously, Carothers McCaslin.

The existence of these two patterns of structure in so many of Faulkner's works, the thematic significance of the structure in each novel, and the implications of Faulkner's tendency toward contrapuntal and centripetal organization, are the subjects of this study.

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 71.

Chapter One

The Seeds of Technique:

Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes, Faulkner's second novel, is like the yacht on which the story takes place: it goes nowhere. Still, of the five books that might reasonably be classed as Faulkner's failures--Soldiers' Pay, Mosquitoes, Pylon, A Fable and The Town--it, along with A Fable, is the most interesting to examine in relation to its author's best writing. A Fable, a late, and possibly tired novel, represents the calcification of Faulkner's feelings about man into abstracts, and the congealment of his style into murk. Mosquitoes is at the other pole. It tries to be, not wise and moving, but witty and urbane. It is not mature work; it is pseudo-decadent and falsely sophisticated (with a few memorable lapses) in the manner of most of Faulkner's early poetry and reviews, with a tinge of healthy, if not redeeming, irony. But in its arrangement of parts can be seen the antecedents of Faulkner's later structural patterns.

Mosquitoes is an hour-by-hour account of a four-day outing on Lake Pontchartrain. Faulkner has established a group of characters from the fashionable artistic and

social worlds of New Orleans, such as he would have known from his own apprenticeship there around 1925. Through the device of the boat trip, he brings them into exceptionally close quarters to record their interaction. The book has no real story to tell. It is simply the examination of a situation. The material that fills its pages is, almost entirely, conversation. In that sense it is more like drama than narrative. It has all the unity of a well-wrought play; and that unity is certainly one of its limited number of virtues. Excluding the Prologue and Epilogue, which take place in various locations on shore and serve different purposes from the other chapters, the scene remains doggedly within the boundaries of Mrs. Maurier's yacht, except for the brief adventure on land of the niece and the steward, in the Third Day. And that rigid limitation of the scene is emphasized by the use of the successive hours of the day, "Four o'clock", "Six o'clock", "Seven o'clock", for section headings. This makes the reader continually aware that what he can expect three pages forward will be simply what occurs on the same geographical spot three hours hence. There are no shifts in location of more than thirty or forty feet and no shifts in time of more than a few hours, or at most, overnight. The effect is an intense, even tiresome, unity.

The intention of the book is satire: his characters established, Faulkner caricatures, mocks and patronizes them without ever, for more than a page or two, taking them seriously. The organizing metaphor of the book is presumably indicated by the title: mosquitoes, parasitically sucking off the life-blood of other, more self-supporting creatures. In an epigramatic paragraph preceding the book's Prologue Faulkner writes, "But now, as August like a languorous replete bird winged slowly through the pale summer toward the moon of decay and death, they were bigger, vicious; ubiquitous as undertakers, cunning as pawnbrokers, confident and unavoidable as politicians. . . pervading and monstrous but without majesty: a biblical plague seen through the wrong end of a binocular. . . ." On the literal level, "they" are the mosquitoes, which patrol the southern Louisiana waters and swamplands in summer. "They" reappear in the book regularly, to harass the various members of the party:

> Then, as if at a signal, they were all about them, unseen, with a dreadful bucolic intentness; unlike their urban cousins, making no sound.
>
> Jenny and Pete and Mr. Talliaferro evacuated the deck. At the companionway the ghostly poet joined them hurriedly, flapping his handkerchief about his face and neck and the top of his unnurtured evaporating head.(69)*

* From the Dell Laurel edition. All page citations will be from that edition of the work listed in the bibliography.

Rather over-cleverly, "they" are always referred to with the pronoun, or simply indicated obliquely, through the reactions they cause in the humans: "Without stooping the niece angled her leg upward and outward from the knee, scratching her ankle."(18) The word mosquitoes is mentioned nowhere outside of the title.

On the metaphorical level, it is not clear who "they" are. Which is the point of the metaphor: the mosquitoes' blood-draining parasitism, or simply the irritating general distraction they cause? Whose parasitism upon whom might the mosquitoes represent? The lack of an unconfused answer to that question is one of the weaknesses of the book. The novel has problems of wandering focus and confusion of theme for which the metaphor mosquitoes was an imperfect solution.

The Prologue promises a novel about the mutually parasitic relationships between artists and patrons. Fairchild, Mark Frost and even Gordon, in exchange for food, shelter and what they may or may not subsequently judge entertainment, are prepared to provide male company, a self-conscious dose of culture and a vicarious sense of bohemianism to Mrs. Maurier, Dorothy Jameson and Talliaferro. But with the appearance on board the yacht, the First Day, of the young people--the niece and the nephew and Jenny and Pete, who are neither artists

nor very interested in much that artists might have to offer--the formula changes. It changes again, during the non-voyage, as the characters are developed a bit. New categories emerge according to which they may be differentiated. Eventually, three main polarities, of the type suggested by Warren, are whirling about. First is the contrast between artists and the non-artists who attempt to bask in the glow of their creativity. Youth versus age is the second. And then, there is the contrast between words and action. The insignificance of intellectual banter is set against the vitality of any positive act. This third is usually considered the central theme of Mosquitoes, and is certainly the most pervasive of the tensions in the novel, if not the most impressively handled. In terms of the characters, the placid vitality of Jenny and the impetuousness of the niece Patricia, opposed to the almost masturbatory self-consciousness of Fairchild and Julius, reflect the contrast between action and words. Possibly words themselves are intended to be seen as the mosquitoe-like irritants that swarm about everyone's heads: "Talk, talk, talk: the utter and heartbreaking stupidity of words. It seemed endless, as though it might go on forever. Ideas, thoughts, became mere sounds to be bandied about until they were dead."(153) Unfortunately, the question Who are the

mosquitoes and who are the hosts? remains up in the air.

These three polarities suggest an early impulse in Faulkner to break down the elements of a story into two opposing groups and to work toward an expression of theme through dialectic and counterpoint. Fairchild presents a schema of his own, which consolidates the categories a bit, in a statement late in the Third Day. It comes on the page before Fairchild's out-house anecdote, at a point where that character's fumbling, sentimental wisdom is being given as much endorsement as it receives anywhere, and the ideas can probably be trusted to have Faulkner's sympathy:

> But when you are young, you just be. Then you reach a stage where you do. Then a stage where you think, and last of all, where you remember. Or try to."(190)

So the differences between youth and age, and between pure existence and self-consciousness, are aspects of the same fundamental polarity. This polarity is demonstrated more graphically than anywhere else in the Third Day, when Patricia and the steward, David, slip off the boat and set out on their ill-advised excursion to Mandeville. As they move painfully down the road, in a direction which they are not sure of, looking for the end of the swamp, fighting mosquitoes, thirst and

exhaustion, being forced to accept and cope with the very real consequences of their impulsiveness, the shipboard life continues on its ethereal plain. At lunch, Chopin and Debussy are discussed, while Fairchild thinks about Ibsen, Peer Gynt and a sonnet he once read by Siegfried Sassoon. As Michael Millgate has noted,[1] Patricia and David's elopement bears a resemblance to the later story of Charlotte and Harry Wilbourne in The Wild Palms: two people drop everything to go off on a romantic fling, which soon becomes desperate and which later becomes totally demoralizing. But it has, in fact, almost as much in common with "Old Man", the other half of that novel, in which a man and a woman, with no resources other than their interdependence, come to grips with and endure the coldest brutality of nature. And the parallel continues: the Mandeville adventure is the one episode in Mosquitoes that is told in alternating sections, with the scenes on the boat--Chopin, talk of the clubs at Yale and the comedy of Fairchild and the others splashing around in the tender--providing a counterpoint to the suffering of Patricia and David. The trivial accentuates both the harshness of the young

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1. Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William Faulkner (New York: 1966), p. 71.

couple's experience, and its final meaninglessness.

The contrast between pure existence, and self-consciousness, delineated by Fairchild, is also to reappear in Light in August. In that novel, it will alone provide the organizing principle, both structurally and thematically. Lena Grove will share the unreflective nature of Mosquitoes' young characters, with a combination of Jenny's ignorant placidity and Patricia's tenacity; Joe Christmas will be self-conscious, not to the point of fatuous verbosity, like Fairchild, but beyond, to the point of self-torture; and other characters will align themselves toward one or the other influence.

But in Mosquitoes this system--polarity--fails to make the novel work as a unified whole. The problem is that the categories blur; they contradict. They do not reinforce one another. Gordon and Patricia, in the general tone of satire in the novel, are presented as sympathetically as anyone. But Gordon is not one of the young. Julius, the "Semitic man", shows a certain wisdom and perspective that is sympathetic. But he is neither young nor an artist. Mark Frost is at once an artist (nominally), young (relatively) and laconic, but he appears foolish. David, the steward, is not only young but impulsive; yet he appears ineffectual, pitiful and dull. The Mandeville sequence, with its counterpoint,

seems destined to get at something, to develop an aspect of the contrasts in a striking and progressive way. But it does not; it falters, and goes nowhere. Patricia is back at the dinner table by page 178, with 100 pages of inconsequence still to come. The incident is soon forgotten, and ultimately makes no contribution to the over-all impact of the book. What the reader is left with is a group of characters on a boat. No one of them is very interesting. Some of them are more vital, more sensible, or more sympathetic than others. Some of them are compulsive talkers. Among the most supposedly vital are the least-well developed and least interesting, like Jenny. Among the most compulsive and foolish are the most interesting, like Fairchild and Talliaferro. Among the young are all of the most boring.

The idea of dialectic, as well as the device of counterpoint, seems to have occurred to Faulkner; but he apparently never made up his mind as to what was the point of it all. In later novels, the device was developed and the categories were refined. Youth was not again seen as a naturally vital quality (although Faulkner continued through his last novel to affirm the superior wisdom of young boys and old women). Art, and the ability to produce it, was not again presented as an argument for human value. It was the polarity of

unreflective existence, and self-consciousness, that extended into the mature work and was developed in Light in August and The Wild Palms.

In other ways, Mosquitoes resembles the centripetally structured novels. As far as locale and time are concerned it is, as mentioned already, a fearsomely unified book. And its unity is circular. It begins and ends at the same point: the Prologue and Epilogue both take place on shore and include a number of similar scenes. On board the ship, figuratively and, each night at the dinner table, literally, the characters are gathered in a ring, facing each other. Its shape is in this way closer to As I Lay Dying than to any of the other books. As I Lay Dying has the same circumscribed unity: it too is the account of a single journey. It tells no more and no less than the story of the family of Addie Bundren, deceased wife and mother, as they struggle to transport her body overland by wagon, to the town in which she wished to be buried. Like Mosquitoes, it presents an unbroken linear passage of time. In only a few of Faulkner's major novels does the chronological sequence of time escape being drastically cut up and rearranged. In As I Lay Dying, as in Mosquitoes, time is not only intact, it is emphasized, dramatized hour

by hour. The steady decay of Addie's body, the appearance of buzzards, the increasing disgust with which neighbors view the arriving caravan, are reminders that time is moving continuously, inexorably, in a single direction. And finally, the characters of As I Lay Dying are gathered in a ring. Anse Bundren, Darl, Dewey Dell, Cash, Jewel and Vardaman all gravitate around Addie, the focus of each of their lives, the cause of their present journey and the center point of the book.

Another of the critical deficiencies of Mosquitoes is, perhaps, this: while it is circular, it has no dynamic center point. No single character stands as a hub to the other spokes of a wheel, the way Caddy Compson inspires love and resentment, Addie inspires devotion and loyalty and Thomas Sutpen inspires hatred and awe. Even the demonic Sutpen, even Flem Snopes in The Hamlet and even Carothers McCaslin, who is not only a reprehensible character but has been dead for twenty years before the earliest episode of Go Down, Moses takes place, while they may be morally deplorable, are all still positive sources of ferment. They inspire strong emotion. They cause things to happen. They force others to conform to their will. But for the ring of characters in Mosquitoes the center point is a

negative. The passage, quoted above, describing the "utter and heartbreaking stupidty of words," probably identifies what Faulkner considered the core: "Talk, talk, talk. . . .It seemed endless. . . ."(153) It does seem endless in the novel, and in a way it is, because it is moving toward no end point. It is building toward no climax and developing complication not at all. It has made for an entirely homogeneous, and therefore static book. Faulkner's description of the futility of talk may be true enough, and he has certainly gone far toward proving it in his text. But that one paragraph, having been written and read, makes the rest of the book highly unnecessary. Faulkner's genius, some critics have suggested, lay in his dialogue, his ability to capture the rhythm and color and humor of the idiomatic speech patterns of his characters. But, insofar as that is true, it applies to his Southern country people, black and white, who, with little education, no intellectual or artistic pretensions, and not much desire to hear their own voices except when something of substance needs to be said, have a style of speech that, besides being rhythmic, colorful and humorous, is also generally concise. The conversation in Mosquitoes is something quite different. Faulkner has made what may be cautiously

called a tactical mistake: assembling and setting in motion a group of characters, not for the sake of their own innate interest, or to tell a story, but to illustrate an idea. He made the same mistake twenty-five years later, in A Fable.

The beaching of the Nausikaa on a sand bar suggests the static quality of the book. The comically repetitious mannerisms that serve as character portrayal for some of the lesser figures reinforce that stasis. Beginning, middle and end, the nephew fiddles at his pipe, and seems to have the capacity to do little else. Pete, with his hat, is almost as limited. And Talliaferro continues regularly to ask for Fairchild's advice about women, learning nothing, getting nowhere. The Epilogue, carrying on these repetitions and with its similarity to the Prologue, supports the idea that the voyage has had no effects, nothing has happened, no one has been changed in the least by four days of intellectual chit-chat. Jenny and Pete return to their homes and take up just where they left off. Major Ayers is glimpsed at an interview trying to market his idea for salts, which has been his main distraction since lunch of the First Day. Fairchild, Gordon and Julius end up drunk and philosophic as ever, on a crepuscular walk through the seamy sections of town very similar to the one they took at the end of

the Prologue. And Talliaferro, on the final page, rings up Fairchild in the middle of the night to ask for more advice. So Faulkner certainly intended that static quality. The book was designed, not as a line of narration that led somewhere, with gradients of tension and complication, but as a circle. What he cannot have intended is that the reader, having gotten a dose of that "Talk, talk, talk," would feel no real reason to push on. Through the vision of Samuel Beckett, an utterly stagnant situation can be made to fascinate the reader with its philosophical implications, its ripening ironies. But coming from Faulkner, with no morbidly intriguing tale of a "man-horse-demon"[1] to be unearthed, no Flem Snopes whose cold-blooded rise seems howlingly unjust but quietly inexorable, not even any boxed-up corpse of Addie Bundren ripening quickly in the July Mississippi heat even while the force of her personality continues to drive her family along dirt roads and across swollen rivers, Mosquitoes remains a very easy book to put down.

Its unity of time is another aspect of that stasis. This is probably the most radical difference between Mosquitoes and Faulkner's successful work. Mosquitoes confines itself to the present. It contains little

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1. Absalom, Absalom!, p. 6.

suggestion of the future; the reader is not encouraged to wonder what will happen to the characters after the book leaves them. No one finishing Mosquitoes goes on thinking about whether Talliaferro will succeed with a woman, the way the reader is concerned over the future prospects of Lena Grove and Byron Bunch. And the past does not intrude into Mosquitoes, except several times very briefly. Nothing could be more uncharacteristic of Faulkner. As I Lay Dying, admittedly, is another account of a linear span of present time. But the past is on the scene there; it is in the box; it is Addie, who even after her death presides over the lives of the living. And in most of Faulkner's other work the past is always part of the present; it is one element--and among the strongest--which is a factor in any immediate situation. "The past is never dead," says Gavin Stevens in Requiem for a Nun, and as Faulkner had been saying in every book since Sartoris, "It's not even past."(81)

But in Mosquitoes the past is not alive; it is not even dead: it simply fails to exist. One reason for this absence is that the compelling importance of the past was part of a uniquely Southern heritage and Faulkner did not really start writing about the South before Sartoris, his third novel. Mosquitoes takes place on the southern coast of the United States, but New Orleans

is not of the South. Most of the characters are outsiders to the traditional South. Fairchild is a mid-westerner, presumably based on Sherwood Anderson. Julius is a Jew. Mrs. Maurier is a transplanted Yankee. Pete is from an Italian immigrant family. And the nephew and niece are down from Chicago. Faulkner, at the time of writing Mosquitoes, was not exactly of the South himself; he was serving an apprenticeship in the aesthetic circles of a cosmopolitan city:

> With Soldiers' Pay and Mosquitoes I wrote for the sake of writing because it was fun. Beginning with Sartoris I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it. . . .It opened up a gold mine of other peoples, so I created a cosmos of my own. I can move these people around like God, not only in space but in time too. The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as was--only is.[1]

Bits of the past do slip into the framework of Mosquitoes now and then, and, in my opinion, those are among the few places where the book comes alive. The background that is given to Talliaferro I find, for instance, more interesting than Fairchild's musings on

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1. From an interview with Jean Stein, Paris Review, 1956, in Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962, James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, edd. (New York:1968), p. 255.

Art:

> Mr. Talliaferro had been married while quite young by a rather plainfaced girl whom he was trying to seduce. But now, at thirty-eight, he was a widower these eight years. . . .The family originated in northern Alabama and drifted slowly westward ever after. . . .His brothers were various and they attained their several milieus principally by chance; milieus ranging from an untimely heaven via someone else's horse and a rope and a Texas cottonwood, through a classical chair in a small Kansas college, to a state legislature via someone else's votes. This one got as far as California. They never did know what became of Mr. Talliaferro's sister.
>
> Mr. Talliaferro had got what is known as a careful raising: he had been forced while quite young and pliable to do all the things to which his natural impulses objected, and to forego all the things he could possibly have had any fun doing. After a while nature gave up and this became a habit with him. Nature surrendered him without a qualm: even disease germs seemed to ignore him. (27-28)

The Al Jackson anecdotes of Fairchild are glimpses into the past, although of the mythical, and not of the historical variety; and they are usually cited as among the lively parts of the novel. But I would say that two of the high points of the book come, in the Epilogue, with the very simple narration of the backgrounds of two characters. The first is Pete's mother, old Mrs. Ginotta. The author describes how the restaurant founded by Mr. Ginotta, a hard-working immigrant, was

taken over and modernized by his oldest son:

> Mr. Ginotta had not stood prosperity. He was afraid of the new floor, to begin with. It was too slick, dangerous for a man of his age and bulk; and to look out of his kitchen, that kitchen into which he no longer dared bring his stained apron, upon a room once crowded with his friends and noisy and cheerful with eating and smells of food--
>
> . . .
>
> So he died, fairly full of years and with more money to his name in the bank than most Italian princes have. Mrs. Ginotta had the flu at the same time. It had settled in her ears and as time passed she became quite deaf; and because of the fact that her old friends now went elsewhere to dine and the people who came now arrived quite late, after she was in bed mostly, and her old man was dead and her sons were such Americans now, busy and rich and taciturn, and because the strange waiters frightened her a little, the old lady had got out of the habit of talking at all. She prepared food for her sons on the new stove of which she was afraid, but they were in and out so much it was hard to anticipate their mealtimes; and her eyes being no longer good enough for sewing, she spent her time puttering about their living quarters overhead or in a corner of the kitchen where she would be out of the way, preparing vegetables and such--things that didn't require keenness of sight or attention. (245-246)

That collapsing of the broadest movements of life and death, happiness and regret, into a few simple narrative sentences certainly shows more insight into man than all of the book's self-satirical banter. The juxta-position of past and present in this way brings out an

advised pathos that no amount of fine-grain examination of the present alone can achieve.

Mrs. Maurier herself is the second character whose background emerges in the Epilogue. The story is told by Julius, and under its spell that lady, of a single fatuous dimension until then, suddenly becomes a pathetic heroine, almost of the class of Judith Sutpen.

> "The story is that her people forced her to marry old Maurier. . . .She was young, then; probably a background of an exclusive school, and a social future, the taken-for-granted capital letter kind, but all somehow rather precarious--cabbage, and a footman to serve it. . . .gentility: evening clothes without fresh linen underneath. I imagine he--her father--was pretty near the end of his rope. . . .And all the time she went about her affairs, her parties and routs and balls, behind that cold Dresden China mask of hers."(267-269)

It is true that the tale of her marriage here, in the context of cynically objective banter, may come across a bit more like melodrama than like tragedy. The elements of the drama are not fresh or unique, and Faulkner was to use most of it all again, to better effect, in Absalom, Absalom! Mrs. Maurier is the prior avatar of Ellen Coldfield, being the daughter of a re-settled Yankee, who is married off to the mysterious swaggering parvenu planter. But, though the material here is not as deftly exploited as it is later in

Absalom, Absalom!, it does begin to explain Mrs. Maurier, to make her a full-dimensional character (even if somewhat typed) rather than a fluttering paper cut-out.

An equally interesting aspect of the sequence is the way in which Julius tells the story, and the way in which Fairchild responds. "But then," Julius hesitates at one point, "perhaps nothing went on behind that mask at all."

> "Of course there was," said Fairchild quickly. "For the sake of the story, if nothing else."
>
> "Pride, anyway, I guess. She had that." The Semitic man reached for the bottle. Gordon came and refilled his mug. "It must have been pretty hard for her, even if there was only pride to suffer. But women can stand anything--"
>
> "And enjoy it," Fairchild put in. "But go on."
>
> "That's all. They were married in the Cathedral."(269)

Here is a close antecedent to the interaction between Quentin and Shreve in re-creating the history of Thomas Sutpen. Julius, like Quentin, is somehow too near to the material, he takes it too seriously, to go on any way but haltingly, with respect. Fairchild, like Shreve, is cynical and objective, but fascinated. And Faulkner seems to reveal, toying with the narrative in this way, that his own fascination with the past is growing with Fairchild's.

There is still another advance echo of Absalom,

Absalom! Julius has already said that old Maurier was supposed to have made his money in "several rather raw land deals in which he was assisted by a Jew named Julius Kauffman who was acquiring a fortune and an unsavory name during those years. . . ." With the end of the tale, Fairchild confesses:

> "And I missed it, missed it clean," he mused. "And then Gordon-- Say," he looked up suddenly, "how did you happen to learn all this?"
>
> "Julius Kauffman was my grandfather," the Semitic man replied.(270)

For Quentin also, his grandfather, the only friend Sutpen could claim in the county, provided the direct link with the story. The Semitic man here seems to share the sense of half-guilt, half-shame which Quentin feels over his own connection with the most grotesque and brutal aspects of the society from which he springs. And in that half-guilt Julius, like Quentin, shows how the past retains its power to inflict pain.

But aside from these few breaches in its temporal and spatial unity, the book remains static. It is circular, its characters are set very neatly in a ring, on a boat, facing each other like spokes of a wheel; but the wheel cannot get rolling, because there is no hub. It is full of polarities that distinguish the

characters; but no illuminating dialectic between values and modes of existence emerges, because almost every character is pulling in a different direction. Its virtues are incidental to its over-all plan. It does not succeed very well in doing what it apparently set out to do. But in its structure, its arrangement of parts, and in its arrangement of characters and ideas, it gives a premonition of two narrative techniques of which Faulkner later made wide use.

PART TWO

The Centripetal Novels

The Sound and the Fury

As I Lay Dying

Absalom, Absalom!

The Hamlet

Go Down, Moses

Chapter Two

The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying and Absalom, Absalom!

"Remember," Faulkner remarked in one of his seminars at Nagano, Japan, "all Tolstoy said about Anna Karenina was that she was beautiful and could see in the dark like a cat. That's all he ever said to describe her. And every man has a different idea of what's beautiful. And it's best to take the gesture, the shadow of the branch, and let the mind create the tree."[1]

The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying and Absalom, Absalom! are the three works that demonstrate most convincingly Faulkner's adherence to that principle. They are his only important exercises with the mode of literary impressionism--dispensing with an objective narrator and leaving the reader to piece a story together from subjective impressions, achieving the tree by way of the shadow of the branch. Each of them is founded, almost as entirely as Anna Karenina, on a single preeminent character. Yet significantly

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1. Robert A. Jelliffe, ed., Faulkner at Nagano (Tokyo: 1956), p. 72.

(although Faulkner's titles are in some other cases so personal and whimsical as to be insignificant) they are not named, as Tolstoy's novel, after their characters: Caddy, The Death of Addie Bundren, Sutpen: A Saga. The emphasis is elsewhere. It is on relationships in time and emotion, and on the difficulty of knowing the past. As Michael Millgate has suggested, the three books can be considered Faulkner's trilogy on the process of knowing.[1] Much else about them is similar. But it is all, probably, pointing toward this.

Written in 1929, Faulkner's first and still most striking stylistic and structural experiment, The Sound and the Fury was the beginning. Four different, idiosyncratic and equally limited perspectives, as the book was first published, were directed at Caddy Compson, sister, daughter and mother, and described what they saw. Then, in 1945, Faulkner wrote an Appendix, in his own words the view of the "bloodless bibliophile,"[2] and added a fifth vision. A common reading of the book is that, portraying the decaying fortunes of a house of Mississippi aristocrats, it is one of those fables of the fall of the Old South that Faulkner was supposed

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1. Millgate, p. 106.
2. From the Faulkner-Cowley correspondence, in the Yale University library.

to have been writing quite frequently. But the story that unfolds is one, not so much of gradual collapse, as of abrupt deprivation. It is really about losses, about one minute having, and the next minute doing without. "(T)emporary," Quentin thinks, is "the saddest word of all."(221-222) The foremost of the elements that are present once, and then missing, and the magnetic center of the book, is Caddy Compson.

Then came As I Lay Dying, written in less than seven weeks, revised in another month, and published the same year as The Sound and the Fury. Many students have been quick to note how similar it is to the preceding book. Again there is a group of brothers, only one sister, and a female as the moving force in the family. Wouldn't you say, Faulkner was asked in conferences, that Cash is the Jason of the Bundrens, that Darl is the Quentin of As I Lay Dying?[1] Faulkner wouldn't. He was willing to admit Darl only as the Darl of himself, and likewise with Cash. Admittedly, the family situations of the Compsons and the Bundrens are quite similar. But for purposes here, what counts more is the fact that As I Lay Dying is written as a

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 121.

series of fifty-nine first-person soliloquies. As in The Sound and the Fury, no single narrative voice is entirely trustworthy. Irony is once again rampant. The reader is obliged to pick and choose, to listen and believe or squint sceptically, to sort and finally to assemble the story. And as the puzzle is fitted together he finds in its foreground center the image of Addie Bundren, whose voice has been heard only once in the fifty-nine. Of The Sound and the Fury Faulkner said: "That was not a deliberate tour de force at all."[1] Of As I Lay Dying: "That was simple tour de force."[2] Can that suggest something about two so similar novels, written within the same year, about their relation to each other, and about the intentions behind their respective techniques?

And finally, in 1936 after three other novels, came Absalom, Absalom! To readers and critics for whom Faulkner can be taken or left, this is his most obnoxiously over-inflated balloon; for most committed partisans, it is his greatest work. For Faulkner, it apparently never ranked as either his favorite, his most successful, or his most ambitious novel. Whatever

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1. Faulkner at Nagano, p. 104.
2. Faulkner in the University, p. 87.

else, it was certainly his last and most intricate statement on the nature of knowing. The story, this time, is unravelled not through soliloquies or streams of consciousness but, what amounts to very nearly the same, through long narrative conversations that are introduced and set in their contexts by a third person narrator who is not untrustworthy but simply very cautious, very laconic, remaining well off in the wings and venturing onstage for little more than to announce the scene changes. The reader again is shown only the shadow of the branch. He learns what has happened through hearing subjective accounts--and sometimes here at third or fourth hand. He gets his grip on the facts and the meaning of the story by overhearing conversations (which are still, in most cases, more addresses than dialogues) between Rosa and Quentin, Quentin's father and Quentin, Judith Sutpen and Quentin's grandmother and Sutpen and Quentin's grandfather--both as handed down to Mr. Compson and re-created for Quentin--and finally, Quentin and Shreve. But the present-time context is September 1909 and January 1910, the occasion is the late exhumation of the past inspired by Rosa and, in that setting, but four characters do the narrating: Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve. Of them, none is really a principal to the main events, only two were

alive during any of the action and only one would have had any direct contact with any of the principals. From these four removed, idiosyncratic perspectives the story is delivered and, even as it is only beginning to slog into motion, on page 6, for the reader just as for Quentin one single figure is immediately emerging as the center of it all: the "man-horse-demon"--Sutpen.

The Sound and the Fury, alone among the three (and a bit in the way of Mosquitoes) is in a sense a static book. The reader can understand why Jean-Paul Sartre has complained of it: "Nothing happens, the story does not progress."[1] There is in fact a story, and it does progress, but Faulkner has done his best to tell it not in terms of the development of a plot line but as the examination of a point. It is an inquest, from five perspectives, into a character and a relationship: Caddy, as a member of the Compson family. The five sections, though they include wide ranges of years, are labelled so as to affirm their singleness as points in time: April 7, 1928, June 2, 1910, etc. Even the last section, the Appendix, takes several centuries of history

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1. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Time in Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury," from Three Decades of Criticism, p. 226.

and expresses them as a point: Compson: 1699-1945. Faulkner occasionally spoke, in reference to his run-on syntax, of the impulse to put the whole story in one sentence, between a single capital and the next full stop, to write the history of the South on the head of a pin.[1] In The Sound and the Fury he probably came his closest. Just what that foundation point was, from which the rest of the novel grew, he has explained: "It began with the picture of the little girl's muddy drawers, climbing that tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that didn't have the courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw. . . .It was an image, a picture to me, a very moving one, which was symbolized by the muddy bottom of her drawers as her brothers looked up into the apple tree that she had climbed to look in the window. And the symbolism of the muddy drawers became the lost Caddy. . . .--and it took the rest of the four hundred pages to explain why she was brave enough to climb the tree to look in the window."[2]

Each section is focused on that; each narrator explains, with his own selfish orientation, what Caddy

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1. E.g. at the Nagano seminars, from Lion in the Garden, p. 141.

2. Faulkner in the University, pp. 1, 31.

has meant for him in particular and for the Compsons in general. Each narrator is partially blinded in a characteristic way, so that a full view of the events is never available from any one of the five sources but bits of insight are always filtering through. Each is an idiot, a blocked and simplified consciousness. Since The Sound and the Fury has been by far, in the last thirty years, Faulkner's most over-analyzed work, there is little need to dwell on the characters, or the workings of mind, of the three brothers. We know well the way Benjy's innocent projector-like consciousness clicks from one lantern slide to another, unable to articulate emotion except by invoking the smell of trees; the way Quentin stumbles through his suicide day, in the shadow of absolutely everything and harassed by clocks, if not time; and the way Jason's version unfolds through the leaping association of dollar signs. But more can be said about the narration done in the final two sections, and about the relation those sections bear to the rest of the book.

It is time, I think, to stop saying that The Sound and the Fury consists of four sections, three of which are subjective recitations by Caddy's brothers and the fourth of which, "belonging" to Dilsey and narrated by Faulkner, represents the definitive, or "true" vision.

Benjy, Quentin, Jason, the Novelist and the Historical Appendicist--these are the narrators who, every one with a set of personal obsessions, present the accounts. Section Five, the Appendix, having been intended at first as a short summary of the story, for inclusion with Jason's section in The Portable Faulkner in 1945, became as far as the author was concerned a part of the novel. He saw that it was included in all subsequent editions, beginning with the Modern Library in 1946. "I wrote the Benjy part first," he said at Virginia. "That wasn't good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn't good enough. I let Jason try it. That still wasn't enough. I let Faulkner try it and that still wasn't enough, and so about twenty years afterward I wrote an appendix still trying to make that book what--match the dream."[1]

But to understand how the different sections relate to each other, and to the central significance of the book, it is helpful first to look at how the material of the story, the sum of scenes and bits of information, is divided among them. He wrote the same story five times, Faulkner said, successively trying and failing to get it all expressed. But that was not to say that

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 84.

there was much repetition or overlap among the five. In fact, only one scene in the whole novel is played twice. That--as significantly as could be--is the row Benjy makes, bellowing knowledgeably but for no external reason, the night Caddy returns to the home having lost her virginity to Dalton Ames. The incident is recounted by Benjy on pages 84-85 and by Quentin on page 185. In each case it is marked, as Benjy wails and pulls at her dress, by Caddy's unmistakeable gesture of leaning back against the door and putting her arm across her face.

The time span of narrative action in the book stretches from 1898 to 1943--from Caddy's first appearance, to her last. Of that time, the first two sections dwell almost exclusively on the events between 1898, the year of Damuddy's death and Caddy's climbing of the tree, and the early summer of 1910, after Caddy's wedding (necessarily so for Quentin, who then died). Jason and the third person narrator of Section Four confine themselves as strictly to what has happened since just after Caddy's marriage, April, 1910, until the present, eighteen years later. Benjy covers 1898 to 1910 evenly; Quentin stays almost completely within the boundaries of late summer, 1909, when Caddy lost her virginity, to the present, some ten months later

(except for the one scene from childhood in which he plays erotically with a girl named Natalie, apparently to make Caddy jealous); Jason sweeps from the time of Mr. Compson's fetching the baby girl Quentin to that baby's robbery of Jason, in terms of a few financial responsibilities and profitable transactions; and the fourth narrator's view is absolutely limited to just what it promises: April 8, 1928. The Appendicist follows Caddy from her first marriage(1910), through her second in Hollywood(1920), the divorce in Mexico(1925), to her disappearance in Paris(1940) and her final association with the Nazi staffgeneral(1943). This distribution suggests one thing: Faulkner's familiar descriptions of his five-times repeated attempts, failing each time, to tell the story of the little girl with the muddy drawers, was probably the literal truth, rather than more of the coy fabrication he so often used in interviews. It seems reasonable to believe him, then, that the novel was written in the absence of any over-all plan. While the center of focus never changes, the critical moment in the chain of events--whether that be construed to be Caddy's tree-climbing at her grandmother's wake, her loss of virginity or her first marriage--is not gradually worked up to (or back to, as in Absalom, Absalom!) through the length of the book, but has been dispensed with by

the end of the first section. And Faulkner apparently found the need to go on to new material, new inventions, new events, with which to paint the full picture. This lack of a plan, of course, makes the over-all impact and strange coherence of The Sound and the Fury a bit more amazing.

The novel begins on a birthday, Benjy's 33d, but the chronologically earliest incident, introduced on page 19, is, appropriately, a death. The novel, after all, is about losses. This first is Damuddy's death, occuring the night that Caddy dirties her drawers playing in the branch. It is followed, very quickly, according to Benjy's associational scheme, by the deaths of Quentin and Mr. Compson. Benjy's section sets a mood for the rest of the novel, in being itself the most densely permeated with the smell of death. In fact, around page 26 the message that Damuddy is dead begins to sink in and from there for a space of some twenty pages the novel gropes almost indecipherably around in the thick of the odor of death and the sound of moaning: the children at Versh's house during Damuddy's wake; Benjy with TP after Quentin's death; Roskus counting off the misfortunes a luckless family brings on itself; Benjy and TP watching Mr. Compson's hearse drive away; Dilsey moaning the dead.

Benjy's section shows that he both suffers a greater number of losses than the other characters, and suffers them harder. First he experiences Damuddy's death, which produces only a vague and melancholy foreboding. Then Caddy is married, which according to Roskus's tabulation--"They been two, now(Caddy and Quentin). . . . Going to be one more(Mr. Compson). I seen the sign. . ."(34) --and as far as Benjy is concerned, amounts to a death. Next he experiences the deaths of his brother and father within the space of a few months. Finally he is castrated, so that at age thirty-three when he undresses and looks at himself, he knows enough of a sense of loss to begin crying.(90) And, to reinforce the motif, he has spent most of the day, April 7, helping Luster search in vain for a lost quarter off the edge of his own lost pasture.

The reason the idiot brother has his say first of all the narrators, Irving Howe has argued in one of the sillier statements ever made about Faulkner, is that he has survived a process of elimination: Mrs. Compson is too superficial, Jason is too warped, Quentin is dead, Caddy is gone and Dilsey "must be saved for her role as chorus of lament."[1] But Faulkner would not have posited

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1. Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study, (New York: 1952), p. 158.

one of the characters a perpetual three-year-old at all if he had not had better reasons than that for telling the story through those eyes. Benjy's mental development has been frozen at the three-year-old level, just the point he had reached on the night of Damuddy's death, 1898. For the subsequent thirty years his mind and his perspective have remained absolutely static. From that standpoint, his is the overwhelmingly logical view from which to begin this static examination of the ramifications of muddy drawers. Benjy can drag up scenes from 1898 or 1900, and bring them into perfect side-by-side, comparative focus with scenes from ten years later or from the present, precisely because his way of seeing things has not changed in all those years.

For this reason the theme of losses is the heaviest, while still underplayed in a very business-like way, in Benjy's section. Not only has Benjy suffered the most losses of any member of the family, he has suffered them the longest, the most indelibly. Since he is incapable of growing, he is incapable of replacing what he has lost, or even of developing an emotional scar where the emotional flesh has been pared out. Losses remain open wounds to Benjy, through any number of years. What the Appendicist tells us in Section Five about the Benjamin who loved three things (his pasture, his sister Candace,

firelight) is simply not true: "Who lost none of them because he could not remember his sister but only the loss of her, and firelight was the same bright shape as going to sleep, and the pasture was even better sold than before because now he and TP could. . .follow timeless along the fence the motions which it did not even matter to him were humanbeings swinging golfsticks. . . . Committed to the State Asylum, Jackson, 1933. Lost nothing then either because, as with his sister, he remembered not the pasture but only its loss, and firelight was still the same bright shape of sleep."(423-424) This must be taken as irony, intended to tell the reader no more of validity about Benjamin than it does about the placid and rhetorical type of consciousness that reduces human lives to historical index cards. Any reader who has witnessed, in the first section, Benjy's sad bellowing along the golf course fence and shared his vivid recollection of Caddy present, and then leaving him, must necessarily, it seems to me, refuse to credit such statements in the Appendix with much sincere endorsement by Faulkner.

Of Quentin and Jason, Quentin has both the more unconventional mental terrain, by far the more poetic, haphazard and obscure associational patterns to lead him through his recollection of Caddy, and the less

straightforward loss to regret. For Jason, loss and the significance to him of Caddy are simple and synonymous: whatever he has never had, she has been responsible for depriving him of. As a child it was love, and a sense of belonging to the family circle, which Caddy stole from him, being the darling of her father and two brothers and leaving the despicable Mrs. Compson to corral him off. Then it was his job in the bank, which she lost him by getting turned out by Herbert. And finally, through her daughter, it was the seven thousand dollars, which he had embezzled from Caddy and young Quentin, as just compensation, in his view, for his previous losses.

Quentin, although he is alone among the Compsons in refusing to live with his deprivation, has had to endure, in a sense, the most minimal loss of all. But that only adds to the unbearable frustration for him. He has lost nothing, by losing what he never had. Born Caddy's brother, he was robbed of the hope of being her lover. He could do nothing about it, not even wallow in sweetly painful memories of the lost past, not even curse the persons who had cheated him. He kills himself, it seems, not to escape the particular sadness of Caddy's having been married two months before, but to deal with his frustration and sense of impotence, to achieve some last semblance of effectuality. Although he feels

trapped by time, the "minute clicking of little wheels," and is constantly, theatrically, demonstrating it, Quentin is actually out of time, in that it was too late for him already at his birth. His suicide, if it does anything, brings his life finally into time, by giving it all an end point.

The fourth section, the novel's conclusion in the first-published version, does a number of things; but one thing it certainly does not do is present to the reader the final and resolved significance of the story. Faulkner spoke of the April 8 segment generally either as the narration by "Faulkner", referring to himself in the third person, or as "another section from the outside with an outsider, which was the writer, to tell what had happened on that particular day."[1] He seems not to have considered it either the definitive insight on the Compsons nor synonymous with Dilsey's vision of the story. The section does focus closely on Dilsey, the moral touchstone if not the moral center of the novel, through three quarters of its length. But the narrative burden of all eighty pages amounts to just four separate sequences, and in only two does the reader remain safely attached to Dilsey's apron strings: as Dilsey

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1. Faulkner at Nagano, p. 104.

prepares breakfast, the discovery of Quentin's disappearance and theft is made; Dilsey experiences her catharsis at the Easter service; Jason pursues Quentin and the show-man, returning unsuccessful; and Benjy and Luster drive out toward the cemetery. In the end, as the shapes begin to flow smoothly once again, far from being on the solid ground of Dilsey's perspective, the reader is back again in Benjy's helpless vertigo.

The Novelist has betrayed his own idiosyncratic sense of proportion as surely as Jason with his "Once a bitch always a bitch" opening, in the first lines of the fourth section:

> The day dawned bleak and chill, a moving wall of grey light out of the northeast which, instead of dissolving into moisture, seemed to disintegrate into minute and venomous particles, like dust that, when Dilsey opened the door of the cabin and emerged, needled laterally into her flesh, precipitating not so much a moisture as a substance partaking of the quality of thin, not quite congealed oil.(330)

The impatience that the reader naturally feels in coming from three intense, immediate, personal recitations to such gratuitous obfuscation is Faulkner's warning that, epistemologically, the reader is not yet clear of the woods. Cleanth Brooks has written, in line with a good number of critics: "There is, therefore, as we move toward

the end of the book, the sense of coming out into an objective world, a world in which objects take on firmness of outline and density and weight, in which objective truth, and not mere obsessional impressions, exists."[1] It is certainly a concrete world, of outline and density; that is one of the chief obsessions in the Novelist's own set of obsessional impressions:

> She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage and fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts. . .(331)

> The earth immediately about the door was bare. It had a patina, as though from the soles of bare feet in generations, like old silver or the walls of Mexican houses which have been plastered by hand.(331)

But to assume that those extravagantly over-written descriptions, or the pages filled with concrete accounts of Dilsey opening umbrellas, gathering wood and baking bread, are Faulkner's own conception of the Real Whole Truth is, I think, to miss the Real Whole Point. Faulkner wrote extravagant and sloppy prose at many times, both

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1. Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, (New Haven: 1963), p. 326.

before this and later; but in The Sound and the Fury, as in Absalom, Absalom!, he seems to know exactly, self-consciously, what he is doing. When he writes: "The air brightened, the running shadow patches were not the obverse, and it seemed to him that the fact that the day was clearing was another cunning stroke on the part of the foe, the fresh battle toward which he was carrying ancient wounds. . . .He could see the opposed forces of his destiny and his will drawing swiftly together now, toward a junction that would be irrevocable; he became cunning,"(382, 384) Faulkner is certainly not himself thinking of Jason so much as positing the way in which the Novelist, with only his typewriter, his thesaurus and his limited knowledge of human nature, would think of Jason. When, with Benjy's eyes serene and blue just after another fit of terror, Luster's head aching from a blow and Jason again the man in control, the facades of the town square flow once more from left to right, "post and tree, window and doorway, and signboard, each in its ordered place," the pathetic irony is apparent.

The Appendicist is dour and portentous by character. His pronouncements on the members of the Compson family are shaded as strongly by a personal sense of romantic doom and a melodramatically neat conception of history

as Jason's view was by greed and bitterness. He adds much information to the total picture of the Compsons, but not a shred of that information pertains to Caddy's role in the family between 1898 and 1928. The assessment he makes of Benjamin, who according to him lost nothing ever, has suggested how misleading the Appendicist can be. The other modern Compson principals are treated in the Appendix the same way, painted with a few broad strokes of intellectually pungent, paradoxical rhetoric, fitted into a view of history so stylized that romanticism and cynicism coincide, and then dismissed. What has been said about them resounds as very pat and very final; but it brings the reader no closer to the living truth of the family story, and probably does the opposite:

> Quentin III. Who loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor. . . .But who loved death above all, who loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation. . .(411)
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> Candace (Caddy). Doomed and knew it, accepted the doom without seeking or fleeing it.(412)
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> . . .
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> Quentin. . . .Candace's daughter. Fatherless nine months before her birth, nameless at birth and already doomed to be unwed from the instant the dividing egg determined its sex.(424)
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> . . .
>
> Jason IV. The first sane Compson since before

> Culloden and(a childless bachelor) hence the last. Logical rational contained and even a philosopher in the old stoic tradition. . .(420)

Through the Appendicist, Faulkner seems at this point to be playing, tongue in cheek, with his story, deliberately overstating the tragic and pathetic elements that have already been so forcefully understated. He is saying to the reader: "If you have read all the rest, you will know better than this by now." As the Appendicist moves from the Compsons to the characters who were black, the ironical misrepresentations have not disappeared entirely:

> Luster. . . .Who was not only capable of the complete care and security of an idiot twice his age and three times his size, but could keep him entertained.(426-427)

But with the successive eulogies to TP, Frony and Luster, the use of language is tightened, comments grow shorter, and a single final point is being reached. That is both the vanishing-point of the book, and the instance where the tale-telling comes closest to truth, by being free of misrepresentation. Words, statements, assertions have been the tools with which five narrators have successively failed to capture the meaning of the past. Dilsey's epitaph is delivered, appropriately, in the absence of those faulty means, because she has

earned for herself a final evaluation that is entirely free of falsehood:

Dilsey.

The theme that unfolds from this fragmented structure of the novel seems at first to be quite independent of the themes embodied in the Compson story, as Olga Vickery has suggested: "It would appear, then, that the theme of The Sound and the Fury, as revealed by the structure, is the relation between the act and man's apprehension of the act, between the event and the interpretation."[1] This would be true, an almost total disjunction would separate content and method, if the main concern of the story were simply the fall of the Compsons, or even the character of Caddy, a rebellious woman. But on the idea of loss, deprivation, necessary finitude, the story and its structure converge. An understanding of the past, of the full significance of the family situation, has eluded each of the five narrators, in the same way that Caddy has eluded her family and escaped from the home, leaving the painful vacuum where she had been and a dark spot on the wall

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1. Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation (Baton Rouge:1959), p. 29.

in place of the mirror that helped pay for her wedding. Caddy, in departing from the others and causing the deprivations that they suffer, represents the knowledge, the understanding that each of the narrators is finally unable to attain. The strivings to recapture both, Caddy and understanding, take place concurrently in The Sound and the Fury, and both strivings are unsuccessful. This is not to reduce the book to a conscious allegorical scheme. Nothing could do The Sound and the Fury less justice than to propose that Faulkner had set out to depict the elusiveness of an abstract quality called "Truth" by embodying it in a character called Caddy Compson. The novel was probably just what Faulkner claimed, not a tour de force but a process of discovery, in which he set out to present the story of Caddy and experienced, through his characters, the difficulty of knowing.

If Faulkner ever indulged himself in a perversely comic negation, he did it in As I Lay Dying. In tone and mood, that book is the most complex, the most schizoid, the most precariously balanced of all his works. While The Sound and the Fury begins in idiocy and moves gradually toward comprehensibility, even to

meaningfulness, As I Lay Dying begins in apparent sanity, moves toward the absurd, and then unexpectedly deposits the reader, along with his chief informant, Darl, at insanity. Even the idiocy of Benjy is a stable, dependable universe in comparison to even the more mundane perspectives within the Bundren family, all of which seem to be balancing not too many places removed from a high hysterical giggle. An ostensible purpose lies behind all the unusual proceedings: to transport the body of Addie Bundren to Jefferson, for burial according to her wishes. And an ostensible logic lies behind that purpose: the force of Addie's personality, as a living wife and mother, has so claimed the dedication of her children and husband that they are willing to undergo days of trial by flood, fire, exhaustion, censure, stench and cement to fulfill her will. But the solidity of that logic is undermined continually through the story, even as the logic is apparently obeyed, and in the end, with the presentation of the new Mrs. Bundren, it cracks right in half.

What is left? A parody, I would say, of The Sound and the Fury.

The structural schema and the relationships among the main characters are, as mentioned already, very similar to The Sound and the Fury. Addie Bundren is

the center of the family and the center of the book, but she is set off at a point remote from the reader and depicted (aside from her one eight-page chapter of monologue) only indirectly. The idea seems at first glance to be to portray the character of Addie and the role she played in the family through the minds of the people around her. The chief difference from The Sound and the Fury is that in As I Lay Dying the linear sequence of time is maintained; the narrative unravels from the start of the book to the end generally according to conventional chronology. There is little or no duplication of anecdote or overlapping treatment of a stretch of time by different narrators. Faulkner has each successive narrator simply pick up the thread of the action where the last has left it. Since this arrangement leaves little opportunity for the reader to cross-reference between the accounts, it is appropriate then that each section be short, and the narrators frequently switched and alternated with one another. In this way the delicate balance is preserved, the narrative is kept from being drawn too far off the track, and the reader retains a sense of the story's real continual movement despite the manias of the individual speakers. And so a total of fifty-nine first person narrations are delivered: nineteen by Darl, ten by

Vardaman, five by Cash, four by Dewey Dell, one by Jewel, three by Anse, sixteen by neighbors and strangers who are met in the journey, and one by the long-dead Addie.

But a closer look shows that, although Addie has done her best to gather the family about her in loyal attendance and make herself the star of her own death, she has not succeeded except superficially. Anse, her sons and her daughter stand as a group of satellites, first to her death bed, then to her coffin as they carry it to Jefferson. But as their interior monologues reveal, their attentions all have more than a slight tendency to wander. To the observers from outside the commitment to Addie displayed by the family's willingness to bear the coffin nine days overland, in flood time, goes well beyond duty, beyond even scrupulous loyalty, to derangement. But seen through each of the pairs of Bundren eyes, the whole undertaking is something far less abstract and edifying. The narrators of <u>The Sound and the Fury</u> were each incapable of giving an account of their own actions, during their respective assigned days--April 6, June 2, etc.--without pursuing the ghost of Caddy and explaining the causal connection she had with their present condition. The Bundren narrators are more likely to forget about Addie entirely, as they sit on her coffin in the wagon, to dwell on their own

immediate concerns. Anse has in mind the new set of teeth that await him in Jefferson. Dewey Dell is desperate to make the trip, only so she can get her abortion. Vardaman, who at first is quite shaken by the death of his mother, later has forgotten her in favor of the red toy train on the track, which Jefferson represents to him. For Cash, it all remains simply an exercise in carpentry, until at the end, when he develops into a hero of sensibility, it becomes a question of responsibility to the living. Darl, though he is sometimes spoken of as the most introspective of the Bundrens, is actually the most outward-looking: he is obsessed with the obsessions of his siblings, and hardly ever mentions Addie.

This is all not to suggest that Addie Bundren was not, and did not continue to be after her death, the prime force in the family. She was, and she did. Jewel is one character who seems to have been sincerely, passionately attached to her. And Darl, though he avoids the subject of Addie, is playing out the effects in his life of her denial of love to him, her revulsion when Anse got him on her, which he has apparently sensed. That denial accounts for his bitter envy of Jewel:

"But you <u>are</u>, Darl," (Vardaman) said.

> "I know it," Darl said. "That's why I am not is. Are is too many for one woman to foal."(95)

Throughout the preparation of the coffin, and the ordeals that come between it and Jefferson, the delicate balance continues, a balance between the power of Addie, reaching out from the far side of her death, and the immediate importance to each of the survivors of his own selfish needs. But at the conclusion of the novel, with Addie in the ground, that balance is very abruptly and decisively toppled. As Anse appears with the duck-shaped woman, his bland statement has to be read, I would say, as Faulkner's grimly comic indication that the whole Addie-centered enterprise has been in fact only a mockery of itself: "'It's Cash and Jewel and Vardaman and Dewey Dell,' pa says, kind of hangdog and proud too, with his teeth and all, even if he wouldn't look at us. 'Meet Mrs. Bundren,' he says."(250) It is also an assertion, uncharacteristic of Faulkner, that the power of the past is buried with the corpse of the mourned.

Faulkner has described how The Sound and the Fury was one of his most difficult books to write[1] and has called As I Lay Dying, in his words a tour de force, the easiest.[2] As I Lay Dying, while it uses irony between

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 61.

2. Ibid., p. 87.

the various accounts to restate the idea that each man's view of an experience is different and that any full understanding can only be culled, if at all, from the numerous conflicting perspectives, goes less far than The Sound and the Fury in examining the process of knowing. The past is focused on very little, the present is a pulsing reality and time is a conventionally linear absolute for all of the characters (except Addie, who ignores it and speaks after her death). Mood, in As I Lay Dying, is a much more important issue than epistemology. It seems in fact that, writing As I Lay Dying just on the heels of the effort with The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner was not as interested in developing further the epistemological themes and techniques of the previous work, as he was in exhibiting his mastery of them.

More than either The Sound and the Fury or As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom! is a book full of shadows and mirrors, while it is almost entirely lacking in windows.

Unlike the other two novels, it contains a single third person narrative voice, who is so restrained in his judgements (if not in his rhetoric) as to be solidly trustworthy. That narrator tells a story. That story is simple, torpid, and superficially lacking in drama

enough to be appropriate to his faceless monotone. It takes place in September 1909 and January 1910. A young man, the son of an established family in an old Southern town, is summoned to hear an eccentric spinster reminisce on the past that has haunted her for years. The young man's father briefs him on what local knowledge is of the spinster. Later, the young man is impressed into service escorting the spinster to a plantation-house shell, miles outside town, where she once lived. There, in turn, both she and the young man enter a closed room. Four months later the young man, sitting in a college chamber in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recounts what he knows of the spinster, and her past, to his roommate, a Canadian. The roommate finds it a clinically fascinating bit of Americana. By that time the spinster, in Mississippi, has fallen into a coma and died. Both young men go to bed.

Only at one or two or three removes from that plot framework--removes of memory, hearsay, oral tradition, documentation, extrapolation and outright invention--does the figure of Thomas Sutpen begin to emerge. Sutpen stands a great distance from that late-1909 setting. He was a secretive and solitary man, of the immediate family of none of those characters, and was

buried forty years earlier. But all roads lead to him. He is the fullest embodiment, in Faulkner, of the unseen center, the obscure and inaccessible fact of history that exerts a centripetal force on the individuals around him far beyond their capacity to understand what is affecting them.

At the core, not only of the Sutpen family history and the Sutpen legend, but apparently at the core of the man Sutpen himself, is the hill-country boy, barefoot and innocent, with his message to deliver at the door of the Tidewater mansion, being told by the "monkey nigger" to go around to the back. This is a tableau of impacted significance, after the fashion of Caddy glimpsed in the tree and, less convincingly and smoothly integrated, a few of the traumatic scenes from Joe Christmas's childhood. It came down to Absalom, Absalom!, Michael Millgate has shown, from an unpublished short story called "The Big Shot," written in 1930, which is preserved in typescript at the University of Virginia.[1] It comes down to Quentin, almost unique among all the material about the man, from Sutpen himself. Sutpen has related the anecdote to General Compson, Quentin's grandfather, on a night in the mid-1830s,

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1. Millgate, p. 159.

as they both walked the trail of an escaping French architect. It is excruciatingly apt, to use Faulkner's phrase, that this first and most far-reaching of all the personal facts about Sutpen has been known by the absolute minimum number of people necessary for it to have come down at all: General Compson, Mr. Compson, Quentin, Shreve and the reader. General Compson and Mr. Compson each may have described it to their wives, but that is unlikely, General Compson being a gentleman and discreet and Mr. Compson's wife not being interested, as we know from The Sound and the Fury. So they probably both just passed it on to their sons. Even Ellen Sutpen, even Judith and Henry, Sutpen being the man that he was, probably knew nothing at all about the little boy, turned away from the door, conceiving his design.

Around the man Sutpen collect a number of circles of individuals who are faced with the problem of trying to penetrate his natural mysteriousness, trying to understand him in order to formulate their reaction. None succeed more than imperfectly. The town of Jefferson makes an attempt, on Sutpen's arrival in 1833. From his first appearance until his marriage five years later the response by most of the townfolk to his presence, as described by Mr. Compson in chapter two, is one of

fanatical curiosity, which turns to hostile suspicion and finally to violence when he fails to open up on the secrets of his doings and purposes.

The second ring is formed by his family, or more accurately, his families. For both Eulalia Bon and her son and Ellen Sutpen and her children, the center of existence is this stormy man who has the power and the will to alter their lives drastically and at the same time is never to be entirely understood. When, in 1831, Sutpen set his first wife and son aside, deserted them to start completely fresh in Mississippi, the only reason given, as he himself tells General Compson in 1862, was that the new fact he had learned after the birth of the son "rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design. . . ."(217) Charles Bon, that son, grew up with a relation to his father that was either one of total ignorance, so that Bon didn't even recognize him when he walked into that father's house, or, more likely, one of abstract hatred, conditioned by his mother, for a man who continued to reject him for a reason he probably misunderstood. Ellen Coldfield never came closer to him than the distance of mutual convenience and Henry, his second- and most-preciously-begotten, was the blind tool by

which Sutpen tried to achieve the design, telling him only enough at any one time to have him play out Sutpen's own calculated moves. Judith, the only person who was spiritually close to Sutpen, was never informed of the reason why, suddenly over the Christmas of 1860, he had forbidden her marriage to Charles Bon. To the end, for all of those nearest to him except Henry, who outlived the mystery if not its impact on him, Sutpen remained an unsolved cipher.

Rosa, who knew him least well of any of those immediately exposed to him, and who understood him less still, carries that cipher into the present. She is responsible for assembling that modern seance that gathers in 1909-1910 and attempts to make contact with the past: herself, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve. Those four are the final ring that has the common center of Sutpen, or his legend, and the common difficulty in understanding him.

Yet the line of impact from Sutpen into the present does not end there. It reaches beyond Quentin as narrator, beyond Shreve as fabricator, one place more: to Quentin as Absalom, as the necessary and logical heir to the story of Thomas Sutpen. But the question of

the relationship between Sutpen and Quentin, why the Sutpen saga proved for Quentin to be such a difficult yet unavoidable epistemological riddle, deserves to be treated in a fresh chapter.

Chapter Three

Absalom, Absalom!

Three fictional enterprises function concurrently throughout Absalom, Absalom!, thematically distinct yet narratively interlocked: 1) the story of Thomas Sutpen; 2) the story of the effort, in 1909-1910, to assemble and sort the material and extract from the legend of Thomas Sutpen a piece of history; and 3) the second act in the tragedy of Quentin Compson, of which the first and third have been played in The Sound and the Fury. The reader himself is challenged to operate on three levels, applying simultaneously three different sets of questions to the mysteries of the book's folds and shadows and textures: 1) What happened? 2) How do we know what happened--or do we? 3) Why? Why did it happen? And why do we know? Yet a good part of Absalom, Absalom!'s delicate effectiveness comes from the fact that it is not intellectually obscure on its surface; it is not esoteric; it is self-contained and (apart from the language) easy to penetrate. Those three sets of questions do not combine to confront the reader with a highly inscrutable whole. They wait in turn and steal on him

one by one. And nothing prevents the book from succeeding on the basis of one third, or two thirds, of its assets. It can be read as a tragedy of ambition and fall, a study of the nature of history and the process of knowing, an account of the social oppression of Quentin, or all three.

The first level, that of the internal significance of the story of Sutpen, has been analyzed already in much able criticism. Sutpen is a man of uniquely American innocence; he has a design; it has been conceived in reaction to a boyhood experience in which he was turned away from a door; he feels that courage and cunning and carefulness alone should allow him to achieve that design; when the design goes awry he feels it is because he has made a mistake; and when he tries to correct the mistake, in his innocence recognizing no force in the world above the potential of his own will, he defeats himself. That is his tragedy. The idea, Faulkner said, was "of a man who wanted sons and got sons who destroyed him. The other characters I had to get out of the attic to tell the story of Sutpen."[1] For the purpose of considering the structure of the novel, the main interest here will be in what Faulkner

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 73.

found in the attic.

The Sutpen story is delivered in a form, as mentioned already, very similar to the first-published version of The Sound and the Fury: through four removed, idiosyncratic perspectives. One of the chief ideas pressed forward by that schema is simply a repetition of what has been shown by The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying, that every person tends to create for himself the "truth" of an event, and that all such "truths" are subjective and conflicting. Olga Vickery has accurately characterized the general natures of the various biases by describing Rosa's account as a Gothic thriller, Mr. Compson's as "classical drama which is forever verging on satire" and Quentin and Shreve's as chivalric romance.[1] The reasons behind each of these views being distorted in its particular way are: a) the natural disposition of the given narrator, b) the circumstances in which he or she has grown and lived, and c) the specific circumstances of each of the narrators' connections with Sutpen. Those three factors in each case must be added to the mixture, along with the different versions of "truth," from which the reader hopes to extract a more valid final

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1. Vickery, p. 87.

estimation of Sutpen.

But a key difference from The Sound and the Fury suggests the way in which Faulkner's ideas on the process of knowing the past have developed. While The Sound and the Fury contains no repetition of scenes (except for the one describing Benjy's hysterics on the night of Caddy's loss of virginity), Absalom, Absalom! is full of repetition. That repetition is the very principle that makes the design of the novel work, as Michael Millgate has recognized, in one of the more astute comments that has been written on Absalom, Absalom!: "One way of looking at the book's structure is to think of it as organized about a number of crucial moments of recognition, truth, disillusion: Henry and his father in the library, Henry shooting Bon, Sutpen proposing to Rosa, Wash Jones murdering Sutpen--each moment presented in a kind of tableau arrested at a particular point of time and held in suspension while it is looked at, approached from all sides, inspected as if it were itself an artifact, like that Grecian urn which Faulkner so often invoked elsewhere. The main business of the book then becomes the interpretation of these moments, the attempt to explain and make sense of them."[1]

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1. Millgate, p. 164.

The tableau in which Rosa finds her niece Judith, standing outside the door of the bedroom within which lies the corpse of Charles Bon and holding the small metal locket presumably containing a photograph, is one of those moments, as described by Millgate. The contents of that locket are alluded to twice, first by Mr. Compson(78), who claims it held the picture of Bon's octoroon mistress and small child and, on being discovered by Judith, caused her to burn all of the hypothetical letters that Mr. Compson assumes Bon had written her during the war, saving the one she brought in to Quentin's grandmother; and secondly by Rosa(117), who actually saw the locket in Judith's hand, and yet assumed, probably wrongly, that inside was Judith's own photograph, given Bon by herself. This incident is a perfect parallel to the way the novel finally refuses to yield its kernel of inner meaning, no matter how strenuously the search is carried on, no matter how close to that kernel the searchers might get. Rosa was only a few feet from that locket, just as she was only a few yards from the closed door of the room in which lay Bon's body; and yet just as she never saw Bon, even dead, she never knew the secret of that locket.

But does Mr. Compson know it? And does the reader? Does anyone, in fact, other than Judith, Bon and (perhaps)

Faulkner know whose picture was inside that locket? Probably not. There is no reliable evidence. Cleanth Brooks, in the tables he has organized for Absalom, Absalom! to separate fact from conjecture, listing the source of each bit of information and the authority on which it is known, places Mr. Compson's view of the locket--that it contained a miniature of the octoroon mistress and child--in the category of solid truth. Brooks asserts that this is fact, passed along to Mr. Compson by his father, who must have learned it from Judith when she brought Bon's letter to town.[1] But that itself is simply more conjecture, this time by Brooks. Mr. Compson mentions the photograph only once, on page 78. He says nothing about the intimate fact having come down from Quentin's grandparents. The scene is early in chapter four, it is not yet dark enough for Quentin to go and meet Rosa, and Mr. Compson, having produced Bon's letter, has delayed allowing Quentin to read it while he throws forth his own presumptively omniscent vision of the whole Judith-Bon-Henry relationship: "Because Henry loved Bon. . . ."(74) In the context, Mr. Compson's credibility is undermined not only by his own patronizing over-certainty about

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1. Brooks, p. 430.

the motivations of people he never saw, and by the very stylized, sophisticated romanticism of his view (which is similar to that of the Appendix in The Sound and the Fury), but because it is all, particularly the locket, being posited as a foundation to Mr. Compson's lame guess on the reason behind Sutpen's forbidding the marriage--namely, Bon's previous contract with the octoroon. And that guess is definitely wrong. He is making his case for that faulty hypothesis when, speaking of the letter, Mr. Compson says:

> . . .and this one here preserved not because Judith put it away to keep but because she brought it herself and gave it to your grandmother after Bon's death, possibly on the same day when she destroyed the others which he had written her (provided of course it was she herself who destroyed them) which would have been when she found in Bon's coat the picture of the octoroon mistress and the little boy. Because he was her first and last sweetheart.(78)

The significance of the locket is that, dangling unopened from Judith's hand on the afternoon of Bon's death, it is a metaphor for the meaning of the lost marriage, the meaning of Henry's murder of Bon, the meaning of the story of Sutpen himself. It refuses to divulge its secret. Two hypotheses are proposed, each of which makes some but not complete sense, each of which is founded on well-informed deductions but not immediate

knowledge. The reader can never know. He can choose, with Brooks, to believe Mr. Compson was speaking from evidence. But he can just as well choose to distrust Mr. Compson and accept Rosa's version after all. Or he can speculate for himself. Faulkner has designed the book that way. Perhaps it was actually the demon-father, Thomas Sutpen, whose picture Bon carried.

A number of other critical single moments receive this type of overlapping treatment, as the story is told and re-told. In most of the cases the intent is to produce not directly contradictory interpretations, as with the locket, but simply a very adept summing effect, which both contributes suspense and suggests that the events in question have a separate reality, that they actually exist, even during the time they are not being described or alluded to in the text. That impression of separate reality is part of what gives the character of Sutpen his flesh-and-blood, yet monumental, stature. Sutpen's entrance into Jefferson with his wagonload of slaves, his proposition to Rosa and his death are three important events that are presented in this way. They are not simply narrated once and then either re-narrated, with conflicting perspectives, or alluded to. They are presented only as the sum of a succession of very light strokes. They

are built up in their solidity and detail by a process of laying down a number of thin laminations of outline and reference.

The arrival in Jefferson, for instance, exists for the reader as the sum of successive references by Rosa, Mr. Compson (as passed on by the third person narrator) and Shreve:

> "--a man who rode into town out of nowhere with a horse and two pistols and a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from. . . ."(12)

> . . .two months later he returned, again without warning and accompanied this time by the covered wagon with a Negro driving it and on the seat with the Negro a small, alertly resigned man with a grim, harried Latin face. . .and the Negro crew which he was to advise though not direct. . . ."(28)

> "--this Faustus who appeared suddenly one Sunday with two pistols and twenty subsidiary demons and skulldugged a hundred miles of land out of a poor ignorant Indian and built the biggest house on it you ever saw. . . ."(147)

In the same way, the reader's comprehension of the death of Sutpen is constructed gradually from contributions by Rosa, Shreve and Quentin:

> "--to find severance (even if not rest and peace) at last in the stroke of a rusty scythe. I was told, informed of that too, though not by Jones

this time but by someone else kind enough to turn aside and tell me he was dead. 'Dead?' I cried. 'Dead? You?'"(141)

". . .she doubtless foresaw the scythe if for no other reason than that it would be the final outrage and affront like the hammer and nails in her father's business--that scythe, symbolic laurel of a caesar's triumph--that rusty scythe loaned by the demon himself to Jones more than two years ago to cut the weeds away from the shanty doorway to smooth the path for rutting--"(146)

"Only she (the black midwife) could not move even yet, and she didn't even know that Wash was outside there; she just heard Sutpen say, 'Stand back, Wash. Don't you touch me,' and then Wash, his voice soft and hardly loud enough to reach her: 'I'm going to tech you, Kernel': and Sutpen again: 'Stand back, Wash!' sharp now, and then she heard the whip on Wash's face but she didn't know if she heard the scythe or not because now she found out that she could move, get up, run out of the cabin and into the weeds, running--"(235-236).

The unsavory details of the proposition Sutpen made to Rosa, as a second thought after having first proposed marriage, is presented by the same process, in four glancing allusions by Rosa(15 and again on 139), Shreve(148) and Quentin(230). Through that delay of a clear explanation, an eddy of suspense is made to gather about the proposition, adding to the mysteriousness of the whole Sutpen story, while at the same time Sutpen's suggestion, even in its own context, is made to seem more unspeakably heinous.

This type of laminated narration--not simply

relating an event but referring to it before it has been fully described, then referring to it again with a little more detail, then again, and then finally, perhaps, dramatizing it as a scene--is probably, through all his work, Faulkner's most characteristic narrative technique. He used it for the first time in The Sound and the Fury, so it has a close and logical connection with the beginning of his examinations of the process of knowing. In that book, such facts as the changing of Benjy's name at the point when his mother discovered he was an idiot, and the existence of two Quentin Compsons, one of whom is the niece of the other, are laid out in a series of light, overlapping strokes, each of which seems simply obscure or paradoxical by itself but which together add up to a comprehensible idea. In other works, such as As I Lay Dying, Light in August and A Fable, it was equally important in enabling Faulkner to elevate certain central events to a position of separate reality and bring the reader toward them with a gradualness that inspires special attention. And many places in his novels it appears as little more than a mannerism. The consistent tendency to narrate in this way suggests that Faulkner's tales and characters were not created by the typewriting of words but were

real to him before he had written about them and continued to have a separate existence as personal legend even once the words had been put down and arranged, just as his fictional world, his Yoknapatawpha County (of which he drew maps and cited population statistics) had for him a separate reality.

But the fact, in Absalom, Absalom! (and in all of Faulkner, for that matter), that remains most tantalizingly and crucially separate from the comprehension of the reader, is Sutpen's forbidding of Judith's marriage to Bon. The scene in which that decision is announced and explained--Henry's interview with his father in the library, at Christmas, 1860--takes place behind closed doors. Bon himself probably does not know what took place, what was said; Judith presumably does not know. Rosa does not know and at the beginning of the novel, when Quentin is first summoned, no one but Henry and Sutpen (and possibly Bon, before his death) has ever known. By the end of the novel the reader assumes that he knows. And that presumptive epiphany is the climax of the story of Sutpen.

The scene in the library, like the tableau with the locket, is of course more than an occasion for the use of laminated narration to build suspense and

establish a sense of historical authenticity. It is even, unlike the photograph in its locket, more than a metaphor for the meaning of Sutpen's story, wrapped in its sheath of obscurity: it <u>is</u> that meaning. To understand Thomas Sutpen's life and career is, most critically, to understand why he forbade the marriage of his daughter and caused his son and heir to murder; and to understand that is to know what occurred in the library that Christmas. That scene is mentioned, described and returned to five times, by Rosa(14), twice by Mr. Compson(65 and 74) and twice by Shreve(241 and 274-275). But in those five approaches its secret is never penetrated; the significance of what Thomas Sutpen was doing that evening as he said whatever he said to Henry, remains yet to be grasped. Probably Henry himself did not halfway understand what had happened, as he burst out the door.

The hypothetical answer to that riddle--Why did Sutpen call Henry in and tell him that the marriage could not take place?--comes only later, in an italicized sequence that seems to take shape autonomously in the cold and silent air of the Cambridge room as Quentin and Shreve sit facing each other, involved and exhausted:

> --Yes. I have decided, Brother or not, I have decided. I will. I will.

--He must not marry her, Henry.

--Yes. I said Yes at first, but I was not decided then. I didn't let him. But now I have had four years to decide in. I will. I am going to.

> --He must not marry her, Henry. His mother's father told me that her mother had been a Spanish woman. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out that his mother was part Negro.(292)

Can the reader believe in the authenticity of that scene, any more, or even as much, as he can believe Mr. Compson's version of the contents of Bon's locket? Perhaps not. In any case, that is a critical question, which must be asked in order to decipher the meanings of the second and third levels of Absalom, Absalom!, the levels that are concerned, not with the story of Sutpen, but with the process of knowing and with the implications of it all upon Quentin. On a first reading of the book, the reader, who is by this point groping along with his attention keenly hungering for an answer to the forbidden-marriage riddle, will almost certainly pounce on this late italicized section as that answer, and allow himself the satisfied conviction that the book has surrendered its secret, that the climax in the search for truth (both by himself and by the 20th century characters) has been successfully passed. But on a second reading, when not being held in suspense

he has more opportunity to notice the way that "answer"--"It was the miscegenation, and not the incest"-- is set among the epistemological vectors of the book, the reader may begin to have doubts: the italicized revelation (which is split into two passages, pp. 286-288 and 290-295) is ultimately unclaimed by any of the book's narrating sources. This scene seems to erupt spontaneously, without being called forth, as if the Sutpen story has developed its own momentum and is claiming the right to tell itself. Faulkner seems to have taken care to fit it into the text, and into the evening in the Harvard room, so as to give that impression. In this novel about the search for an historical truth and the blind alleys that can foil that search, evidence is naturally of the highest importance; and Faulkner has in this case avoided supplying any evidence. He has carefully refrained from citing any sources. The unclaimed italics, all nine pages of them, are unique, and conspicuous, by that standard. The natural assumption, of course, is that the scene is being created or re-created, as the others have been, between Quentin and Shreve in that room, either verbally by Quentin, or through some mutual non-verbal (almost mystical) understanding, as a result of their intense identification

with Henry and Bon. That is an assumption that Faulkner seems to have wanted the reader to make. At the same time, it is an assumption he certainly also wanted the reader to question. The way in which the two bursts of italics are blended into Quentin and Shreve's interaction is so syntactically evasive and so ambiguous as to leave any attribution of source suspiciously impossible:

> First, two of them, then four; now two again. The room was indeed tomblike. . . .Quentin had not even put on his overcoat, which lay on the floor where it had fallen from the arm of the chair where Shreve had put it down. They did not retreat from the cold. . . .--the two the four the two facing one another in the tomblike room: Shreve, the Canadian, the child of blizzards and of cold in a bathrobe with an overcoat above it, the collar turned up about his ears; Quentin, the Southerner, the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat in the thin suitable clothing which he had brought from Mississippi, his overcoat (as thin and vain for what it was as the suit) lying on the floor where he had not even bothered to raise it:
>
> (--the winter of '64 now, the army retreated across Alabama, into Georgia; now Carolina was just at their backs and Bon, the officer, thinking "We will either be caught and annihilated or Old Joe will extricate us and we will make contact with Lee in front of Richmond and then we will at least have the privilege of surrender": and then one day all of a sudden he thought of it, remembered, how that Jefferson regiment of which his father was now colonel was in Longstreet's corps. . .

. . .and an orderly came along the bivouac line and found Henry at last and said, "Sutpen, the colonel wants you in his tent.")

"And so you and the old dame, the Aunt Rosa, went out there that night and the old nigger Clytie tried to stop you. . . .and she looked at you and you saw it was not rage but terror, and not nigger terror because it was not about herself but was about whatever it was that was upstairs, that she had kept hidden up there for almost four years; and she didn't tell you in the actual words because even in the terror she kept the secret; nevertheless she told you, or at least all of a sudden you knew--"

Shreve ceased again. It was just as well, since he had no listener. Perhaps he was aware of it. Then suddenly he had no talker either, though possibly he was not aware of this. Because now neither of them were there. They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither, smelling the very smoke which had blown and faded away forty-six years ago from the bivouac fires burning in a pine grove, the gaunt and ragged men sitting or lying about them, talking not about the war yet all curiously enough (or perhaps not curiously at all) facing the South where further on in the darkness the pickets stood--. . . ."Sutpen? I'm looking for Sutpen" until Henry sits up and says. . . .

--Here, he says--What is it?

--The colonel wants you.

. . .

--He must not marry her, Henry. His mother's father told me that her mother had been a Spanish woman. I believed him; it was not until after he was born that I found out that his mother was part Negro.

. . .

--Who will stop me, Henry?

--No, Henry says.--No. No. No. . . .You are my brother.

--No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry.

. . .

--You will have to stop me, Henry. "And he never slipped away," Shreve said. "He could have, but he never even tried. Jesus. . ."(284-295)

The information contained in this sequence, as far as I can imagine, must have c ome to the Harvard room, and to the reader, by one of three avenues: either 1) Quentin and Shreve, in this moment of silence, through the mystical legitimacy of their identification with Henry and Bon, have together, without a word spoken or a sliver of evidence, mutually envisaged the correct key to the forbidden marriage and the life of Thomas Sutpen; or 2) they have envisaged an interpretation--"the miscegenation, not the incest"--that is just another personal hypothesis, having no more truth-value than Mr, Compson's version about the octoroon; or 3) Quentin received this same inside account from Henry Sutpen the night he entered that room, and is quietly repeating it to Shreve as the italicized passage--in the third person narrator's language--discloses it to the reader.

The first of these three possibilities would totally undermine the case that Faulkner has been making, throughout the rest of the novel and in The Sound and the Fury, for the difficulty of knowing the past. If Quentin and Shreve, simply by being young and sympathetic with Henry and Bon, could send a blind but killing shot straight to the heart of the Sutpen mystery, then that idea of a final, transcendant understanding that is arrived at through wisdom, careful collation and objectivity, would be destroyed.

The second is more conceivable. This alternative is passed over by readers and critics, in their excited discovery of what they assume are the absolute facts behind Sutpen's forbidding the marriage, and their anxiousness to push on and use that information as a basis for analyzing the story of Thomas Sutpen in terms of classical tragedy or socio-historical allegory. If the true story of Thomas Sutpen is not known, then Sutpen cannot be analyzed. And perhaps that is precisely Faulkner's point. This second possibility is the opposite extreme from the first. The idea that the italicized sequence is no more than another speculation would portray the process of knowing about past events not merely as a difficult undertaking but as an impossibility.

And in that case Absalom, Absalom! would be Faulkner's most ironically complete exercise with the principle of the unseen center: the book is about Thomas Sutpen, yet the reader never knows what he did.

But at least one bit of evidence--although not firm evidence by any means--gives support to the unclaimed italics and makes this interpretation less probable than the third. Quentin, in chapter seven, where he narrates part of the story in his own terms rather than in response to Shreve's questioning, describes the conversation that Sutpen and General Compson had in the latter's office, while Sutpen was home from the war in 1862. Sutpen, at that point, had forbidden the marriage and, though neither Henry nor Bon had yet reacted drastically, Sutpen could see where events were heading. His visit was an attempt to use General Compson as a sounding board to explain for himself where he had made the mistake in strategy that he felt he had made, and to discover how he could use his current position to counteract that mistake. General Compson listened politely, but did not understand what Sutpen was talking about. Some account of that discussion was given to Mr. Compson by his father, although Mr. Compson would not have been able to make sense of it either. It would have been simply

an anecdote about Sutpen appearing at the office one day and making some strange, inscrutable references. Eventually an account was passed on to Quentin by his father--probably not until after Quentin had returned from the Sutpen house with his unspecified amount of new information. At that point the vague references supposedly handed on from Sutpen to General Compson to Mr. Compson--

> ". . .they deliberately withheld from me the one fact which I have reason to know they were aware would have caused me to decline the entire matter, otherwise they would not have withheld it from me--a fact which I did not learn until after my son was born. . . .I merely explained how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design. . . .Yet I am now faced with a second necessity to choose. . . : either I destroy my design with my own hand, which will happen if I am forced to play my last trump card, or do nothing, let matters take the course which I know they will take and see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away. . .this second choice devolving out of that first one which in its turn was forced on me as the result of an agreement, an arrangement which I had entered in good faith, concealing nothing, while the other party or parties to it concealed from me the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and design which I had been working toward. . ."(217, 225-226)

--at that point these references fall into a pattern, meshing in complete comprehensibility both with the

facts that Bon was Sutpen's first son, and that he was partly Negro, and with the idea embodied in the unclaimed italics, that Sutpen's reason for denying him as a son-in-law was not the incest involved but the Negro blood, which he felt, as he had before, would utterly negate his dream of a preeminent Southern family line. So there appears to be verification, traceable from Sutpen himself, for the version that makes fear of miscegenation, rather than of incest, the motive behind everything. And that bit of verification would seem to suggest that the italicized scenes of the winter of 1864-65 were not a product of the imaginations of Quentin and Shreve on that evening in 1910. But a question that brings the "verification" too into considerable doubt should be asked: Did those veiled references to <u>new facts</u> and <u>trump cards</u> come down verbatim through three generations of Compsons? Without having been understood at all by the first two generations? What is the likelihood that the sense and internal logic of that strange monologue about a design that would "complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal of that little boy" could have or would have been preserved across forty-eight years by two

intermediaries who had no idea what it was all about?

Yet one other circumstance supports the probable historical validity of that monologue, suggesting that Faulkner does, perhaps unjustifiably, wish the reader to accept the premise of its having been transferred intact (and to accept also, then, the unclaimed italics as the actual key to the story). It is almost certain that Mr. Compson did not describe Sutpen's visit to the office until after Quentin had returned from the trip with Rosa and informed his father, among other things, that Charles Bon had in fact been Sutpen's first son. Mr. Compson seems to have then remembered that 1862 interview and used it as a point of departure for his own revised interpretation of the forbidden marriage(218-222). It was not because of the previous contract with the octoroon that Sutpen forbade and Henry killed, Mr. Compson sees now; it was because of the incest. And the monologue full of its veiled references--or at least part of it--becomes clear for Mr. Compson. Sutpen, Mr. Compson now feels he understands, appeared at the General's office and began a perturbed and unsolicited continuation of the story he had told thirty years earlier--explaining this time that he had set aside that original wife and child (because of

some "fact") and assumed he was free of them--because that child had now sprung up from the past, as Charles Bon, and placed him in an impossible situation. That much Mr. Compson assumes, and he assumes it rightly, on the basis of what Quentin has t old him and what he remembers of the interview in the office. But Mr. Compson does not go far enough; he uses part of the information he now has, while ignoring the rest. On the basis of his knowledge that Bon was Judith's half-brother, Mr. Compson concludes that Sutpen's objection to the marriage was incest(218-222). In doing so, Mr. Compson is failing to read the logic of those very statements by Sutpen that he must just have re-created for Quentin. If the first half of Sutpen's monologue evokes mainly the mistake made in putting aside a wife and child, because of some "fact", which Mr. Compson neglects to wonder about, and the unfortunate result, the second half goes beyond that, in pointing right back to the beginning:

> "Yet I am now faced with a second necessity to choose. . .this second choice devolving out of that first one which in its turn was forced on me as the result of an agreement, an arrangement which I had entered in good faith, concealing nothing, while the other party or parties to it concealed from me the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and

> design which I had been working toward, concealed it so well that it was not until after the child was born that I discovered that this factor existed"(225-226).

The obvious deduction, in conjunction with the unclaimed italics, is that Sutpen is here saying that, just as a part-Negro son was irreconcilable to his design, the same part-Negro individual is equally irreconcilable as a son-in-law. And so, if Mr. Compson can produce for Quentin a detailed account of remarks by Sutpen, and yet fail to draw the right conclusions from those remarks himself (even allow them to undermine his own conclusions), that account must have independent validity.

All of this suggests that the third of the three possible sources for the unclaimed italics is the actual one: Quentin must have received that information from Henry Sutpen, during the moments they shared in the closed upper room of the Sutpen house. That hypothesis perhaps seems to have been the obvious one all along, and the one toward which Faulkner was steering the reader:

> "Your father," Shreve said. "He seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-five years. If he knew all this, what was his reason for

telling you that the trouble between Henry and Bon was the octoroon woman?"

"He didn't know it then. Grandfather didn't tell him all of it either, like Sutpen never told Grandfather quite all of it."

"Then who did tell him?"

"I did." Quentin did not move, did not look up while Shreve watched him. "The day after we--after that night when we--"

"Oh," Shreve said. "After you and the old aunt. I see. Go on. . . ."(219)

But this assumption should be made only after the other alternatives have been eliminated, because it raises as much uncertainty as it dispels. Quentin certainly obtained some new information about the Sutpens when he visited the house with Rosa. But exactly what that information was, and from whom Quentin got it, is left by Faulkner as ambiguous as the source of the unclaimed italics. Quentin refers shyly to "The day after we--after that night when we--" and Shreve mentions only "After you and the old aunt. I see." Nowhere does either say explicitly that Quentin was given the s tory by Henry Sutpen. It is possible to suppose that Quentin learned only the fact of Bon's having been half-brother to Henry and Judith, and that it was Clytie who told him. When Faulkner finally presents the scene of Quentin's meeting with Henry, he does it in such a stylized form

that the reader cannot tell whether this was the extent of their exchange, or simply the representation of a much longer conversation:

> . . .the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived:
>
> And you are-- ?
>
> Henry Sutpen.
>
> And you have been here-- ?
>
> Four years.
>
> And you came home-- ?
>
> To die. Yes.
>
> To die-- ?
>
> Yes. To die.
>
> And you have been here-- ?
>
> Four years.
>
> And you are-- ?
>
> Henry Sutpen.(307)

Quentin probably would not have had much more than ten minutes to talk with Henry, in any case (as Brooks has shown in his chronology to that evening[1]), because he overtakes Rosa before she has had time to hobble all the way back to the buggy. Furthermore, Brooks

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1. Brooks, p. 441.

says, "As for Quentin's conversation with Henry, what would Henry have told--if anything--to a young man whom he had never seen before?"[1] This is most important. The strongest evidence against Henry's having transmitted the whole story to Quentin is the simple face-value unlikelihood. Henry is a fugitive murderer. He is hiding in the house because both he and Clytie apparently believe he is still in danger of being prosecuted and hanged. Quentin is a total stranger to him, fifty years younger. Quentin has just helped Rosa break into the house. Quentin has intruded, uninvited, into Henry's bedroom. Both of them are presumably petrified with dread. What is the probability that, in the space of ten minutes, in addition to the skeletal dialogue already quoted, Henry will say to Quentin: "Here is the actual reason why my father forbade my brother to marry our sister, and here is the reason I killed him"?

It is highly improbable. And yet, in my opinion, the process of elimination and the logic of the novel say that that is what happened. But why? Did Faulkner's powers of contrivance wear so thin at this critical point that he had to hang his whole story on a premise that is not credible? Or does this

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1. Brooks, p. 441.

improbability make sense, as part of the story of Quentin Compson?

The epistemological level of Absalom, Absalom!, as has already been noted, is much more complex than that of The Sound and the Fury. In the earlier book, the issue was "What are the facts?" and that issue was eventually decided conclusively; in Absalom, Absalom! there is the additional issue of "How are these facts known?" The question that runs through the book like a vein of ore, in every direction, is: "Was such-and-such known at the time? By whom? And on what authority?" Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve all speculate on how much information the different principals in the Sutpen story had at any given time, and the reader is forced to wonder with them. The emphasis placed on this additional epistemological uncertainty seems to make the meaning of the story of Thomas Sutpen all the more difficult to grasp. But at the same time it is leading the reader toward a key to understanding the condition of Quentin Compson: "Did Judith know, through the four years of probation, why her marriage had been forbidden?" "Did Bon know that Sutpen was his father? When did he learn? Did he know the real reason for Sutpen's denial?" "How did Sutpen learn the 'fact'

about his 'Spanish' wife's ancestry?" "Did Bon's mother know that Henry Sutpen was at the University of Mississippi, when she sent her son there?" "Did Bon know that Sutpen had visited New Orleans after their meeting?" "Who told Charles Etienne that he was part Negro?" "Did General Compson guess what the 'fact' was, when Sutpen came to his office?" "Did Mr. Compson guess, or even wonder, when told of that conversation?" "How did Mr. Compson suddenly know that Bon was Sutpen's first son?" as Shreve asks on page 219. Quentin told him. "How did Quentin know?" Henry Sutpen told him.

"Why?"

Critics have found a variety of avatars to Absalom, Absalom! in English and American novels of the 19th and 20th centuries. Hepzibah, of The House of the Seven Gables, has been mentioned as a possible source behind the character of Rosa, voluntarily closed off from life within the Gothic obscurity of her house. Wuthering Heights is frequently cited, for the way the story of Catherine and Heathcliff is transmitted in pieces, chiefly through Mrs. Dean, to be assembled by and reside finally with Mr. Lockwood. Michael Millgate minimizes that similarity while finding for himself a close parallel in another Brontë novel.

In Jane Eyre, he sees the forceful, calculating St. John Rivers, with a design to impose on the world, as a predecessor to Sutpen.[1] And both Brooks and Irving Howe, for slightly different reasons, note a connection between Absalom, Absalom! and Heart of Darkness. Brooks associates Sutpen with Kurtz,[2] while Howe focuses on the way both books raise and prolong expectations.[3] But in my opinion, the most suggestive clue, at least to the relation between the story of Sutpen and the life of Quentin Compson, comes not from a novel but from a narrative poem:

> It is an ancient Mariner,
> And he stoppeth one of three.
> "By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
> Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"
>
> . . .
>
> He holds him with his glittering eye--
> The wedding-guest stood still,
> And listens like a three years' child:
> The Mariner hath his will.

Quentin, when he is originally summoned to spend the long September afternoon sitting in Rosa's house, has no more idea than Coleridge's wedding-guest why he should be demanded as an audience. Only one

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1. Millgate, p. 162.
2. Brooks, p. 308.
3. Howe, p. 224.

wedding-guest of three--for no discernible reason--is seized, and subsequently turns away, a "sadder and a wiser man," without ever entering to the feast. Quentin, of all the able-bodied men in Jefferson, is chosen by Rosa to hear her story and escort her out to Sutpen's Hundred, and lives to carry the awful weight of that experience. Various reasons can be suggested for the election of Quentin to that role. Rosa asserts one herself, at the outset:

> "Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard they tell me," Miss Coldfield said. "So I dont imagine you will ever come back here and settle down as a country lawyer in a little town like Jefferson, since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man. 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."(7)

This is a satisfactory explanation neither to the reader nor to Quentin.

> Only she dont mean that, he thought. It's because she wants it told. . . .so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War. . . .Then almost immediately he decided that neither was this the reason why she had sent the note, and sending it, why to him, since if she had merely wanted it told, written, and even printed, she would not have needed to call in anybody--

> a woman who even in his (Quentin's) father's youth had already established herself as the town's and the county's poetess laureate. . . .(7-8)

Admittedly, if she were determined to summon a stranger and burden him with the intimate details of her and her family's connection with Sutpen, in exchange for his help in breaking into the house, Quentin was not an illogical choice. He is young, healthy and the son of a family that is (or was) one of the established lines in Jefferson, and that already has an association with the events, through Quentin's grandfather's friendship with Sutpen. This does not, however, make Rosa's sudden decision to depend upon Quentin in any way natural, as he shows after having escaped from that first confusing interview: "'But why tell me about it?' he said to his father that evening, when he returned home, after she had dismissed him at last with his promise to return for her in the buggy; 'why tell me about it? What is it to me that the land of the earth or whatever it was got tired of him at last and turned and destroyed him?'"(9) Through the first chapter, as Rosa's voice continues to drone out her polemic against "the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration" and the reader's attention begins to be caught by the emerging

figure of Thomas Sutpen, the main thing on Quentin's mind seems to be the question: Why me? But if Rosa's choice of Quentin as a confidant, at the beginning of the novel, is puzzling, Henry Sutpen's confidence in him, at the end, is a fact both far more mysterious and more important.

Quentin's interest in the story of Thomas Sutpen is engaged very slowly. His personal involvement in the reconstruction of the past that is being encouraged by Rosa, his father and Shreve, is developed gradually and only near the end does it become anything like the compulsion it has been for the other narrators all along. Unlike Shreve and his father, Quentin has no objective appreciation for the ironies inherent in the story, such as Sutpen's murder, performed by Wash Jones, the faithful retainer and potential grandfather-in-law, with the rusty scythe that Sutpen himself had loaned Jones two years before; and the existence of Jim Bond, a half-idiot Negro who has lived for 26 years in a run-down cabin, as Sutpen's sole known male descendant. These are the type of details that Mr. Compson and Shreve pick up and savor, but they have no attraction for Quentin. He lacks the capacity to serve as an objective, attentive audience on this particular subject. To him, the Sutpen story seems always to be

either not uncommonly interesting, or (as appears later, when he accepts the opportunity to give his account) too painfully personal even to talk about. A consideration of the attitude of Quentin at each point in the reconstruction, as it can be guessed from hints Faulkner gives, should suggest something about what the whole Sutpen story comes to mean to him.

He seems to spend much of the first chapter, much of that afternoon session with Rosa, wondering more about Rosa herself, about why she is confiding in him and about what inner demons must be driving her, than about what she is actually saying. The flow of her narrative, so eliptical and vehemently biased it is nearly incomprehensible, is continually broken into by Quentin's own reflections on the incongruous situation he finds himself in:

> It seems that this demon--his name was Sutpen --(Colonel Sutpen)--Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation. . . .and died. Without regret, Miss Coldfield says--(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson. (6-7)
>
> . . .
>
> Only she dont mean that, he thought. It's because she wants it told.(7)
>
> . . .
>
> "But why tell me about it?" he said to his

father that evening. . .(9)

. . .

Whatever her reason for choosing him, whether it was that or not, the getting to it, Quentin thought, was taking a long time.(10)

. . .

<u>Maybe you have to know anybody awful well to love them but when you have hated somebody for forty-three years you will know them awful well. . .</u>(11)

. . .

And maybe it (the voice, the talking, the incredulous and unbearable amazement) had been a cry aloud once, Quentin thought, long ago when she was a girl--(11).

Chapter two, in which Mr. Compson describes the events between Sutpen's first arrival in Jefferson and his marriage to Ellen, takes place in the early evening, as Quentin and his father loll on the front gallery after supper. Here, as in the previous sequence, the narration would not, and seems not to, have held Quentin spellbound. Mr. Compson is giving an account of Sutpen's early behavior only as it was seen and known by the town. He is simply rehashing local legend, the accepted and public knowledge of the man. Quentin has heard it all before: "--the listening, the hearing in 1909 mostly about that which he already knew, since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday

morning in 1833. . ."(25) Mr. Compson, much more wrapped up in his own story than Quentin appears to be, brings this second installment to a melodramatic close with the scene of the town's hostile disruption of the wedding, to which Mr. Compson adds what he considers an impressive literary flourish: "He did not forget that night, even though Ellen, I think, did, since she washed it out of her remembering with tears. Yes, she was weeping again now; it did, indeed, rain on that marriage."(48) Quentin, in turn, shows how little he has been engaged by this with his response. In the very next sentence, which begins chapter three, he changes the subject entirely: "If he threw Miss Rosa over, I wouldn't think she would want to tell anybody about it Quentin said."(48)

With that, he drags his father back (or attempts to) from idle and unsolicited speculation over the same past events that Quentin has already lost an afternoon in hearing about, to the question that is still his immediate concern: What can this eccentric old woman, Miss Rosa Coldfield, want from me? There is, after all, no suggestion that Quentin has requested the narrative that his father delivers on the gallery. More likely, considering that it echoes both what Quentin grew up knowing and much of what Rosa has mentioned, Mr. Compson

rather forced it on Quentin, a polite but unenthusiastic audience. So at this early point the momentum is building: Quentin is becoming the single, unwilling repository for the Sutpen tale, the victim of a story that a number of people feel compelled to tell.

Mr. Compson, of course, entirely ignores Quentin's implication about Rosa's unwelcome revelations to him, and takes it as a cue for expounding his own view of Rosa's whole life, from her childhood visits to the house of her brother-in-law to the day Wash Jones rode into town with news of her nephew. This occupies chapter three.

In chapter four Quentin's imagination for the first time becomes actively caught up with the exercise of wondering what the Sutpen family members did and felt. Mr. Compson fills that chapter with his scenario of the relationship among Judith, Bon and Henry, taking up at the Christmas visit when Sutpen forbade the marriage, and finishing with Wash Jones's announcement to Rosa that Bon has been killed. Mr. Compson first produces the letter that Bon wrote to Judith, using that as his point of departure and as a token of validity for his presumptively omniscent hypothesizing on the secret motives of the Sutpen children. But he delays reading the letter, or even handing it to Quentin,

until he has had his full say. From this section Quentin's internal involvement with the story stems, which will spiral him on and on, deeper and deeper, as to the center of a whirlpool. But for Quentin, unlike the rest of the characters, that center is not Thomas Sutpen. While Sutpen is certainly the objective center of the events, the relationships, the history that is being constructed, Quentin's connection with that history is not at all objective. He remains unengaged by the idea of Sutpen. Quentin is drawn toward a different, more personal center point: Henry Sutpen. But even that association Quentin desperately resists.

As Mr. Compson goes on almost endlessly inventing speeches by Judith, Quentin ignores his father and turns to the evidence:

> Half rising, Quentin took the letter from him and beneath the dim bug-fouled globe opened it, carefully, as though the sheet, the desiccated square, were not the paper but the intact ash of its former shape and substance: and meanwhile Mr. Compson's voice speaking on while Quentin heard it without listening. . . .(106)

Quentin reads the letter as his father drones on. When he has finished reading, Mr. Compson is still talking. But now, Quentin finds, the subject is something that his imagination too cannot resist--Henry and Bon, in a mortal confrontation over a sister:

> "the one calm and undeviating, perhaps unresisting even, the fatalist to the last; the other remorseless with implacable and unalterable grief and despair--" (It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them, facing one another at the gate. . . .the one with the tarnished braid of an officer, the other plain of cuff, the pistol lying yet across the saddle bow unaimed, the two faces calm, the voices not even raised: Dont you pass the shadow of this post, this branch, Charles; and I am going to pass it, Henry).(109-110)

This time Mr. Compson is obliged to cause the distraction, to start the narrative moving again, when he breaks in on Quentin's vision of that scene with his description of Wash Jones's macabre announcement to Rosa that "Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as a beef."(110)

Chapter five continues the inexorable movement that is carrying Quentin deeper into the Sutpen story, toward the particular point that is so personal it will oppress him, even help to destroy him. His involvement with the triangle of Sutpen children, and his own identification with Henry are strengthening constantly. This is the chapter in which Rosa, during the late evening before it is dark enough forthem to begin riding out to Sutpen's Hundred, recounts for Quentin her own life with the family survivors, from the moment she heard the news of Bon's death, to the moment she heard

the news of Sutpen's. She comes tantalizingly close to explaining the mysterious proposal of Sutpen's, which so infuriated her ("he stood with the reins over his arm. . .and spoke the bold outrageous words"), and brings to an end this installment, as well as the entire opening half of the book, with the first allusion Quentin has heard to Sutpen's grisly and ironic death at the blade of a rusty scythe. But the attention of Quentin, again, is not held by this, one of the very few key scenes in the drama of Sutpen, one of those tableaux which, as Millgate says, must be looked at, approached from all sides, carefully inspected, if the life of Thomas Sutpen is to be understood. Quentin apparently is not interested:

> "Dead?" (Rosa) cried. "Dead? You? You lie; you're not dead; heaven cannot, and hell dare not, have you!" But Quentin was not listening, because there was also something which he too could not pass--that door, the running feet on the stairs beyond it almost a continuation of the faint shot. . .as the door crashed in and the brother stood there. . .the two of them, brother and sister, curiously alike as if the difference in sex had merely sharpened the common blood to a terrific, an almost unbearable, similarity, speaking to one another in short brief staccato sentences like slaps, as if they stood breast to breast striking one another in turn neither making any attempt to guard against the blows.
>
> Now you cant marry him.
>
> Why cant I marry him?

Because he's dead.

Dead?

Yes. I killed him. (141-142)

That dialogue, with its directness, its intensity and the desperate, almost masochistic way in which brother and sister address each other with "brief staccato sentences like slaps" evokes the honeysuckle scene between Quentin and Caddy, on pages 185-203 of The Sound and the Fury, in which Quentin eventually threatens to kill them both with his knife, but is not bold enough to do it. The honeysuckle scene took place the night Caddy lost her virginity to Dalton Ames, apparently in late August of 1909, and was therefore less than a month in the past on the September day when Quentin was forced to hear the Sutpen story. That long, anguished confrontation, during which Quentin and Caddy wrestle, drench themselves in the stream, and recall the day of Damuddy's death when Caddy dirtied her drawers, represents the crisis in Quentin's unsuccessful struggle to hold his sister as his own, to preserve her from the tarnishing contact with the world toward which her own nature inevitably takes her. This, it should be noted, is among Quentin's most immediate memories as Rosa lectures him on the last offenses of Thomas Sutpen.

The similarities between Henry Sutpen as seen in

Absalom, Absalom! and Quentin as seen in The Sound and the Fury, regarding their sisters, their senses of honor and responsibility, and the pressures of family and background that maneuver them both into self-destructive courses of action, while not unrecognized by criticism, have certainly been under-emphasized. This association is the key to the meaning of the Sutpen story for Quentin, and the key to the book itself insofar as it depicts the dilemma of Quentin. Henry Sutpen is both an image of Quentin from out of the past and, on that day in September, 1909, Quentin's destiny, awaiting him in the future, within the closed bedroom at Sutpen's Hundred. Thomas Sutpen embodies the public past--history and legend--but Henry embodies the very particular, deathly power that the past can hold over an individual. Rosa, breaking into Quentin's private reflection at the end of chapter five exactly as Mr. Compson did at the end of chapter four, makes an allusion that forebodes the pattern of Quentin's involuntary, spiralling descent into the Sutpen past:

> "There's something in that house. . . .Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living hidden in that house."(142)

Henry Sutpen is there. He has come home to die; and to participate in the destruction of Quentin Compson.

Chapter six, beginning the half of the novel that takes place in January, 1910, finds Quentin far away from Mississippi and the scenes of the Sutpen drama, in the frigid Harvard sitting-room in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the same time, it completes the picture of Quentin's paradoxical dilemma: although he has physically escaped from the South, and perhaps for precisly that reason, he cannot escape the South's power. Rosa, at least so she claims, decided to burden Quentin with the story of Thomas Sutpen "Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard. . . ."(7) His father too, and his grandfather, have abetted that burdening by passing the Compson family's own inside knowledge of Sutpen down to him like a fat gold watch. Yet on his arrival in Cambridge, rather than having escaped from his burden, Quentin discovers that he is trapped beneath it: "Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all."(143) And a fat, bespectacled Canadian, from Edmonton, Alberta, forces Quentin to return in his mind to Sutpen's Hundred. "He sounds just like father," Quentin thinks about Shreve.(149)

Throughout the chapter, Shreve resorts to coaxing, prompting and badgering, to draw out of Quentin an account

that sweeps briefly over the whole saga but focuses mainly on the lives of Judith and Charles Etienne, from the war until their deaths. The occasion has been inspired, and Shreve's curiosity whetted, by the letter from Mr. Compson informing Quentin that Rosa has died and been buried. Quentin has no interest in relating, or even remembering, the story. His attitude, as Shreve extracts from him bits of information and enthusiastically recasts them into a narrative of his own rhetorical style, or as Quentin recalls the day of quail-hunting and his father's commentary over the graves of the Sutpens as well as his own languid, laconic responses, seems to be: "Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long. . . ."(171)

Chapter seven is unique, in being the section of the book where for the first and last time Quentin seizes active control of the narrative, refuses to be diverted by Shreve's interruptions, and tells the story of Thomas Sutpen the way he wants to tell it. Henry, Judith and Bon are conspicuously absent from the entire account. The love-triangle of brothers and sister is ignored while Quentin goes back to the barefoot mountain boy, turned away from the door of the Tidewater mansion, and describes the life of Thomas Sutpen, a

man with a design, a man who simply wanted a son. Even as it covers the critical years of the probation, from the forbidding of the marriage until Bon's murder, Quentin's account has a different focus from all the others: he holds his attention on Sutpen, home from the war, sitting in General Compson's office and wondering over his strategic mistake. Meanwhile, Henry and Bon are in the field, struggling with the issues of love of sister, incest and responsibility to family. But Quentin refrains from giving them even a passing reference. Irving Howe has written: "Because the material of Absalom, Absalom! was so oppressively close to him, Faulkner had to find a device by which to hold it, so to speak, in suspension. . . ."[1] Howe has made a Shreve of himself by confusing Faulkner with Quentin; he is asking the author, "Why do you hate the South?" But if Howe had recognized Faulkner's conscious control of Quentin's attitude toward what he has been forced to hear, and had made this remark about Quentin, it would have been accurate. The story of Henry Sutpen, and his relationship with his sister and his sister's lover, is for Quentin no game or puzzle to be played with: it is too painfully personal. If the Sutpen saga is to be reconstructed for the sake of historical truth or idle curiosity, then, as far as Quentin is concerned, it should be done

1. Howe, p. 221.

historically, objectively, by means of evidence and leaving aside those elements that make it emotionally immediate. While Rosa organizes the story about herself, presenting it as the history of one man's offenses against her and her family, Quentin does the opposite, turning it away from any potential association with his own life. Quentin, it is fair to assume, simply could not have presented a dispassionate view of the actions of Henry, Judith and Bon.

In chapter eight Shreve, from the very beginning, reverses the trend and conducts an all-out, if not consciously malicious, assault on Quentin's self-protective measures:

> "So the old man sent the nigger for Henry," Shreve said. "And Henry came in and the old man said 'They cannot marry because he is your brother' and Henry said 'You lie' like that, that quick: no space, no interval, no nothing. . . ."(241)
>
> "And now," Shreve said, "we're going to talk about love."(260)

In this chapter Quentin finally succumbs to the power of the past and is sucked into painful identification with those ghostly voices and shapes. By the time the scene of unclaimed italics depicts the interpretation that he shares with Shreve, Quentin has totally surrendered to the election that made him the repository

of the Sutpen history, and is morbidly submerged in it, in the role of Henry Sutpen. He is in the position of Coleridge's wedding-guest, who never did enter into the feast because he could not choose but hear. He is on the way to four and a half months of sleepless, remembering nights, such as the one described in chapter nine, at the end of which lies his ultimate failure to deal with the pressure of the past, and his suicide.

Yet in spite of the burdens of heritage and circumstance, the oppressive weights of confidence and expectation laid on him by Rosa, his father, his grandfather and Shreve, the story of Thomas Sutpen would not have victimized Quentin as it did--he could have forgotten the embarrassing confessions of Rosa and the heavy narratives of his father and left it all behind when he went up to Cambridge--if he had not entered that upper room and met Henry Sutpen. And was further burdened by Henry, we must assume, with the most intimate secret of the Sutpen family.

The question remains: Why Quentin? Why did Henry, a terrified recluse and fugitive murderer seventy years old, unburden himself and give that secret to Quentin, an unknown intruder of twenty? The answer, I would say, lies in the very idea of election, an almost mystical

recognition that this particular person is one who is designated to receive the burdensome confidence. Only certain men are predisposed to be profoundly affected by the vision of evil: the wedding-guest was one; Quentin is another. The choice, made by Henry as by the Ancient Mariner, is neither random nor entirely logical. It is a response to a character trait in Quentin that makes him the natural victim of such destructive confidences, in a way that others--Mr. Compson and Shreve--could never be. Quentin and Henry, in that bedroom, are doubles confronting each other across the span of three generations. Faulkner was confirming this special relationship by attributing the critical transfer of information to that unlikely contact. And he was, in this way, condemning Quentin--as much as Henry or Bon--to the role of Absalom, lost and lamented son of the South.

Chapter Four

The Hamlet and Go Down, Moses

The Hamlet and Go Down, Moses, published in succession at the end of Faulkner's fourteen-year period of most intense creative effort, are, at first glance, his least unified novels. The Hamlet is a continuous but loosely interrelated narrative that was drawn together mainly out of short stories--"Spotted Horses", "The Hound", "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard", "Fool About a Horse", and "Barn Burning", written during the two decades preceding their final assembly. While it observes strict unity of place and chronological progression of action, it is episodic and not balanced to develop toward a single crisis and denouement. No subordination of emphasis exists among its different individual stories. Each anecdote is presented principally for its own sake, with only tenuous relation to any larger pattern.

Go Down, Moses consists of seven separately-titled sections and is still being published in its British edition, contrary to the author's stated intentions, not as a novel but as a collection of short stories.

Unlike The Hamlet, not even a common period of history holds these sections together: they are strung out between the late 1850s and the beginning of World War II. And, aside from Isaac McCaslin, who is a key figure in "The Old People", "The Bear" and "Delta Autumn", the group of principal characters changes with each section.

In neither novel is there any pretense to consistency of mood. The Hamlet shifts from comedy to false elegy to pathos as it deals with the bartering activities, Ike's love affair and Houston's widowerhood. And the mood of Go Down, Moses changes just as drastically between "Was", "Pantaloon in Black" and "The Bear". Finally, a gauge of the lack of cohesiveness lies in the fact that both novels are more widely known by the segments that have been lifted out and anthologized--"Spotted Horses" and "Barn Burning", "The Bear" and "Delta Autumn"--than they are known in their entirety.

Each of the novels, of course, has a certain thematic unity. The simple repetition of one or a set of themes in the different episodes gives those episodes a reason for being together, if it does not make them an integrated whole. Critics have generally concurred on defining "love and greed" as the pair of impulses that are treated in all sections of The Hamlet. Go Down, Moses has been accurately described as a treatment of black-white

relations in which the format of a ritual hunt is a common to nearly all of the sections. But then, Big Woods is a book with as much unity of theme, and even Knight's Gambit has, like Big Woods, a consistency of format in its sections; yet neither of those did Faulkner choose to consider a novel. He must have intended something more, in The Hamlet and Go Down, Moses, than similarity and repetition.

Malcolm Cowley described The Hamlet as "a series of episodes resembling beads on a string"[1] and was much argued with, by the proponents of that book's thematic unity, for his choice of words. But those who took exception may have been unable to see the necklace for the beads. What they seem to disagree with is the suggestion that The Hamlet is "a series of episodes like a pile of similar beads," which was not what Cowley said. The string, the element that remains in the background while giving an order and a cohesion to the individual pieces, must be recognized, to show that both these episodic novels do have some subordination of purpose and to understand better what their central themes might be. The career of Flem Snopes, in The Hamlet, serves as

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1. Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction to The Portable Faulkner", from Three Decades of Criticism, p. 105.

that string.

The Hamlet, as the first volume in Faulkner's Snopes trilogy, is ostensibly the account of the initial third of Flem's rise from a sharecropper's farm to the presidency of a Jefferson bank, depicting his movement from the clerkship at Varner's store to the possession of Eula and a half-interest in a Jefferson restaurant. All lines of guilt and responsibility in the novel lead to him; in every transaction he is implicated. He is at once the eventual victor in the feverish rivalry over Eula, the financial custodian of the idiot Ike, the person expected by all to save Mink from conviction of murder, the presumed entrepreneur of the spotted horses, and, at the critical point, the title-holder on the Old Frenchman place. He is the tacitly acknowledged head of the clan of cousins, brothers and nephews that suddenly overruns Frenchman's Bend, just as Uncle Billy Varner is the acknowledged first citizen among all the Bend's non-Snopes inhabitants. He is the focus of attention, even of obsessive curiosity, on all occasions of significance, whether he is physically present or not, by everyone including the basically dispassionate and sensible Ratliff. In a sense, all that happens in the

books is, or is taken by the characters to be, Flem's story. And yet, through most of that story, Flem is invisible.

The novel's four sections have been divided by Faulkner into a total of nine chapters, three in "Flem" and two each in "Eula", "The Long Summer" and "The Peasants", representing the nine principal blocks of material, each of them anecdotal and nearly independent. They cover: 1) Jody's initial arrangement with Ab, the revelation of the "Barn Burning" information, and his subsequent arrangement with Flem; 2) the "Fool About a Horse" story of Ab and Pat Stamper; 3) Ratliff's first engagement with Flem, over the contract for goats; 4) the story of Labove and Eula; 5) the story of McCarron and Eula, with Flem emerging as groom; 6) the ironical idyll of Ike with his cow; 7) the stories of Jack Houston and his wife and Mink and his wife, as part of the Mink-Houston relationship, which ends in murder; 8) the Texan's sale of spotted horses; and 9) Ratliff, Bookwright and Armstid's search for the Frenchman's gold. Through most of these sections, Flem remains out of view (if not out of the county and state entirely, as during "The Long Summer"). At no point does he take more than what to appearances is a completely passive role in any of the events. And in only

five brief scenes does he exist as enough of an immediate presence to utter any lines. The sum of dialogue spoken by him through the novel, excluding the scene of Flem in Hell, presumably fantasized by Ratliff, amounts to no more than a s ingle page.

In his initial encounter with Jody, when he maneuvers Jody into giving him a foothold as clerk, for security against Ab's barn-burning tendencies, Flem extends himself no more than to say, "I hear you run a store."(24) Without further pressure, the job is his, much more as a result of Jody's having out-maneuvered himself than due to any ingenious dealing Flem has done. When Jody grumbles out the offer and its terms, adding, "But you got to guarantee it," Flem cannot be pinned down because, as he knows, he has said nothing and the whole deal, the whole threat-and-bribe exchange, has taken place only in Jody's mind: "'Guarantee what?' he said."

Flem's statements are, almost without exception, obvious and declarative. He does not pry information from other men. His information presumably comes from less straightforward sources. The only questions he asks are, How much does it cost? and How much will you pay for it? And even the second of these is infrequent, since as the seller he can usually name his own price. The words he exchanges with other characters generally contain no

information, or information that is obvious to all parties, and serve merely as place-markers for the less polite and nonverbal implications that Flem knows the listener will grasp, without his having to commit to explicit threats and promises. In this way he uses the capacity for suspicion, venality and devious thinking in the others for his own purposes.

When they barter over the goats, Ratliff shows an understanding of this strategem--holding the trump card in coy abeyance while communicating very clearly and without bluff what it is--and wins a temporary victory over Flem. In doing so, he comes closer to making Flem admit vulnerability than Flem is brought anywhere else in the novel. Precisely because he has that advantage, the power to force Flem's interest out into the open, Ratliff succeeds. Ratliff holds a note from Mink, the weak and unreliable link in the Snopes hegemony, on which Mink has signed Flem as co-debtor. And with that note Ratliff carries the message Mink sent to Flem, the implied threat from the dispossessed to the possessor, almost identical to the threat Ab posed to Jody Varner: Mink does not intend to let himself go wanting while he has a cousin as well established as Flem. "Do you want to hear it?" Ratliff asks(86), in the strong position of being able to connect Flem's dealings with the vehement clumsiness of Mink's.

"No," Flem says; he pays for the right of burning the evidence into obscurity, and Ratliff has won the skirmish.

The last of the rare bits of dialogue in which Flem takes part comes when Ratliff has ridden out to meet him, returning from Jefferson with his wife, his mother-in-law and Will Varner. Ratliff wants to negotiate with Flem for the purchase of the Old Frenchman place, on the grounds of which he and Bookwright and Armstid believe they have discovered the long-hidden gold. Secrecy and speed in acquiring the place are essential to them, to protect their claims from being overrun by others. Ratliff hopes to haggle for a low price. But one sentence is enough to win Flem exactly as much as he cares to name:

> "We'll let this one count," Ratliff said. "How much do you want for that Old Frenchman place?". . . .
>
> "What do you want with it?" Snopes said.(360-361)

This exchange is a negative image to the earlier transaction over the goats. Flem wins a full victory here the same way Ratliff won a partial one there: by suggesting that he knows more about what is in the other's mind than either of them cares to make explicit.

Flem's visible presence is as extremely limited as his speaking part. Of the nine chapters, four do not even contain a glimpse of him in the flesh--those featuring Ab and Pat Stamper (in which Ratliff, in his mid-twenties at the time of Flem's rise and so presumably about the same age as Flem, takes the role of small-boy observer and counterweight to Ab, which otherwise the young Flem might have been expected to play); Labove and Eula; Ike and the cow; and Houston and Mink. When he does appear, the vision is generally so fleeting and two-dimensional as to suggest the existence of a volitional force without giving the concrete impression of a human being. The scene in which Flem makes his first appearance in the novel is a good example. Jody, having had second thoughts about the Snopes reputation, has ridden out to placate Ab. As he leaves again, with little reassurance:

> . . .he was travelling at a fair gait when he saw suddenly, leaning against a tree beside the road, the man whose face he had seen in the window of the house. One moment the road had been empty, the next moment the man stood there beside it, at the edge of a small copse--the same cloth cap, the same rhythmically chewing jaw materialised apparently out of nothing and almost abreast of the horse, with an air of the completely and purely accidental which Varner was to remember and speculate about only later. He had almost passed the other before he pulled the horse up. . . ."Howdy," he said. "You're Flem, ain't you? I'm Varner."
>
> "That so?" the other said. He spat. He had a

> broad flat face. His eyes were the color of stagnant water. He was soft in appearance like Varner himself, though a head shorter, in a soiled white shirt and cheap gray trousers.(22)

The most distinctive thing about Flem's physical appearance is simply that it is so indistinct: he is flat, stagnant, soft and short. Like Popeye of Sanctuary, he has an aspect of being machine-made rather than individually created. Later, when Flem has begun to affect the crease-marked white shirts, the gray cloth cap and the snap-on bow tie that remain his only identifying features throughout the entire period he spends in Frenchman's Bend, it is as if, conscious himself that he is lacking in normal physical characteristics, he has assumed for convenience an archetypal visual identity. The uniform is not for his own taste but so that others might recognize him on the street, to buy and borrow from him. And as long as it serves that purpose, he sees no reason to vary it. He does possess one natural feature that is worth mention: a nose. But even that is pictured not as a unique and organic part of Flem Snopes but as something that must have been clapped on to this deceptively bland Flem Snopes entity for an ominous purpose. Faulkner describes him at the time he came to work in the store:

> --a thick squat soft man of no establishable age between twenty and thirty, with a broad

> still face containing a tight seam of mouth stained slightly at the corners with tobacco, and eyes the color of stagnant water, and projecting from among the other features in startling and sudden paradox, a tiny predatory nose like the beak of a small hawk. It was as though the original nose had been left off by the original designer or craftsman and the unfinished job taken over by someone of a radically different school or perhaps by some viciously maniacal humorist or perhaps by one who had had only time to clap into the center of the face a frantic and desperate warning.(52)

In the initial meeting between Jody and Flem, what is as ominous as Flem's lack of distinctive lineaments is the manner in which he materializes, as if in a cloud of sulfurous smoke, "apparently out of nothing and almost abreast of the horse, with an air of the completely and purely accidental which Varner was to remember and speculate about only later." Flem, from the beginning, is never seen making an effort. He manages always to present a facade of passivity, and people come to him rather than him going to them. For Flem to have jogged, or even walked, toward Jody to arrange this first deal would have been entirely out of character. This apparent passivity allows Flem to catch people before they are aware he is stalking them. Just as he is suddenly abreast with Jody on the road before Jody has noticed him, later he will have eclipsed Jody in power and success at some point long before Jody, or anyone, realizes it:

> This was the time they referred to later, two or three years later, when they told one another: "That was when he passed Jody," though it was Ratliff who amended it: "You mean, that was when Jody begun to find it out."(61)

Although Flem's appearance by the road had an air of pure accident, it embodied as much calculated covertness as was possible. The mechanics of Flem's dealing were not invisible from only one side, but, as it soon dawns on Jody, from two:

> The horse, travelling supperward, was going well in the evening's cool, when Varner pulled it to a stop and held it for a full moment. "Hell fire," he said. "He was standing just exactly where couldn't nobody see him from the house."(24)

One of the more significant adjustments made by Faulkner when he finally began arranging, into <u>The Hamlet</u>, the material he had earlier written as stories, was to decrease Flem's visibility. The first attempt Faulkner made, sometime in 1926 or 1927, to use the Snopes material in the form of a novel is probably preserved, as Millgate has shown, in a 25-page manuscript entitled "Father Abraham", now in the New York Public Library. Millgate says:

> This manuscript opens with an extended description of Flem as a symbolic and legendary figure, a bi-product of the democratic principle in action and successor to the Southern gentleman as the representative figure of his region and

> his time. There follows an account of the Old Frenchman place and its legend, and of the inhabitants of Frenchman's Bend, which bears a direct and sometimes a close relationship to the opening pages of The Hamlet. Once the setting has been established the "Father Abraham" manuscript goes on to describe a number of characters, notably Uncle Billy Varner and his daughter Eula, and continues with a telling of the "spotted horses" story. . . .[1]

The significance of Flem as a "symbolic and legendary figure" was an aspect of the material that promised a far greater dramatic effect if understated, or not stated at all, rather than being baldly announced at the start of the narrative. Faulkner's decision to omit that bit of exposition reflects his increasing maturity of approach and confidence in his material, between the writing of the "Father Abraham" fragment and, a dozen years later, The Hamlet. But an even more meaningful difference between the two beginnings is that, in The Hamlet, not only flat-footed explanations of Flem's character and role, but also any verbal reference to or visual glimpse of him, have been excised from the opening. The scene(Frenchman's Bend) has been described, the critical plot-fixtures(the Old Frenchman's legend) have been established, the social milieu (with Will Varner at the peak of its hierarchy) depicted,

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1. Millgate, p. 181.

the standard mood and mode of interaction throughout the book has been introduced(by Ab's settlement with Jody), and the first of all the anecdotal tales of barter(between Ab and DeSpain) has been told, before Flem joins the narrative. Faulkner seems to have had a substantially different idea of the role Flem would play in the novel, and the relationship Flem's career would have to the rest of the material, when he undertook the writing for the second time. The change in the title reflects that difference: the focus has shifted from the "Father Abraham" who was to be portrayed in the foreground as "the representative figure of his region and his time" to the hamlet itself, the peasants and cattlemen and schoolteachers and itinerant sewing-machine salesmen and men who do little but sit on the gallery of Varner's store.

When Flem comes to work in the store, he is visible to all of the hamlet as Varner's new clerk, the fellow with the gray cloth cap and the false bow-tie, but he remains invisible as the man on the rise, the businessman who they assume must be doing some dishonest dealing to get him where he is headed. The local people are used to the more open, if trivial, dishonesty of a Jody Varner. At this point they are misreading the type of threat which Flem represents:

they expect him to cheat them in the old familiar ways. Because he does not, or does not appear to, they assume that he is simply more successfully sneaky about it. Even Ratliff, when told that the clerk never makes a mistake in his own favor, reacts: "You mean ain't nobody ever caught him <u>once</u> even?"(57) They do not yet realize that he is practicing an entirely new brand of magic against their financial security. Because it is more legalistic and less humanly petty than any type of greed they have known, it is by nature more covert also. They are accustomed to the shell-game man, who makes his profit by sleight of hand. If they watch his hands sharply enough, he is unable to trick them. But Flem does not use his hands. His method is more abstract: he uses his brain.

Only later do they begin to understand the devious and secretive nature of Flem's machinations. Gradually, the people of Frenchman's Bend learn that watching Flem's actions will not protect them from him. They must be devious themselves, attempting to guess, given the circumstances and possibilities, what he has done and what he may do. And even that is usually not enough.

At the end of the first section is a rare vision of Flem, at rest on the grounds of the Old Frenchman place. He is sitting in the flour-barrel chair, the

customary throne of Will Varner. This tableau combines the passive, torpid exterior Flem shows the world with an indication of his inexorable, and quite rapid, movement upward. As with the water tower in The Town, this external sign is at once a monument to Flem's success and a footprint left from his passing. It is typical of almost all the glimpses that are given of Flem in that it does not reveal him doing anything, but it very clearly reveals his having done.

At the beginning of the "Eula" section, Flem vanishes from the novel, not to reappear for 50 pages. Only when the stories of Eula, Labove and McCarron have unrolled, Eula is pregnant, and Will Varner has declared, "What did you expect--that she would spend the rest of her life just running water through it?"(145) does he figure again. This later appearance is just like the one in the barrel chair: he is observed doing nothing, or nothing more than collecting the fruits of his implied industry. As the seven men squatting about the gallery of the store look on, Flem walks down the road with a relative to carry the straw suitcase that he had carried himself to Varner's house a year before, joins Eula, with whom he has never been known to exchange a word, and departs with her and her father for Jefferson, where even the wedding license is paid for by Will. "Eula" is the account of the girl,

an unconscious country Aphrodite, of the lust she evoked in an entire county, and of the four or five men in particular whom she drove to desperation. It establishes her as an infinitely desirable quantity and then, without ascribing any such desire to him or showing the process by which it was accomplished, it records her acquisition by Flem.

Flem is in Texas throughout "The Long Summer". As with "Eula", this section steers back to him at its conclusion. Here, however, Flem serves as the logical end point of all plot complication, not in his physical presence, but only as an idea, a set of expectations in the minds of the other characters. Mink having murdered Houston and been caught, the assumption by all is that Flem now has himself associated with a special interest that cannot be settled in discreet secrecy, since that would involve the bribing of county sheriffs and judges beyond even his power. The people of the hamlet have again misread the nature of Flem's self-interest by imputing to him the too-human motive of blood loyalty. Although, as it develops, Flem has no plans to do anything about Mink's situation or even to return from Texas in time for the trial, the questions that s tick in everyone's minds, from Mink himself to Ratliff, are Where is Flem Snopes? and How will he do it?

In the last incident of the novel--the sale of the Old Frenchman place--Flem again makes use of the capacity for devious thinking and greed in the minds of his victims, rather than actively perpetrating deceits or manipulating anyone:

> "I hear somebody digging," Bookwright whispered. "How do I know it's Flem Snopes?"
>
> "Hasn't Henry been laying here every night since ten days ago, listening to him? Wasn't I right here last night with Henry myself, listening to him? Didn't we lay right here until he quit and left and then we crawled up there and found every place where he had dug and then filled the hole back up and smoothed the dirt to hide it?"
>
> "All right," Bookwright whispered. "You and Armstid have been watching somebody digging. But how do I know it is Flem Snopes?"
>
> "All right," Armstid said, with a cold restrained violence, almost aloud. . . ."It ain't Flem Snopes then. Go on back home."(344-345)

If Flem is visually present in this scene it is only as a shadowy figure. Ratliff, Bookwright and Armstid convince themselves that they are watching him, taking whatever bait has been left and compounding it with their own suspicions and greedy assumptions. But as far as objective evidence for the reader is concerned, Faulkner has left Flem's presence unconfirmed:

> "All right. Just watch." They lay in the weeds; they were all holding their breaths now,

> Bookwright too. Then he saw the digger--a shadow, a thicker darkness, moving against the slope, mounting it. "Watch," Ratliff whispered. Bookwright could hear him and Armstid where they lay glaring up the slope, breathing in hissing exhalations, in passionate and dying sighs. Then Bookwright saw the white shirt; an instant later the figure came into complete relief against the sky as if it had paused for a moment on the crest of the slope. Then it was gone. "There!" Ratliff whispered. "Wasn't that Flem Snopes? Do you believe now?"(346)

Whether Flem himself, or one of his minions such as Lump or Eustace Grimm, is actually doing the digging there, of course, is moot. The important point is that Ratliff's and the others' belief that it is Flem causes them to act in a mean, obsessive way. This is perhaps the clearest demonstration of how the idea of Flem brings out the worst in even the most sensible people.

Throughout The Hamlet, Flem Snopes exists more as an idea than as a living character. He never takes shape as a real person. He has been compared to Sutpen, viewed in opposition to Ratliff and said to ape Will Varner, but he never gives the impression of flesh-and-blood humanity that those men all possess. He is not historically distanced from the reader, like Carothers McCaslin, but in effect he is equally abstract and symbolic. It is impossible to speak about Flem's motivations, even to say that he is possessed by greed, because not only his feelings but even most of his actions are invisible.

Generally with fictional characters, actions at least are presented and motivations may be inferred therefrom. But Flem's actions themselves must be inferred from what little is seen by the reader--and his inner nature is therefore doubly distanced.

On the next to last page, one of the local people muses to another over the Frenchman's-gold hoax and the mad Henry Armstid, who persists at his digging:

> "That Flem Snopes."
>
> "That's a fact. Wouldn't no other man have done it."
>
> "Couldn't no other man have done it. Anybody might have fooled Henry Armstid. But couldn't nobody but Flem Snopes have fooled Ratliff."(372)

Those sentiments are overcast with irony. In their readiness to attribute all mischief to the magical demonry of Flem, the people of the hamlet overlook the fact that Ratliff and Armstid have fooled themselves. Flem has allowed them to do it, but he has acted as no more than an agent, a broker for all the mean impulses that they carried themselves. Flem did not invent greed and rapacity, nor bring them for the first time to Frenchman's Bend. He merely showed how to take profitable advantage of what was already there.

Flem has been a transient in Frenchman's Bend,

appearing out of the countryside and leaving eventually for the town of Jefferson. Aside from Eula, he has made no permanent acquisitions, and he has done no very permanent damage. He has come, in a sense as a prophet to the citizens of Frenchman's Bend, and in a sense as a mirror. He has provided them opportunities to see what they are, and what they can be at their most base, by becoming synonymous with the ideas of greed and viciousness himself, but more importantly, by unleashing the extremes of those vices from others. And he has provided Faulkner with a device for unifying his examination of human weaknesses. The true subject of The Hamlet is not the career of Flem Snopes but the individual tragedies of obsession, the stories of Ab and Labove and Houston and Mink and Armstid, Snopes and non-Snopes, "Turpin and Haley and Whittington, McCallum and Murray and Leonard and Littlejohn,"(4) the people of Frenchman's Bend, who "married and committed infrequent adulteries and more frequent homicides among themselves and were their own courts, judges and executioners."(5)

In the final scene, the tableau that pictures the local inhabitants sitting in their halted wagons to watch the demented Henry Armstid dig furiously at his claim of gold, is a graphic representation of the way Flem has been

a mirror to the mean impulses that already existed beneath the surface in everyone, from Jody to Ratliff. On one side of the tableau are the outwardly innocent people, the women holding their nursing children and the men standing along the fence; beyond the fence is Henry Armstid, driven mad with greed and suspicion and murderous self-interest: yet Flem has shown that there is a little of the Henry Armstid (or the Flem Snopes) in most men. The Old Frenchman place--the symbol of all the objects of greed and passion--has even passed through Flem's hands and reverted to local ownership. As Flem leaves for Jefferson, that symbol remains in the hamlet, for the people to live with.

If the career of Flem Snopes serves as the string on which all of the anecdotal beads of The Hamlet have been strung together, the far-reaching paternity of old Carothers McCaslin has a similar role in Go Down, Moses. Like Absalom, Absalom!, Go Down, Moses is a novel in which the crucial issue seems at first to be race and later appears to be incest. It is an examination of the relations between blacks and whites that resolves itself into a family chronicle. But then, this is

simply because Faulkner was one of the earlier American writers to recognize or admit that treating historically the racial situation in his country, without treating the issue of common fatherhood, is impossible.

Go Down, Moses, on the surface, looks more like a collection of stories, without even the tenuous narrative connections of the episodes of The Hamlet, than like the novel that Faulkner claimed it to be. Yet there is no evidence that any of the individual stories, or any part of the material contained in them--aside from "The Bear"--had been published, written, or even conceived of before Faulkner began work on the novel sometime in 1940-41. "The Bear" grew out of an earlier story called "Lion", published in 1935, and was itself published in The Saturday Evening Post a few days before the release of Go Down, Moses. Section four of the novel's version had no relation to the "Lion" material and was represented in "The Bear" as printed by the Post, according to Brooks,[1] only by eight or ten paragraphs at the conclusion.

Otherwise, none of the blocks of material from which Go Down, Moses was put together seem to have had any previous existence. This is in marked contrast to the

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1. Brooks, p. 415.

way The Hamlet, as described already, was assembled. Go Down, Moses, in fact, has perhaps less in common with the meandering narrative looseness of The Hamlet than with the dense, intricate centripetal unity of Absalom, Absalom! Go Down, Moses and Absalom, Absalom! both carry at their cores, as the logical first cause behind all other action, a single sinister secret. And in both novels the process of narration consists in working through outer layers toward the discovery of that secret and the recognition of its ramifications throughout the entire chain of events.

Old Carothers McCaslin, the grandfather of Ike McCaslin and Lucas Beauchamp and the f ounder of the McCaslin patriarchy in Mississippi, purchased a slave named Eunice in New Orleans in 1807. Two years later he fathered a child on Eunice, and then married her off to another of his slaves, Thucydides, before that daughter, Tomey, was born in 1810. Twenty-three years afterward, at the age of sixty, a widower and within five years of his death, a lonely and bored old man on a successful plantation with two nearly middle-age bachelor sons to run it for him, McCaslin called that illegitimate daughter to him and fathered on her a child, to be named Terrel, or Tomey's Turl: at the same time his son and his grandson. When Eunice, the original

mistress and the mother of Tomey, learned of this in 1833, she drowned herself. These are the dark facts that are buried in section four of "The Bear". The eighty-year saga of black-white relations on the McCaslin plantation can be seen as an examination of the consequences of old Carothers' offense. As with the "love and Greed" schema to The Hamlet, two interwoven ideas are usually identified as providing the thematic pattern: the relationship between the races, and the disappearance of the wilderness. But an additional theme, though returned to a little less frequently, is probably just as essential to the novel's meaning: the role of fatherhood.

Ike McCaslin is father to no one. This is the first bit of information given in the book, at the start of "Was", an episode in which Ike not only takes no part but which occurred before he was even born: "Isaac McCaslin, 'Uncle Ike', past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one."(9) Old Carothers McCaslin is father, at one or two or three or five generations' remove, to nearly everyone, and stands as the solitary, original source of the McCaslin family tree,[1] as if he had had no father himself. The contrast

1. Brooks, p. 448.

between Carothers and Ike, regarding the role of fatherhood, is a key opposition of principles. While Ike emerges as the principal living character among the assortment of episodes and across the span of years, the facts of old Carothers' dissolute paternity are unveiled as one of the determining factors of all Ike's adult actions. The idea of fatherhood is evoked repeatedly throughout the episodes, and its repeated identification both with violation of nature and with the crimes of the white race against the black, provides a strong but subtle force for unity in this study of two (or more accurately, three) races and a doomed wilderness.

Zack Edmonds (Lucas Beauchamp's white contemporary cousin), the Indian chief Ikkemotubbe and Roth Edmonds, Zack's son, all commit offenses against the black race that echo the original sin of old Carothers, relating the individual narratives to the secret guilt that is hidden among the ledger pages of section four of "The Bear" and suggesting that the history of the oppression of the black man has been no more than a hypocritical campaign to deny an unwanted brother. Zack Edmonds, of "The Fire and the Hearth", is the first of his branch of the family in whom fatherhood becomes a tool of oppression.

"The Fire and the Hearth" is a story of family inviolability, wound together from two distinct narrative threads. In the present time, around 1940, it is simply an account of gold fever, the obsessive search for a non-existent treasure, which nearly destroys a home, very similar to the Armstids' situation in The Hamlet. That plot embodies the ritual hunt that is held as a common format by all of the novel's sections. A reflection into the past, interpolated among the comic scenes of gold-hunting, describes the bitterly serious struggle of Lucas Beauchamp to recover his wife and his self-respect from his white counterpart, Zack. Zack himself has not fathered a son on a Negro body but, forty-three years earlier, has brought about the death of his own wife through the act of fatherhood: she died in childbed at the birth of their son, Roth. Zack at that point committed an outrage that was a subtle reversal of the sin of old Carothers. While Carothers fathered a child on a woman(Eunice) and then foisted her off on a black man (Thucydides) to take as his wife, Zack Edmonds was father of a child by his rightful wife and then, losing her, appropriated the wife of Lucas to come up to the plantation house and live as the mother to his son. On the night Zack's wife died in labor, Molly, the young

wife of Lucas, was summoned to deliver the baby and never returned to her own cabin for six months afterward. Zack even imposed the transferal of roles upon Lucas by sending Lucas out through the flooded dark countryside to bring back a doctor, rather than going himself: "So even before daylight he was in the water and crossed it, how he never knew, and was back by dark with the doctor, emerging from that death. . .which he had entered not for his own sake but for that of old Carothers McCaslin who had sired him and Zack Edmonds both, to find the white man's wife dead and his own wife already established in the white man's house."(41) Zack, like Carothers before him, has robbed the black male of his full manhood, and therefore of his humanity, by assuming one half of the black's manly role to himself: the black is permitted to be husband, or father, but not both. And the black female is made a kept woman. The power to do this was the most effective tool of enslavement, because as long as the family was so undermined and the black man prevented from having a relationship of both physical and spiritual fatherhood to his heirs, a strong race could not grow. Samuel Worsham Beauchamp, of "Go Down, Moses", is the final demonstration of that.

The Indian race is usually (and accurately) depicted

as a common victim, with the blacks, of white oppression. But in Faulkner's Mississippi the Indian was more often an image of the white slave-holder.[1] Ikkemotubbe, the Indian chief from whom the original Jason Compson bought his square mile of Jefferson land, is exposed in "The Old People" as one more agent of the sin of old Carothers. Ikkemotubbe, however, is in many ways more of a white man than an Indian, so his actions represent the adverse influence of white values, rather than a more general Indian complicity. Ikkemotubbe has lost the pure ways of the wilderness and begun selling off parts of the forest (which, as even Ike McCaslin knows, ceased to have ever been his at the moment when he realized he could exchange it for money) as a result of spending his formative years in the white man's city:

> . . .run away to New Orleans in his youth and returned seven years later with a French companion calling himself the Chevalier Soeur-Blonde de Vitry, who must have been the Ikkemotubbe of his family too and who was already addressing Ikkemotubbe as Du Homme--returned, came home again, with his foreign Aramis and the quadroon slave woman who was to be Sam's mother, and a gold-laced hat and coat and a wicker wine-hamper containing a litter of month-old puppies and a gold snuff-box filled with a white powder resembling fine sugar.(128)

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1. Cf. "Red Leaves".

Ikkemotubbe has become a violator of nature: the gold snuff-box contains a poison with which he destroys not only two of the puppies to demonstrate the extent of his new powers, but also the eight-year-old son of his cousin and rival, to demonstrate the direction of his ambition.

At the same time, Ikkemotubbe has adopted the white man's technique of maintaining the blacks' submission by dividing the roles of husband and father:

> . . .on the day after that,[1] during the ceremony of accession, Doom pronounced a marriage between the pregnant quadroon and one of the slave men he had just inherited (that was how Sam Fathers got his name, which in Chickasaw had been Had-Two-Fathers) and two years later sold the man and woman and the child who was his own son to his white neighbor, Carothers McCaslin.(128)

Like Carothers, Ikkemotubbe has given no more than his seed, and the condition of slavery, to his black descendant. He has not even left Sam Fathers as much as the $1000 that Carothers bequeathed to his three grandchildren through Tomey's Turl. This is fatherhood as the most painful, most irreversible wrong committed against the black man: fatherhood that bears its children into a physical and economic enslavement and a spiritual

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1. Doom = Du Homme = Ikkemotubbe.

and emotional vacuum.

In "Delta Autumn", as late as 1940, the Edmonds branch of the family is guilty of this same offense against the Beauchamp branch. And here, completing a circle that began with old Carothers, the sin is not only fatherhood and repudiation, but incest as well. Whites continue to father children on blacks, and continue to make hypocritical denials of their paternity that lead them around to fathering still other children on their own black relatives. Roth Edmonds, the son of Zack, has taken as a mistress an anonymous country woman from the Delta, left her with a child, and attempted to buy himself free, as old Carothers (and Thomas Sutpen) did. The woman is not only part black but, as she reveals to Ike McCaslin in the tent while Roth and the others are out on a deer stand, she is their cousin, the granddaughter of James Beauchamp, who was Tomey's Turl's oldest son. Both she and Roth Edmonds are fifth generation descendants of old Carothers, come down so far that Roth himself is not aware of their common blood. Yet even across those five generations, across the 105 years since the conception of Tomey's Turl and the suicide of Eunice, the Original Sin of old Carothers continues to be the paradigm for black-white relations and to have its own harmful effect

on victim's like Roth's mistress. Even Uncle Ike, who has spent his life in reaction against old Carothers' irresponsible acts of fatherhood, has become so old himself that he fails to understand how the birthright of white blood, white seed--and no more--is to a black child more of a curse than a blessing:

> "That's right. Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for you--for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a black man. You are young, handsome, almost white; you could find a black man who would see in you what it was you saw in him. . . ."(274)

Ike does recognize that some form of spiritual patrimony must accompany the physical act of fatherhood. But he has given himself a very limited life and his gesture in that direction is futile. Ike has never known human love, but has embraced only the values of the wilderness. At this point, when the wilderness is as old and near to death as he is, the best gift he can make is meaningless to the woman. He gives her

> the horn, the one which General Compson had left him in his will, covered with the unbroken skin from a buck's shank and bound with silver.
>
> "What?" she said.
>
> "It's his. Take it."
>
> "Oh," she said. "Yes. Thank you."(274)

"Go Down, Moses", the final story and the only one set entirely outside the McCaslin patriarchy, includes a modern avatar of the victim of Carothers' paternity: Samuel Worsham Beauchamp. Samuel Worsham, like Roth Edmonds, is the fifth-generation offspring of old Carothers. Like most of the members of his line before, Samuel Worsham was given a vacuum in place of conventional paternity. He did not know his parents, but was raised by his grandmother, Molly. As birthright he received not even so much as the cash compensation left by old Carothers--the $1000 had been exhausted long before--but instead was thrown off the McCaslin plantation by Roth Edmonds and ordered never to return, sold into Egypt by his own brothers, as Molly would have it. His life ends with execution for murder, in a Chicago jail. The return of his body to Jefferson, for burial by his grandmother on the McCaslin plantation, is only an ironic fulfillment of decorous family solidarity, comforting to the old black woman but too late and worthless to the disinherited son.

Rider, the young widower of "Pantaloon in Black", is a figure similar to Samuel Worsham, though still more completely disinherited. A minion on the McCaslin plantation, Rider has not even the slightest McCaslin ancestry. Had he wanted to, with the alteration of a name, Faulkner could have perfectly well connected this story

more closely to the others by making Rider another great-grandson of Tomey's Turl. But Faulkner chose to leave Rider the single protagonist in any of the sections who is not descended from Carothers McCaslin. This was to good effect: Rider's lack of relationship to the McCaslins accentuates his spiritual isolation, and his solitary presence in the novel is a reminder of the most extremely alienated, misinterpreted state of the Negro. He has no specifically mentioned problem of fatherhood (although his only immediate family are his aunt and uncle), but his situation makes those of most of the Beauchamp blacks appear comparatively fortunate.

The comic "Was" is incongruously placed as the opening sequence to such a pathetic and elegiac novel. "Was" is as effectively written as any part of Go Down, Moses but, being the mock-heroic account of how one sixty-year-old bachelor brother saves his twin from the peril of a fawning old maid, and attended by broadly humorous chase sequences of dog after fox, horse after mule and master after slave, it would seem to belong more with The Unvanquished or with the lightest of Faulkner's Big Woods stories, such as "Race at Morning". In its treatment of Tomey's Turl, the shiftless but wily family slave, who is simple enough to know exactly what he wants and clever enough to know how to get it, and of his agreeably

bondaged relationship with the white brothers, it suggests a view of the racial situation no more enlightened than that in Sartoris or, again, the regressive The Unvanquished. "Was" gives such an impression as an individual story. But as part of the novel it does more.

"Was" presents an early view of three of the four first-generation descendants of old Carothers, the only three (to the exclusion of a daughter Mary,[1] the grandmother of Cass Edmonds) to appear in the book: Theophilus McCaslin(Buck), his brother Amodeus(Buddy) and their half-brother, Tomey's Turl. Although no single present-time can be assigned to the novel as a whole, "Was" is clearly indicated by Faulkner to be at some temporal distance from the other sections. It represents a set-piece glimpse of the past while the others, whether occurring in 1880 or 1940, are treated as present. "Was" is set off both by its title and by the introduction describing the temporal gap across which the events are viewed:

> Isaac McCaslin, "Uncle Ike", past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one.

This was not something participated in or even

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1. Brooks, p. 448.

seen by himself, but by his elder cousin, McCaslin Edmonds. . . .

Not something he had participated in or even remembered except from the hearing, the listening, come to him through and from his cousin McCaslin born in 1850 and sixteen years his senior and hence, his own father being near seventy when Isaac, an only child, was born, rather his brother than cousin and rather his father than either, out of the old time, the old days.(9-10)

Such distancing is the basis on which the light, romanticized mood of "Was" will be ironically undermined by future revelations. Faulkner may have been consciously reverting toward his earlier, humorously stereotyped view of the races, one not too dissimilar from those of Joel Chandler Harris or George Washington Cable, in order to say, "This is the way we always thought of it," before admitting, "This is what lay behind it." The reader of "Was" is given no hint that Tomey's Turl is the half-brother of the two white owners who seem to treat him with friendly indulgence. Only later, in section four of "The Bear", does the reader learn both of the brotherhood and of the incestuous act in which Tomey's Turl had his origin. Then, the story that read like a comic but irrelevant anecdote is endowed in retrospect with pathetic implications. It is difficult to look back at the agreeable, skulking figure of Tomey's Turl

without seeing him as the victim of a brutal hidden evil and the symbol of all the outcast and repudiated Negro heirs from Charles Bon and Joe Christmas to Samuel Worsham Beauchamp.

At the same time, "Was" prepares for the later condition of Ike McCaslin as a spiritually isolated man, a man with no blood father that he ever knew and no desire to be a blood father to any human being. Uncle Buck, sixty at the time of his narrow escape, was Ike's father, and the grotesquely unsympathetic Sophonsiba Beauchamp, as the reader learns, again from section four of "The Bear"(229), was under some unimagineable circumstances his mother. Whatever reasons were behind Uncle Buck's reversing his attitude toward Sophonsiba (presumably a decision by the two ageing brothers that one of them should take the responsibility for propagating the McCaslin family name), he died not long afterward and left Isaac fatherless. He also left Isaac, up to the age of ten,[1] with a mother for whom no one, least of all Ike McCaslin, could be grateful. The character of his mother, Sophonsiba, as pictured in "Was", may or may not have helped to make Ike inclined to live most of the years of his life in the

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1. Brooks, p. 448.

absence of women; but without doubt the choice by Buck to wait until he was seventy to become a begrudging father, and then quickly depart from the scene, was important. It may have left Ike with a cynicism toward the state of blood fatherhood. And it certainly left him with a vacuum that was filled by Sam Fathers.

In reaction to the ethics of their ancestors--Ikkemotubbe and old Carothers--who fathered sons as if they were stamping on the curse of Cain and then denied any spiritual responsibility to their offspring, Sam Fathers and Ike both choose to be the physical father of no man, but to embrace the values of the wilderness and to serve a spiritual paternity by passing those values down, Sam to Ike, and Ike to such as Roth Edmonds and Will Legate. Contrasting with the comic moods of "Was" and "The Fire and the Hearth" and the bitter pathos of "The Fire and the Hearth", "Pantaloon in Black", "Delta Autumn" and "Go Down, Moses", the two stories in which that spiritual paternity is described--"The Old People" and "The Bear"--are the most positive and elegiac segments of the novel.

There is an irony to the name of Sam, known as Had-Two-Fathers in the original Chickasaw: although two men shared that relation to him in form, Ikkemotubbe

and the slave to whom Sam's mother was married, neither of them fulfilled it. Sam had to look elsewhere for paternity. He found it through the Indian race--not such as his father, Ikkemotubbe, who in the image of the white man was a violator of nature, but through the wilderness Indians, whom Sam spoke of as the People.

> The boy would just wait and then listen and Sam would begin, talking about the old days and the People whom he had not had time ever to know and so could not remember (he did not remember ever having seen his father's face), and in place of whom the other race into which his blood had run supplied him with no substitute.(132)

Sam's greeting of the great phantom buck that he took Ike to see in the thicket shows that he has made a substitute heritage of the wilderness itself: "'Oleh, Chief,' Sam said. 'Grandfather.'"(142) He affirms an ancestral relationship based on the passing down not of seed nor money nor property but of courage and patience and understanding, by which a man can learn to live at peace with nature and with the past.

"The Bear" is the account of the gradual process of Ike's training in those values, to the point not only of learning to live within the wilderness, but of learning to live without it. His education has taught him to stalk Old Ben and know the bear's ways as well

as any man but, more important, it has given him an understanding of the inevitable movements of life and death that allows him to accept the destruction of Ben. The deaths of Ben, Lion and Sam Fathers within four days of each other represent the passing of one generation and the transference of its responsibilities to the next, but not a negation of the values of courage and patience and understanding. Although, according to his emotional attachment to the ritual contest with Old Ben, Ike "should have hated and feared Lion," he appreciates why he need not. Much later, in "Delta Autumn", when the Mississippi wilderness itself has nearly gone the way of Sam, Ben and Lion, that wisdom allows Ike to be free of bitterness or regret in treasuring what he has had and what remains.

Section four of "The Bear" has no more to do with the bear hunt than with "Was" or any of the other stories--though it does have a critical connection with all of them. Faulkner said of a publisher who mistakenly printed the complete five-part version as an autonomous story:

> If he had told me he was going to print it separately, I would have said, Take this (i.e., section four) out, this doesn't belong in this as a short story, it's a part

of the novel but not part of the story.[1]

Section four is, in fact, the key to the structure of Go Down, Moses, the part by which all seven stories are drawn together in novelistic unity. The section arises from a small parenthetical gap between parts three and five of the bear-hunting tale and spreads out over the seven disconnected narratives like an umbrella.

Section four, as it is placed in "The Bear", violates the chronological order of the rest of that story. Sections one through three focus on Ike at the ages of ten, thirteen and sixteen, as he encounters Ben for the first time, then witnesses the capture and training of Lion, and finally as he takes part in the hunt which ends in Ben's death. And section five shows Ike, at eighteen, returning to the scene of the hunt to witness Boon's hysterical sorrow for the vanishing wilderness. But section four leaps ahead, finding Ike at age twenty-one, to deal with the themes of birthright and repudiation.

The long dialogue with his cousin Cass Edmonds, in which Ike rejects his inheritance of the McCaslin plantation, is the principal focus. Yet the section spans a period of time from Ike's seventeenth year (the

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 273.

same year Old Ben was killed), when he broke into the commissary and discovered the facts of his grandfather's sin on the ledger pages, to sometime in his thirties, when Ike's wife attempts to use her body as a bribe to make him reclaim his property, and their marriage is dealt a fatal blow. Three different financial birthrights are examined: Ike's inheritance of the McCaslin property, the $1000 that old Carothers left for the children of Tomey's Turl, and the silver cup filled with gold pieces and sealed in burlap, which was put in trust for Ike by his Uncle Hubert Beauchamp. Of these, the latter two must have served as lessons to Ike and helped shape his decision to repudiate the first.

Ike was nineteen when Fonsiba Beauchamp, the daughter of Tomey's Turl, eloped with the black stranger in the ministerial clothing. Five months later Ike himself traced her--as he had already traced her brother James as far as Jackson, Tennessee--to give her a third of the $1000 legacy. A sense of guilt over his ancestor's sin and feelings of family responsibility to these black cousins compelled him to make the journeys. But when Ike found Fonsiba and her proud husband, in a decrepit cabin somewhere in Arkansas, they refused to accept any share of Carothers McCaslin's bribe money.

With little firewood to get them through the winter and no lenses in his spectacles, the husband repudiates Ike's offer with lofty principles that are empty but firm: "We are seeing a new era, an era dedicated, as our founders intended it, to freedom, liberty, and equality for all, to which this country will be the new Canaan--"(213). Fonsiba responds to Ike's concern in a more simple way, but one that is equally idealistic:

> "Fonsiba," he said. "Fonsiba. Are you all right?"
>
> "I'm free," she said.(214)

If one man, besides Sam Fathers, set a positive example for Ike that influenced him in his decision to repudiate the McCaslin heirship, it was this stubborn stranger, who had so infuriated him.

The story of the silver-cup legacy from Hubert Beauchamp is a light anecdote but relentlessly echoes the theme of the hollow birthright. Ike was guaranteed at his birth, by his uncle and godfather, a silver cup filled with gold pieces, to be Ike's when he reached twenty-one. But long before that day the gold and even the silver cup had been secretly borrowed back by the indigent Hubert, and by the time Ike broke the wax seal

and removed the burlap wrap--when Hubert himself was long dead--nothing remained but a handful of copper coins, a rat's nest of I.O.U.s and a bright tin coffee pot to hold them. Ike learned that his Beauchamp heirship was as economically bankrupt as his McCaslin heirship was morally bankrupt.

These incidents, as well as the scene between Ike and his wife that closes section four, provide a background to Ike's decision and his alienation from property-owning white society. The final scene, with the anonymous young wife who, as Faulkner himself said,[1] has the ethics of a prostitute, touches again the theme of spiritually empty parenthood. Motherhood, not fatherhood, is in this case the particular issue. But the potential motherhood represented by Ike's wife is just as cold-blooded, as motived by viciously selfish concerns, and as devoid of spiritual responsibility as the fatherhood of old Carothers or Ikkemotubbe. This experience, in which his wife tries to extort a promise to reclaim the plantation by tempting Ike with her body, may indicate the main reason why Ike, uncle to half a county, is father to no one:

> . . .she turned and freed herself and on their

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 275.

> wedding night she had cried and he thought she was crying now at first, into the tossed and wadded pillow, the voice coming from somewhere between the pillow and the cachinnation: "And that's all. That's all from me. If this don't get you that son you talk about, it won't be mine:" lying on her side, her back to the empty rented room, laughing and laughing(240).

Section four is a portrait of the process of Ike's disillusionment, his rejection of a normal life in the world, and his repudiation of his role in the McCaslin line of descent. At the heart of that section and of his attitude--occurring before any of the other scenes, when he was sixteen, the year he parted with Ben and Sam Fathers--is his discovery, in the ledgers, that the blacks he has known and been served by, Tennie's Jim, Fonsiba, Lucas and others, are his cousins, products of a concealed abomination committed by the first of the McCaslins, his grandfather. Like the reader, Ike never approaches old Carothers and the sin more immediately than through the scrawled and misspelled entries by his father and uncle, in the yellowed ledger pages. But obscured from view as he is, Carothers has shaped the course of Ike's life, and those of the whole line of McCaslin, Edmonds and Beauchamp characters as well.

PART THREE

The Contrapuntal Novels

<u>The Wild Palms</u>

<u>Requiem for a Nun</u>

<u>Light in August</u>

Chapter Five

The Wild Palms and Requiem for a Nun

The Wild Palms and Requiem for a Nun are strikingly similar in structure. Each employs the device of counterpoint, as thesis alternates with antithesis and two distinct plot elements reflect on a single set of themes. Faulkner himself conceded this close similarity between the two novels, separated in the writing by a dozen years, and even spoke of both--in the comments quoted earlier--in terms of the same musical imagery. Describing his work on The Wild Palms, he said:

> I decided that it needed a contrapuntal quality like music. . . .I'd write the chapter of one and then I would write the chapter of the other just as the musician puts in--puts counterpoint behind the theme that he is working with.[1]

Concerning Requiem for a Nun, he explained that "those interludes" were

> necessary to give it the contrapuntal effect which comes in orchestration, that the hard give-and-take of the dialogue was played against something that was a little mystical, made it sharper, more effective, in my opinion.[2]

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 171.

2. Ibid., p. 122.

These statements offer an excellent insight into the type of creative impulses behind so many of Faulkner's experiments with the form of the novel. Although The Wild Palms, like As I Lay Dying, has been described as a tour de force, it seems rather to have been a utilitarian answer to what the author sincerely perceived as a narrative need. Just as Faulkner attributed his drawn-out and convoluted syntax, in works such as Absalom, Absalom!, to a desire to tell the whole story in one breath, so in these books he is straining toward the effect--beyond the capacity of conventional written narration but characteristic of an orchestra--of speaking with a number of different voices at the same time.

Although The Wild Palms is not at all a "difficult" book, like Absalom, Absalom! or A Fable, it has been surprisingly roughly-handled and underrated. This is probably due in large part to the fact that the primary story, the love affair of Charlotte and Harry, is a departure from what, by 1939 when the book was published, had come to be considered Faulkner's appropriate sphere of activity. Charlotte and Harry's adventure does not take place in Yoknapatawpha County, nor does it deal with stoic endurance by Negroes, instinctive wisdom in old women and young boys, nor the collapse of a decadent

aristocracy. It portrays the passionate, sensual relationship of a modern adult man and woman. Faulkner's only other novel set outside Yoknapatawpha since Mosquitoes at the start of his career was Pylon, also modern, urban and sensual, and justly considered by some critics to be the worst book he wrote. These circumstances may have obscured the fact that The Wild Palms, published under any name other than Faulkner's, would probably have been received as a strikingly good novel.

A history of the publication of The Wild Palms shows the general unwillingness to accept it as Faulkner offered it. Signet Books, the paperback company, first reprinted the two stories, "Wild Palms" and "Old Man", in two separate volumes. Later, in 1954, Signet reissued both in one volume, but without Faulkner's alternation of chapters.[1] In 1958 a Modern Library volume extracted "Old Man" for inclusion with "Spotted Horses" and "The Bear" as one of the author's "short novels". Malcolm Cowley, in 1946, had already done the same, taking "Old Man" for The Portable Faulkner, with the comment that it was by so much the more effective half that it "gains by standing alone."[2] Irving Howe has gone a step further in the disengagement

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1. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Unity of Theme and Structure in The Wild Palms", from Three Decades of Criticism, p. 305.
2. Malcolm Cowley, ed., The Portable Faulkner (New York: 1946), p. 540.

of the two halves. In his treatment of The Wild Palms he attributes to Faulkner the remark: "I did send both stories to the publisher separately and they were rejected because they were too short. So I alternated the chapters of them."[1] Howe neglects to cite any source for this curious statement, which neither agrees with any of the other accounts by Faulkner of how the book was created, nor sounds much like the style of Faulkner's speech. The quote seems to have come out of someone's imagination. Faulkner reacted specifically to its suggestion while at Nagano: "I did not write those two stories and then cut one into the other. I wrote them, as you read it, as the chapters."[2]

Despite the slightly unusual structure, and the unwillingness of editors and critics to let that structure stand intact, The Wild Palms is one of Faulkner's simplest novels, and it seems quite logical that the two simple, bare stories of which it is composed would need each other for the counterpointing effect that Faulkner described. Faulkner further explained: "When I reached the end of what is now the first section of The Wild Palms, I realized suddenly that something was

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1. Howe, p. 238.
2. Faulkner at Nagano, p. 80.

missing. . . .So I wrote on the "Old Man" story until the "Wild Palms" story rose back to pitch,"[1] and Irving Howe approved of this, saying, "'Wild Palms' by itself is almost intolerably painful and needs very much to be brought 'back to pitch'."[2] The desperate affair of Charlotte and Harry, intense, serious and self-destructive from the beginning but leading them finally to pathetic depths, such as when Harry proposes to the doctor in San Antonio to perform any abortions thrown the doctor's way, and when Charlotte twice vomits her "abortion pills" into the sink, twice rinsing and swallowing them again, is in fact almost unbearable to read by itself. It is a profoundly uncomfortable story, leading inevitably--as the reader knows from the opening chapter--nowhere but to ugly complication and death. This may be another reason why critics have tended to dismiss "Wild Palms" as inferior to "Old Man": the reader's natural reaction, when reading the stories in alternation, is to want to detach himself from Charlotte and Harry, and flee on to the less oppressive, slightly humorous atmosphere surrounding the stoic convict.

But besides this, "Wild Palms" and "Old Man" are

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1. Paris Review interview, Lion in the Garden, p. 247.
2. Howe, p. 239.

both such simple narratives, so undeviating in the lines that they follow and so circumscribed in the types of experience that they comprehend, that an antithesis, something in which the same human concerns might be recognized but which was very different in mood and circumstances, was truly necessary to each of them, to give them any universal stature. "Wild Palms" is more bare of plot complication than any other major story Faulkner wrote, a great distance from such intricate narratives as Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury. It tells the story of two people, and all other characters are entirely incidental. There is no more to the plot than this: Charlotte and Harry meet, fall in love and run away together, are driven successively from New Orleans to Chicago to various other places, in the course of which they struggle for a living and Harry is persuaded to perform an abortion on Charlotte, which causes her death and his imprisonment. "Old Man" is equally free of cross-currents or intricate turns of circumstance: a convict is sent out to rescue a woman from flood, he does, takes care of her for s ome two months until he can return her to safety, and then reenters the penitentiary. By itself, "Wild Palms", as Howe said, would be unbearable, a dose of morbid "naturalism"

as might have come from a minor disciple of Theodore Dreiser and Ellen Glasgow. By itself "Old Man" would be--and is--quite inferior to the Huckleberry Finn with which it is sometimes compared: a decent example of pastoral primitivism but the most extreme intellectual reduction of man (at least of the white man) in Faulkner. Together, they represent a study of two attitudes toward life and love--the cautious and the reckless--that has considerable breadth but very sharp focus.

Olga Vickery sees in The Wild Palms "the tension between man's desire for freedom and for security. . . suggested through two pairs of contrasting symbols--confinement and flight, earth and water."[1] But in fact none of the characters are at all interested in freedom, certainly not for its own sake, as she implies. Charlotte and Harry free themselves from certain restrictions only so they may bind themselves in an inescapable contract, dedicating themselves more to an idea than to each other. Michael Millgate stresses the similarities between Wilbourne and the tall convict, implying that, despite their circumstantial differences, they go through congruent experiences. Both at the outset are secure and content, Millgate says, in their ordered lives; both

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1. Vickery, p. 156.

end in Parchman prison; Wilbourne with his arrest begins to assume the convict's anonymity, being called by names that are not his own; they are approximately the same age; at the beginning each, Millgate says, has abjured sex; and finally, each is led "to break away from the familiar pattern of his life and to embark, in company with a strange woman, on an adventure of extraordinary violence and diversity."[1] Howe supports this stress on the similarity of Wilbourne's and the tall convict's experiences, when he contrives to make every possible pair of episodes seem congruent:

"Wild Palms"	"Old Man"
5. Flashback: drifting from country to Chicago.	6. Drifting with pregnant woman on flood waters.
7. Flashback: haven in a mining camp.	8. Haven with Cajun.[2]

A number of similarities do exist between Wilbourne and the tall convict, of course, but throughout the chain of events the two men are facing in opposite directions. Each is going where the other has been. The stories run parallel, not to suggest similarities but to demonstrate that the men are negative images of

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1. Millgate, p. 176.
2. Howe, p. 238.

each other. Faulkner said:

> The isolation, the solitude of the boat in that raging torrent was the solitude which Harry and Charlotte had tried so long to find, where they could be lovers--to escape from the world. They went to infinite labor and risk and sacrifice to escape from the world where this convict had been hurled out of the world against his will whether he wanted to or not. That he and the woman he saved had what Charlotte and Wilbourne had sacrificed everything to get. That's what I mean by counterpoint to the theme of the other book.[1]

Risk is a key word in understanding the difference between Wilbourne and the tall convict. Their respective attitudes toward risk, the amounts of risk they have taken and the amounts they feel disposed to take in pursuit of life, are what distinguish them from each other. Faulkner's chief intent in The Wild Palms seems to have been a portrayal of two antithetical attitudes toward the potential risks involved in a full human life, and of how those attitudes determine the actions of Wilbourne and the tall convict.

The first bit of information related about the tall convict, a man with "pale, china-colored outraged eyes," is the source of his outrage:

> an outrage directed not at the men who had

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 178.

> foiled his crime, not even at the lawyers and judges who had sent him here, but at the writers, the uncorporeal names attached to the stories, the paper novels--the Diamond Dicks and Jesse Jameses and such--whom he believed had led him into his present predicament through their own ignorance and gullibility regarding the medium in which they dealt and took money for, in accepting information on which they placed the stamp of verisimilitude and authenticity. . .and retailed for money and which on actual application proved to be impractical and (to the convict) criminally false. . . .(23)

Of course, it was the tall convict himself who, at an early age, was gullible--gullible and impulsive. He is serving a fifteen-year sentence at Parchman because as an eighteen-year-old, under the influence and according to the programs of dime novels of adventure, he attempted to rob a train with a toy pistol. He was precocious in daring, if not in intelligence. But the attempt was a failure: he was captured with humiliating promptness before the adventure had even begun. Entering the penitentiary just after his nineteenth birthday, he bore a deep mark from that experience. He had tried recklessness, he had tried over-stepping the boundaries laid out by society, and he had been fearsomely punished. In reaction, determined never again to be so deceived and trapped as he was by the detective story writers, he developed an attitude toward life that is profoundly cautious. He avoids responsibility, refusing even the

position of a trusty, which would allow him to guard others as they plow, rather than plowing himself. And when responsibility is thrust upon him, as when he finds himself alone in the boat, sent out to rescue the woman in the tree and the man on the cottonhouse, he does everything in his power--and far more than would be expected of him--to stay within the boundaries of law and society. "He wanted to do it the right way,"(161) describes the convict's ruling obsession.

The conditions of the flood frustrate that reflex for compliance in the convict, by sweeping away all social boundaries and conventions for miles around him, and leaving him floating with his pregnant charge in an unfamiliar watery universe that recognizes no rules but the survival of the able. The fascinating tension of "Old Man" is that between an individual who is obviously capable of much--fortitude, improvisation and independence--but who wants only to do what society expects of him, and a society that has temporarily abdicated, disappeared, refusing to expect anything of him. It should be kept in mind, after all, that the tall convict is no Robinson Crusoe who has been carried off to a new world and forced to make a new order there. The convict has remained in the lower Mississippi basin--one of the most established

social milieux in America at that time--and society has vanished, under water.

Although the book has been described, by Faulkner himself, as a study of "two types of love,"[1] no mention is made of the convict's woman companion after the point where he delivers her and the boat to the deputy. Instead, the final chapter deals with the penitentiary officials' reaction to his reappearance at Parchman. That reappearance is a source of more concern to the Warden and the Governor than to him, just as the additional ten years sentence he is given, on the premise that he tried to escape, is a source of more social indignation to critics writing about the book, than to the convict. He is confirmed in the fanatically cautious life, the life that stays within the boundaries, and the boundaries of prison life are simpler than those of society outside, and therefore more agreeable. His outrage at the writers who caused his original predicament does not extend to those who prolong his incarceration. He responds to the news, when the Warden tells him, in a typical way:

> "They are going to have to add ten years to your time."

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1. Lavon Roscoe, "An Interview with William Faulkner," The Western Review, 15 (Summer, 1951), p. 300. Quoted in Moldenhauer, Three Decades of Criticism, p. 313.

"All right," the convict said.

"It's hard luck. I'm sorry."

"All right," the convict said. "If that's the rule."(331)

Harry Wilbourne, in contrast, was a twenty-seven year old virgin who had been respectably following his father on the single straight path through medical school to being a doctor since two days after his own birth. His problem was that he had been too cautious for too long, and as he passed his twenty-seventh birthday without ever having indulged in an act one fraction as reckless as what the tall convict had done at eighteen, he realized it:

> He seemed to see them: the empty years in which his youth had vanished--the years for wild oats and for daring, for the passionate tragic ephemeral loves of adolescence, the girl- and boy-white, the wild importunate fumbling flesh, which had not been for him. . . .(34)

"Wild Palms" is the story of a man who chooses desperate willful recklessness as a reaction against 27 years of hollow caution, and is fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to meet at the moment of his disenchantment a woman so intensely romantic and self-destructive as to be his ideal partner and guide. (Charlotte Rittenmeyer, though unrecognized and perhaps

not sympathetic, is one of the more impressive female characters Faulkner created. The contrast between her and the woman in "Old Man", who does nothing whatsoever but sit in the boat with bovine placidity and give birth to a child, and who represents the most extreme version--beyond even Lena Grove--of Faulkner's caricaturization of the "female principle", underlines the contrast between the two male characters.) Wilbourne is so over-ripe with self-denial that when the circumstances of his acquaintance with Charlotte and his finding of the $1278 converge, he seems simply to fall off the vine. The process is not so simple, not so clean and automatic, however. It requires a continuing, willful embracing of social damnation to free Wilbourne from his sense of having over-cautiously stood apart from life, as he explains to McCord in the bar, before leaving for Utah:

> "It was like the instant of virginity, it was the instant of virginity: . . .it lasted as long as it did because I was too old, I waited too long; twenty-seven is too long to wait to get out of your system what you should have rid yourself of at fourteen or fifteen. . . ."(137)

The entire course of Charlotte and Wilbourne's relationship, which degenerates in less than a year from a romantic spree into a gruesome deathwatch, consists of a series of unconsciously or semi-consciously self-

destructive decisions. They are not star-crossed lovers: everything that befalls them is from their own hand, consequences of their determination to step across social boundaries wherever those appear and be passionately heedless in seizing the moments they share. Their first difficulties, in Chicago, arise because Charlotte's neglect of the promise she made to keep Rat informed has caused Rat's detective to get Wilbourne fired from his job. Later, in Chicago again, it is Wilbourne's free choice to drag them away from the city and their dependable means of support, to a dubious situation in the wastes of Utah, because, as he explains to McCord in the words he finds a mandate for desperate action: "I had become a husband." In Utah, the feverish abandon with which they make love on the night they have privacy at last, and Charlotte's neglect in allowing the douche bag to burst and not telling Wilbourne, bring on the complication of pregnancy. Penultimately, Wilbourne's own hand literally performs the fatal act, the abortion, which results in their separation--Charlotte's death and his imprisonment. And finally, when they return to New Orleans near the end, for Charlotte's last visit to her husband and daughters, their own destructive vision of a gloriously committed finish prevents them from seeking proper medical

attention for Charlotte. They sacrifice that chance of prolonged but compromised life for just four more days together alone at the Gulf Coast cottage. Wilbourne outlines this attitude toward the risks inherent in a life lived fully, again in that critical conversation with McCord, at the train station bar. He asserts that

> "there is nothing better, nothing to match, nothing else in all this world but to live for the short time you are loaned breath, to be alive and know it--oh, yes, she taught me that. . . ."(133)

This creed, for both Wilbourne and the tall convict, is far more central to the attitudes, temptations and trials in The Wild Palms than the issue of freedom and security. The freedom-security tension suggests something more external, concerning the treatment of an individual by society; The Wild Palms probes the way two individuals choose to treat the potential of their own lives. Wilbourne's final affirmation shows that he has arrived, when pressed to the ultimate, at an unqualified acceptance of whatever life offers: "Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing I will take grief."(324) The tall convict's unprinted expletive, concerning the women who grace the world beyond prison walls, suggests just the opposite.

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Requiem for a Nun certainly owes its structure in some part to Faulkner's previous experiment with The Wild Palms. But despite the similar use of counterpoint, alternating the "hard give-and-take" of one narrative with something "a little mystical" in the other, Requiem for a Nun fails exactly where the earlier book was most successful: in blending into a natural, effective whole. For several reasons, Requiem for a Nun seems consistently forced.

The intention, presumably, was to underline the main story, a moral drama showing Temple Drake's struggle to reconcile her past and her present, with an historical portrait of the institutions--law, government and justice--that provide the external context of Temple's personal struggle. The three acts of the drama take place, at least partly, in the county courtroom, the governor's office, and the county jail; and the three prose prefaces give an historical perspective on each of those settings, describing in turn the building of the courthouse, the founding of the capital at Jackson, Mississippi, and the events connected with the jail since its erection. Olga Vickery describes those prefaces as "presenting history as a record of man's furious efforts to establish a

collective identity, to delegate his moral responsibility, and to find security within a system of laws."[1] Millgate credits the novel's plan with achieving an effect of "constant reverberation between the dramatic and the narrative, between the private and public worlds."[2] But I suggest that this creative reverberation never happens; that, while the dramatic and the historical sections may be theoretical complements, they do not add anything to each other, as the halves of The Wild Palms do.

"Wild Palms" and "Old Man" were two stories independently worthy of telling, and neither had any connection with the Yoknapatawpha canon. Requiem for a Nun, on the contrary, is riddled with derivation from Faulkner's previous work. The drama is a sequel to Sanctuary, and is probably related to the material of an original Requiem for a Nun that was announced for publication and then cancelled in early 1934,[3] three years after the appearance of Sanctuary. The prose sections are a grab-bag of references to material that is already established in the Yoknapatawpha mythology.

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1. Vickery, p. 115.
2. Millgate, p. 225.
3. Ibid., p. 221.

The most striking of these is the description near the end of the s econd preface of President Andrew Jackson (after whom the capital of Mississippi was named):
"--the old duellist, the brawling lean fierce mangy durable old lion who set the well-being of the Nation above the White House, and the health of his new political party above either, and above them all set, not his wife's honour, but the principle that honour must be defended whether it was or not since, defended, it was, whether or not."(93) This is lifted almost verbatim from the Appendix of The Sound and the Fury. The purchase with his race horse by Jason Lycurgus Compson of the square mile of land from Ikkemotubbe is recapitulated(184), also deriving from the Appendix; as is the capture in the swamp of Thomas Sutpen's escaped French architect(189), from Absalom, Absalom!; the murder of Colonel John Sartoris on the Jefferson Square(200), from The Unvanquished; and the heart-attack death of Bayard Sartoris in a horseless carriage(203), from Sartoris. In addition, Temple in one of her longer speeches describes the plight of a man, "before my time in Jefferson"--

> His wife had just died--they had been married only two weeks--and he buried her and so at first he tried just walking the country roads at night for exhaustion and sleep, only that failed and then he tried getting drunk so he

> could sleep, and that failed and then he tried fighting and then he cut a white man's throat with a razor in a dice game. . .(167)

--without mentioning that his name would be Rider, whose story, "Pantaloon in Black", was part of Go Down, Moses. Finally, most of the plot of Sanctuary itself is rehashed by Temple and Gavin, between pages 118-128. This is ostensibly done for the benefit of the Governor but, although the reader has already seen this material if he is reading the two books in their logical order, Faulkner attempts to create an eddy of suspense around the perverse details of Popeye, Temple and Red's relationship, as if the impact should be fresh:

> Governor: Wait. What did you say?. . .You said, after they left. . . .Am I being told that this. . .Vitelli would be there in the room too?
>
> Stevens: Yes. That was why he brought him. You can see now what I mean by connoisseur and gourmet.(127)

The effect of all this repetition is to make each of the halves of Requiem for a Nun seem more intimately related to the Yoknapatawpha saga as a whole than they are to one another. In the writing, that may have been precisely the case.

Besides the material that is echoed from previous novels, the three prose prefaces contain a good bit of

"historical" information relating to characters and events that were already part of the Yoknapatawpha mythology, but which is not repetitious itself. Particularly in the first and third prefaces, an almost systematic series of additions to the history of the county are made, which suggest that the author, with his entire Balzacian tapestry in mind, was finding a few historical spaces that wanted filling, and was acting to put in the finishing stitches. The identification of the three founders of the original Jefferson settlement--Alec Holston, Dr, Habersham and Louis Grenier--is one such bit of detail, since each of those names is significant to a reader of earlier Faulkner: Holston as the proprietor of Jefferson's first and preeminent hotel and informal social nucleus; Habersham as the ancestor of Miss Habersham, the dowager heroine of Intruder in the Dust; and Grenier as the anonymous Frenchman behind the legend of gold in The Hamlet. The arrival of John Sartoris, the relationships among Compson, Sartoris and Sutpen, the mustering of the Jefferson regiment for the war by Sartoris, and the cooperation between Sutpen's architect and the settlement in building the courthouse (although this last is improbable, perhaps even contradictory, to the relationship between the town and Sutpen as depicted in Absalom, Absalom!)

are other touches added to the larger picture. The only piece of Faulkner's work that is similar to these prefaces in historical scope and method is the Appendix to The Sound and the Fury, a retrospective addition to that book. It is easy to imagine how, in 1951, Faulkner being fifty-four and having just climaxed his career in the reception of the Nobel Prize the year before, a parallel impulse to encapsulate the full history of his imaginary domain may have inspired the prefaces.

Requiem for a Nun is, in fact, at the same time the author's most detailed, most remote (excepting the Appendicized biographies of the 17th and 18th century Compsons) and most systematic examination of the past, and his most modern view of Mississippi society. Faulkner seems to be placing the county he had written about through ten novels in a perspective that recognizes both temporal extremities, the pioneer days of Holston, Habersham and Grenier, and the New South of fast cars and filling stations and World War II tank guns flanking the Confederate monument. This New South, suggested tangentially in "Delta Autumn" as an imminent shadowy fact, is seen in the drama by the harsh, direct glare of modern electric light fixtures. The young Gowan Stevenses are raising their family in a "smart, modern,

up to date" house complete with an imitation log fire that burns gas, one of a type "rented to young couples or families who can afford to pay that much rent in order to live on the right street among other young couples who belong to the right church and the right country club."(48) Their bungalow, Temple admits, is "on the right street to start the Saturday night hangovers in, a country club with a country-club younger set of rallying friends to make it a Saturday-night hangover worthy the name of Saturday-night country-club hangover, a pew in the right church to recover from it in, provided of course they were not too hungover even to get to church."(134) This is not the characteristic dying South of Faulkner, but a socio-cultural missing link, the author's single glance forward at the South of Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, his successors, in which "at last even the last old sapless indomitable unvanquished widow or maiden aunt had died and the old deathless Lost Cause had become a faded (though still select) social club or caste, or form of behavior when you remembered to observe it on the occasions when young men from Brooklyn, exchange students at Mississippi or Arkansas or Texas Universities, vended tiny Confederate battle flags among the thronged Saturday afternoon ramps of

football stadia."(207)

This juxtaposition of the Yoknapatawpha past with the Yoknapatawpha "future", for the sake of a final, more transcendent look at his county, is consistent with the type of writing Faulkner published throughout the last dozen years of his life. After the Nobel award, which was presented for the year 1949 and accepted in 1950, there seems to have been an impulse in Faulkner to set himself to the Last Things and clean up the unfinished edges of his lifework. First came Requiem for a Nun, in 1951, which had been promised as early as 1934 and which finally took shape as a pair of historical bookends to his chronicle. Next, in 1954, he completed and published A Fable, eight years in the writing, and considered by the author his masterpiece statement on the nature of man. This novel contained, in one seminal dialogue(313), an echo of the thoughts on man's indomitability, from his Nobel acceptance speech four years before, which throughout the essays, speeches and public letters of his last decade emerged as a thumb-nail philosophy. Coming after A Fable was Big Woods, an elegiac and nostalgic look at the vanishing wilderness, put together from previously collected material, plus one new story, "Race at Morning". It is usually labeled as an anthology of Faulkner's hunting tales, but it is much

more than that, doing for the Mississippi wilderness (though with greater success) what the prose sections of Requiem for a Nun attempted to do for Jefferson. Then, in 1957 and 1959, the two final volumes of the Snopes trilogy were produced. They included material thirty years old and had been mentioned among Faulkner's intended projects since the very beginning of his career. Last of all, published in 1962 just a few weeks before his death, was The Reivers. Subtitled A Reminiscence, it is in fact one of the few novels in which Faulkner drew largely on autobiographical sources. It is a first-person account by a young boy of certain adventures of initiation; yet self-conscious recognition is made of the fact that it constitutes an historical set-piece, by the words which introduce the boy's narrative: "Grandfather said:". Requiem for a Nun is less successful than most of these other broadly retrospective novels, not because of its divided structure, but because of its divided purpose. The evolution of Jefferson's legal and governmental institutions is never more than a secondary theme. The primary theme remains the moral rehabilitation of Temple Drake, and according to its treatment of that theme the book must be judged.

A crucial problem with the dramatic half of the book,

as Millgate has recognized, is that "the whole drama centres not simply upon but within Temple Drake herself: the only really important things that happen are those which we understand to have taken place inside her."[1] He goes on to compare it to the commissary conversation between Ike and Cass in Go Down, Moses, in that both employ the "device of dramatising the internal conflict in terms of a dialogue." But a more fundamental problem, in Requiem for a Nun, cannot be solved by any narrative device: while the drama takes place within Temple, the conflict she feels, and her resolution of it, have been forced on her by Gavin Stevens. Nothing happens in the play, from the opening curtain to the finish, that Gavin, acting as a spokesman for Faulkner's moral judgements, has not forced to happen. Gavin follows Temple home after the trial, sends her a telegram in California, arranges for her to make a personal plea to the Governor, contrives for that plea to be transformed into a confession to her husband, and prods her every step of the way to dig deeper, to be more honest, to face up to her past. In Vickery's words, he is the "Socratic midwife" to her moral dialectic.[2] Without Nancy

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1. Millgate, p. 222.
2. Vickery, p. 123.

Mannigoe Temple may have run off with the young blackmailer, but without Gavin Stevens she would have continued to live with her dark secrets and hypocrisies, suppressing what minimal pains of conscience they may have given her. That the life of Nancy Mannigoe is treated--by Temple, by Gavin and by Faulkner--as a pawn, to be sacrificed coldly for effect, is disturbingly evident. The reader quickly realizes that what Faulkner is putting at stake is not Nancy's life, but Temple's soul. Yet Temple's soul is, from the evidence that is presented, a moot point. If Temple herself is not unbearably concerned with its rehabilitation, as she does not appear to be, then why should the reader care? The answer is that Faulkner, through his righteous attorney, has forced everyone to suffer through this conflict. But it is not effective. It is an artificially induced crisis.

The prose prefaces, it can be said, lend an historical dimension to Temple's struggle to reconcile justice and morality, and a public dimension to the struggle to reconcile her past and her present. But this plan is forced as well. Of the ninety pages of prose, less than half is compelling material that stands on its own merits. The first preface is built around an earlier story, published in Harper's as "A Name for the

City".[1] Running from the beginning of the book to page 29, the original material is a lively narrative. The fifteen pages that have been added on, including the actual building of the courthouse and a survey of its use, are anticlimactic and rather diffuse, by comparison. The second preface, in which Faulkner inflates his rhetoric for a stampede through the ages of central Mississippi, from a rhapsody over the primordial ooze to a Chamber of Commerce litany, must be considered a total loss. It contains some of the most self-indulgent clots of phrases Faulkner ever wrote: "In the beginning was already decreed this rounded knob, this gilded pustule, already before and beyond the steamy chiaroscuro, untimed unseasoned winterless miasma not any one of water or earth or life yet all of each, inextricable and indivisible; that one seethe one spawn one mother-womb, one furious tumescence, father-mother-one, one vast incubant ejaculation already fissionating in one boiling moil of litter from the celestial experimental Work Bench;"(87) and so on. It is painfully evident that "The Golden Dome" has been erected to balance out part two of Faulkner's contrapuntal schema, and could have no other conceivable reason for

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1. Millgate, p. 224.

its existence. The third preface contains an interesting narrative element in the image of Cecilia Farmer, standing for years behind her window pane, but that is buried in forty pages of rehashed local history, much of which is already familiar and, like the last fifteen pages of "The Courthouse", not much of which is either narratively engaging nor particularly unbearable.

Gavin Stevens, late in Act One of the drama, argues that the crux of Temple's moral problem--which is the problem he has posed for her--is to somehow come to grips with her own past. He asserts, by implication, the relevance to Temple's situation of the material in the three prefaces, when he makes one of the more familiar statements in Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."(81) Interestingly, in the beginning of the third preface, Gavin again is credited with the suggestion that the physical history of these three civil institutions--or at least of the jail--is somehow profoundly relevant:

> . . .as Gavin Stevens, the town lawyer and the county amateur Cincinnatus, waswont to say, if you would peruse in unbroken--aye, over-lapping--continuity the history of a community, look not in the church registers and the court-house records, but beneath the successive layers of calsomine and creosote and whitewash on the walls of the jail, since only in that forcible

> carceration does man find the idleness in which to compose, in the gross and simple terms of his gross and simple lusts and yearnings, the gross and simple recapitulations of his gross and simple heart. . . .(180)

Temple's problem may be the past, in which she first surrendered herself to corruption; or it may simply be the natural impulses of her rather promiscuous present self. But whichever, despite the efforts of Stevens the amateur Cincinnatus and Stevens the Socratic midwife, the two opposed strands of Requiem for a Nun--the forced, platitudinous trifling with the life of Nancy Mannigoe for the spiritual good of Temple Drake, and the doses of "history"--never meld into a truly productive dialectic toward the illumination of a single theme. The only novels in which Faulkner achieved full success with the contrapuntal effect were those which opposed, not ideas with people, the past with the present or public with private, but two modes of living, one with the other: that is, the straightforward The Wild Palms and the subtly dialectic Light in August.

Chapter Six

Light in August

Light in August is Faulkner's most delicately effective novel of counterpoint. In this carefully structured work, successive layers enfold each other, from an inner heart outward, to a final exterior sheath. At the core lies the orphan-child, Joe Christmas. Across the distance of all the other characters and action in the novel, Lena Grove surrounds him, front and back, the outermost layer.

The novel does not develop in linear progression toward a crisis near the end, then fall off promptly into a conclusion. Light in August is more symmetrical than that; its first half is almost the mirror of the second. Its most powerful action is concentrated toward the center and not the conclusion: the murder of Joanna Burden occupies two separate positions in the text, one 110 pages from the beginning and the other 210 pages before the end. The capture of Joe Christmas occurs 150 pages before the end, and that is the last direct appearance by him, the central and most intense personage of the novel. In the concluding six chapters the pace

is slowed. Those chapters are taken up with the low-key interplay among Lena, Byron Bunch and Hightower, and introduce new portions of background material, such as the substantial account of Hightower's childhood, training and arrival in Jefferson. This bit of late exposition, seemingly out of place in the next to last chapter, is sometimes pointed to as a blatant artistic flaw in the book.

Why this arrangement? If Light in August is a novel that primarily tells the story of Joe Christmas, tragic hero, or image of modern man brutalized by the categories of society, as Longley[1] and Vickery[2] would have it, why should Christmas be disposed of six chapters before the finish to get on to the story of Gail Hightower's grandfather and Byron Bunch's unrequited attachment to Lena? Why indeed have the stories of Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Gail Hightower and Joe Christmas--and particularly Lena and Joe--been placed together in the same novel?

The narrative connections between Lena and Joe Christmas are so tangential that it almost seems their

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1. John L. Longley, "Joe Christmas: the Hero in the Modern World", from Three Decades of Criticism, pp. 265-278.
2. Vickery, pp. 66-83.

stories might as well have been written separately, like "Wild Palms" and "Old Man", even for inclusion in the same book. Joe and Lena never see each other; they are in the same town because there happens to be, in the town in which Christmas is already living, a man with a name similar to that of the man Lena is looking for; by coincidence, the man who deserted Lena later becomes Joe's roommate; through the ubiquitous agency of Byron Bunch, Lena's baby is dandled by Joe's grandmother; as the sheriff returns from the scene of Joe's murder of Joanna Burden, his car is held up by a person who happens to be Lena:

> Looking out, the sheriff saw a young woman climbing slowly and carefully down from the wagon, with that careful awkwardness of advanced pregnancy.(278)

And finally, on the same day Lena's baby is born and Joe is slaughtered.

Only this tenuous relation exists between the two main figures in the novel, but Faulkner tied those delicate strings for a solid purpose. Lena and Joe are the dialectic opposites in the book. Vickery describes the contrast as one between the world of nature and the

world of society,[1] and Alfred Kazin, as one between fertility and barrenness.[2] But more can be found in the contrast than those general dichotomies suggest. Joe is self-conscious to the point of self-ruin. Lena is totally unselfconscious. Joe is a victim of the categories that society around him imposes on him. Lena is oblivious and invulnerable to those categories. Joe is a victim of his own background; he has been stamped by it so brutally that he is forced to react against it. Lena's background seems to have had very little impact on her. Joe is inflexible; he has been set off on a certain course and inevitably he will drive himself on to a single, definite end. Lena is free, spontaneous and open to possibility. Joe is desperately repelled by the female principle: ". . .that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men."(158) Lena, pregnant and all-accepting, is that principle. Lena and Joe are such extreme opposites, in fact, that their plot connections must almost necessarily have been tenuous. It is difficult to imagine how, thrown in each

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1. Vickery, p. 80.
2. Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of Light in August", from Three Decades of Criticism, p. 250.

other's presence, the two characters could have interacted.

It is for Byron Bunch and Hightower's benefit that Lena and Joe converge on Jefferson. Byron and Hightower constitute the field of battle on which the antithetical principles of Lena and Joe will act out their dialectic. Lena and Joe are complete: they each represent a fully formed mode of life, as described above. Byron and Hightower are not complete: they are individuals suspended outside the flow of life, whose capacities to participate in the business of living have failed to develop. Neither has seized on a mode of living, either positive or negative, as Lena and Joe both have. Consequently, their lives are malleable material. The modes of Lena and Joe exert competing influences on that material, each threatening to move it in an opposite direction and determine for it a different final resolution. The subject of Light in August then is not the tragedy of Joe Christmas, or even the stories of Lena and Joe, but of Lena, Joe and their effects on Byron's and Hightower's lives.

At the center of this symmetrical book is the murder of Joanna Burden. If a primary event sets the action of the story in motion, around which the chain

of cause and effect (running from the Friday afternoon on which Lena first appears to the following Monday a week when Joe is killed, and receding beyond those limits into past and future) radiates, it is this violent act. The murder is expanded beyond its own dimensions, visually, by Faulkner's device of associating it with the burning Burden house. The column of smoke that stands up above the trees outside town that Saturday morning, first described as Lena arrives in Jefferson, announces it as a public act of ominous proportions. But this murder is still not the very heart of the layered structure. The crime is allotted two separate positions in the text. It belongs to the spaces between the end of chapter five (as Joe begins to move toward the house) and the beginning of chapter six, and again at the end of chapter twelve. Between these two points, then, lies the innermost ring: the s tory of the childhood and development of Joe Christmas, chapters six through twelve.

The protagonist's private background is walled off on each end by his crime. Surrounding that core is a different Joe Christmas: Christmas the suspicious stranger, the man with no past, the runaway nigger murderer--Joe as he is known by Brown, the sheriff, Byron Bunch, the Town. Next, moving outward, are the intermediaries, Byron and Hightower. Hightower, sitting at the study window

of his safe and sterile house in town, lies the closer in to Christmas of the two. Byron, working doggedly away at the planing mill outside Jefferson, is a step farther away. And finally, Lena Grove, with her dominant presence in the first and last chapters, encloses the rest of the story.

The only other major character is the Town. The Town represents the collective body of Armstids, Varners, Mrs. Beards, Watt Kennedys and Gavin Stevenses who make it their business to distort the reality of individuals into outward characteristics and public categories. The Town fills the gaps between all of the other layers, to insulate and interfere. Lena must pass through the Town, in the form of the righteous condescension of women like Mrs. Armstid, to encounter Byron, just as Byron had to penetrate the rumor-mongering about the outcast preacher, to make human contact with Hightower. Joe Christmas must break out of its encirclement to escape his strangling loneliness, but he never does. What the Town "knows" about an individual assumes an effective reality often stronger than what the person's real nature actually is. The power of this type of "knowing" by the Town is an important factor distinguishing Lena and Joe. The way in which their public identities reflect

back on and affect their lives is a function of the different modes according to which they live. Lena's public identity--"deluded unwed pregnant girl needing protection and gentle disabusing"--has on her no force whatsoever. Joe's public identity--"nigger sinner trouble-making stranger criminal"--has the force of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The novel begins with movement. The opening chapter, suffused with the calm presence of Lena, sets a tone that is gentle and placid, almost idyllic, in obvious contrast to most of what comes later. The first image is of her, a young girl "Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her,"(1) and suggests little but peace and stasis. The chapter evokes a mood of summer languidness, dust on the roads, mules asleep in their traces, and men sitting--Armstid and Winterbottom as Lena walks past, later the men on the porch of Varner's store. But across it all, and the very point of the chapter, in counter-rhythm to that mood, there is motion: the inexorable movement of Lena down that road, toward Jefferson, toward Joe Christmas, bearing the force of what she represents toward the heart of the book.

Effective as Faulkner's portrayal of Lena may be, she is not a complex character. What she represents is innocence, blind hope, and that all-accepting, enclosing principle often defined as female. She is a walking, child-laden womb, trudging unthinkingly after the man who deserted her in order to encompass him also and constitute a family. She has a background, but it is presented as negligible, brought up promptly and disposed of without mystery in four pages. The implication is that it has little significance, that whatever Lena is or may do, she is not the product of her past. This freedom from the past is another aspect of her contrast with Joe Christmas, as appears later.

While Lena crosses the miles of this first chapter, passing into and through the ken of various representatives of the Town (though actually countryfolk here), one of the dominant impressions is the way in which one person's knowing about another--the type of knowing that is based entirely on superficial appearances and the prior biases of the knower--becomes a tool of control. Armstid, the men at the store and Mrs. Armstid all form more or less rigid conceptions for themselves about what Lena is, and the presumption of which she is the potential victim is that she must behave so as to fulfill those conceptions,

and if she is not inclined to they will do their best to make her. Mrs. Armstid's conception is the most rigid and her enforcement the most insistent, as has apparently been the case with most of the women that have ttaken Lena in. The idea of the power of knowing continues in the next two chapters, where still more stress is laid on the significance as reality not of what is actually real but of what people know: "Byron Bunch knows this:. . . ."(27)

What is exceptional about Lena, as seen in the first chapter, is her capacity to move through these fields of knowing and be totally unaffected. She is invulnerable to the type of self-fulfilling expectation that the Town, elsewhere in the book, so effectively imposes. And the reason for that is her lack of consciousness, her lack of perception, her inner hope. She is operating in a different mode from the rest of the characters, with their socially circumspect habits. Lena is oblivious to the world as it exists around her, and sensitive only to a reality she feels stirring within her, in her womb, and in her weak mind. She has her own type of knowing; she is quite strong and rigid in it herself, as a matter of fact. But knowing for her is not directed outward. It is an inner, completely

instinctive fire, relating exclusively to her own affairs, not only separate from but often in obvious contradiction to outward reality. She knows that she will find Lucas Burch and persuade him to marry her. And the basis for that knowledge is simply that she has to.

This brings up another facet of the counterpoint Faulkner has established in the novel, between believing and knowing: "Memory believes before knowing remembers. ..."(111) Believing, and knowing(in Lena's sense) are presented in Light in August as two contrasting processes that concern an individual's vision of his own experience as well as his way of perceiving others. Believing comes to be defined in the book as a rather dogmatic, inflexible tendency, a function of a person's past and his training, stamped onto the character by some external or apparently external agency, like Divine Call or experience. Knowing is instinctual. Where believing implies a code book of predetermined reactions to all situations, knowing implies spontaneous response to the current inner climate. Joe Christmas is a believer. Lena is a knower. She has no reason to believe she will ever see Lucas Birch again, but she knows she will.

By operating in this upper register of faith Lena transcends the sceptical discouragement she meets with

in the first chapter, and carries her placid influence as far as Byron Bunch.

Lena arrives at the planing mill and comes into Byron's life, on the Saturday of the Burden fire, through one of the several galloping coincidences in the novel. Perhaps the best way to discern the point that a novelist is trying to steer his story toward is by noting the direction in which he aims its greatest coincidences. That two men with the similar names Burch and Bunch would be working at the same mill is a coincidence. That Lena would hear from a distance of miles that there was a man at the mill in Jefferson whose name was supposedly the one she was looking for, and that this man should be in fact Byron, who was to fall in love with her and have his life dramatically altered; that at the same time the man Lena sought would have worked at that very mill, only under the name of Brown, and that Lena would catch up with him, is an outrageous unlikelihood. The other two major unlikelihoods that are critical for the plot are: 1) that Joe should, completely by accident, dash into Hightower's house the day of his escape and be slaughtered there of all places, and 2) that Joe should find himself, when he decides to be captured, in Mottstown, the town where his grandparents have lived

since Doc Hines abandoned him. Faulkner would not get away with such unlikelihoods if it seemed to the reader that they had been spliced into the plot by his own whim and will, to achieve unearned effects. But these fateful coincidences do not in fact seem to come from Faulkner but from a higher will, a deterministic Force that hangs over the story and leads each character, despite probability, to his appropriate and predictable destiny. If Faulkner did contrive, it was only in positing such a Force to rule his universe, here, in Absalom, Absalom!, in A Fable and elsewhere. Mrs. Armstid questions Lena with cynical contempt: "And you believe that he will be there when you get there."(18) Improbable as it is, it happens to prove true. And Lena's simplistic explanation is, in a sense, Faulkner's explanation as well. "I reckon the Lord will see to that," she says.(18)

Before Lena reaches him, chapter two establishes Byron as a man with no past, hardly any present and no discernible future. In lacking a past he is like Lena. In being out of touch with present and future he is different, her inferior, because Lena is intimately close to the present and carries the life of the future inside her womb. Byron works at the mill six days a week, lives in a room at Mrs. Beard's, and on Sundays

disappears to lead a country choir. And that is all there is to him. The Town knows nothing about Byron Bunch, and cares less. This is saying quite a bit, given the Town's compulsively nosey tendencies. It is saying that Byron's life is empty and suspended, like a fish frozen in a pond, and that anyone can tell at one glance that it is. "In fact, there is but one man in the town who could speak with any certainty about Bunch, and with this man the town does not know that Bunch has any intercourse, since they meet and talk only at night. This man's name is Hightower."(43) And Hightower himself is frozen in a similar state of suspension.

Then, in his first contact with Lena, things begin to happen again in Byron's life. He falls in love. But more than that: falling in love, he becomes part of a dialectic struggle between two modes of existence. "It happens on a Saturday afternoon while he is alone at the mill. Two miles away the house is still burning, the yellow smoke standing straight as a monument on the horizon."(44) At this point Lena and Joe are coming at him from opposite sides, to grapple for his commitment. They come to grapple for Hightower's as well.

Hightower is introduced in chapter three, as he sits at his study window in town, gazing out at the street.

Like Christmas, Hightower is a man doubly pinioned by the past: he is bound by his own memories, by his belief in his dead grandfather, the spirited Confederate who was shot from his horse on those very Jefferson streets; and he is bound by what the Town "knows" of him, a flouted husband, a disreputable preacher, slightly crazy, a pervert, "Gail Hightower, Done Damned". That combination, his inner fixation on the past and the outer constraints on him, has brought Hightower's life to a halt. Now, always, through the whole of his chapter, he sits in his study, watching the street. Only at the end, as he sees a figure approach, do things begin happening also for him, the ripples of disturbance continuing to spread. "'Byron Bunch,' he says. 'In town on Sunday night. Byron Bunch in town on Sunday.'"(70)

Hightower's little house on the side street of Jefferson represents the Limbo of the story, a place of vacuous safety between the principles embodied by Christmas and Lena. In a way that house is the main stage of the drama, because there the dialectic, with Byron and Hightower serving almost as chess pieces for Lena and Joe, is acted out. The first phase is performed in chapter four, as Byron and Hightower, on Sunday night, face each other across the desk. Hightower had assumed

that his house, his sterile little study with its window, was the ideal hiding place from the moral world; that if there ever was a place a man could go, where the responsibility to do good would not have found him, it was the house. He was wrong. The influences of an apparently helpless pregnant girl and a fugitive "nigger murderer" enter Hightower's hiding place suddenly, the same evening. They are brought by Byron Bunch.

Having heard all the facts, Hightower's advice at this early point amounts to: "Don't get involved. Don't be in love and don't try to help." Hightower's belief is that such situations are unmanageable, and good intentions will only cause trouble. Byron's is not a believing, but a knowing position: "I <u>am</u> involved." He says: "When I think now how worried I was on what little I knowed, now when I know the rest of it, it don't seem like I had anything then to worry me at all. All day I have been thinking how easy it would be if I could just turn back to yesterday and not have any more to worry me than I had then."(75-76) The interplay between the two modes is inconclusive in this scene. But it will be continued later.

The story of Lena Grove is suddenly dropped and, in chapter five, for the first time, the reader is given

a direct and intimate view of the murderer of the novel. The chapter follows Joe Christmas through twenty-four hours, from just after midnight on Friday morning until midnight Friday night. But nothing happens and the reader learns nothing about him. All that is shown is a murder about to be committed (a murder we already know of by hearsay), by a man who, for unknown reasons, is evidently in the frame of mind to murder. This chapter treats Christmas neither as an image in other people's minds, a suspicious outsider--as he was dealt with in chapter two--nor as a complete individual, with background and complexity. The narrator is moving towards Joe's individuality, peeling away the layers to reveal the essence of the man, which is the heart of the book. But this chapter is still only the last intermediate level. Joe is presented directly but it is a silhouette portrait, lacking explanation and dimension, of a "Man Aroused to Murder". The resolution has already been made. Joe is heard to say, "It's because she started praying over me,"(98) and this is obviously significant but the reader does not know how. Joe sharpens his razor. Then, as the clock strikes twelve, he rises from the shadowy grove and stalks toward the house, plainly to commit the decapitation of Joanna Burden that has already been

reported. Here, the reader has been brought to the point of the most feverish, grotesque and inconceivable action of the novel, then abandoned. The murder is committed. The question that remains is: Why?

Chapters six through twelve are Faulkner's answer. Jefferson is abruptly deserted, the clock is set back thirty years, a verbal adjustment of focus is made, and we have reached the inside of the last Chinese box. "Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building. . ."(111) chapter six begins, and this poetic literary dissolve transports the reader into the world of orphanages, dieticians, punishment, fanatic foster-fathers, love and disillusionment, rejection, and the thousand lonely streets, that are the life story of Joe Christmas. Elsewhere in the novel Faulkner is constantly shifting the scene and the point of view, examining one character for a space of pages or an entire chapter, then setting him aside to take up something else. But here, for seven smoothly continuous chapters, for 160 pages, Faulkner traces, trauma by trauma, the development of Joe Christmas, from an anonymous three-year-old orphan into what will be known by society as

a "nigger murderer". The account of the orphanage, of Doc Hines and McEachern, Mrs. McEachern and Bobbie the waitress, make of these chapters a realistic, intriguing and entirely self-contained story, which could possibly stand on its own as effectively as "The Bear". Three main facts emerge from it, three aspects of Joe's character as society's vision and his own experience have molded it, which together supply Faulkner's explanation for the murder. They are: 1) the reaction against religion that Joe's brutally fundamentalist upbringing has printed on him; 2) the repelling effect that women, particularly in their mother-like, all-accepting, all-encompassing tendency, have on him; and 3) his ambivalent attitude toward his own racial identity.

In what the narrator calls the "third phase" of their unusual and corrupt relationship, Joanna Burden has the misfortune to offend in combination all three of Joe's sensitive quirks. At first, she and Joe fall into what is a satisfactory sexual arrangement because Joanna's hard masculinity coincides with Joe's repulsion from the all-swallowing female principle. Joe does not want a woman to give herself to him; he wants to take her by force. And Joanna, complementarily, does not want to give herself, but to be taken.

> And when he entered the house at night it was as he had entered it that first night; he felt like a thief, a robber, even while he mounted to the bedroom where she waited. Even after a year it was as though he entered by stealth to despoil her virginity each time anew. It was as though each turn of dark saw him faced again with the necessity to despoil again that which he had already despoiled--or never had and never would.(221)

This Joanna, who yielded the first time in a "hard, untearful and unselfpitying and almost manlike" surrender, is not at all the subsuming female.

Joe has a terrible need to encounter such resistance. His entire life's experience has been extreme, and the treatment he has received from other individuals has fallen into these two extremes: 1) brutal determination to make of him something that he is not; and 2) obsequious anxiousness to accept him for whatever he wishes to be. He has been beaten as a heathen, punished as a sinner and taunted as a nigger. This has given him rage, a rage that needs to be spent. It has filled him with a bitter energy that requires a target to be lashed out against. The reason Joe comes to hate Mrs. McEachern more than Mr. McEachern is not, as Vickery asserts, simply because McEachern's discipline makes his life comfortably predictable.[1] It is because, while McEachern causes

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1. Vickery, p. 70.

Joe's rage, his wife, in her understanding, cushioning pacification, threatens his opportunity to release that rage. As more and more rage is pounded into Joe's hide, by McEachern, by Max and the other friends of Bobbie, by the anonymous Negroes and whites who beat him in Detroit and Chicago, Joe develops a compulsion for being unacceptable, a pariah. He becomes a masochist. His rage feeds on itself to the point that he is not content with ever being accepted, but must be beaten, rejected, given a wall to throw himself against.

For all intents and purposes, Joe is a white man. He looks like a white man. He has been raised as a white man. The only suggestion that he might be anything other than a white man is made by an anonymous circus owner, stating in a court of law, after a "Mexican" once in his employ had been killed in cold blood by Doc Hines, that the Mexican had had partly Negro blood. There is no more reason to believe the circus owner was telling the truth than there is to assume he was supplying a convenient lie. So Joe's partly Negro blood is no more than a legend.

But Joe comes to hate his own whiteness because, being a white man, he is acceptable. He desperately wants to be black, to be treated as a <u>nigger</u>, so that he

can direct his own bitter rage against something dependably resistant: the white society that would spurn and exclude him.

> He went directly to the table where she set out his food. He did not need to see. His hands saw; the dishes were still a little warm, thinking Set out for the nigger. For the nigger.
>
> He seemed to watch his hand as if from a distance. He watched it pick up a dish and swing it up and back and hold it there while he breathed deep and slow, intensely cogitant. He heard his voice say aloud, as if he were playing a game: "Ham," and watched his hand swing and hurl the dish crashing into the wall, the invisible wall, waiting for the crash to subside and silence to flow completely back before taking up another one. He held this dish poised, sniffing. This one required some time. "Beans or greens?" he said. "Beans or spinach? . . .All right. Call it beans." He hurled it, hard, waiting until the crash ceased. He raised the third dish. "Something with onions," he said, thinking This is fun. Why didn't I think of this before? "Woman's muck."(224-225)

Such acts, the senseless destruction of "Woman's muck. . .Set out for the nigger," are the highest release for him. In this way his bitter reaction to brutality and condescension can vent itself. During the second phase of the relationship, which, the narrator says, was "as though he had fallen into a sewer,"(242) Joe cannot bring himself to leave Joanna precisely because she offers him opportunities for this sort of release. She supplies the ideal combination of provocation, victim

to be struck at, and sexual satisfaction.

Joanna, at the same time, is satisfying secret needs of her own. As she lies naked under a shrub outside, lets Joe find her and take her roughly, she pants "Negro! Negro! Negro!" to inflate her sense of degradation and titillate the New England Puritan demons in her own past. This perverse symbiosis leads inevitably up to the final act of spoliation and release, when Joe slashes open her throat.

The murder is brought on, in the third phase of the affair, when Joanna's passion is dead and she begins trying to pull shattered pieces together into a conventionally satisfying life. Here, she threatens Joe's sense of pariahhood. In one stroke, she both becomes the hated all-agreeable female, and jiggles the very delicate balance of his racial self-image:

> "To school," his mouth said.
>
> "Yes," she said. "They will take you. Any of them will. On my account. You can choose any one you want among them. We won't even have to pay."
>
> "To school," his mouth said. "A nigger school. Me."
>
> "Yes. Then you can go to Memphis. You can read law in Peebles's office. He will teach you law. Then you can take charge of all the legal business. All this, all that he does, Peebles does."

"And then learn law in the office of a nigger lawyer," his mouth said.

"Yes. . . ."

"But a nigger college, a nigger lawyer," his voice said. . . .(261)

To Joe's mind, the only thing worse--and he finds it far worse--than being an accepted and patronized white man is the thought of being an accepted and patronized black man: a good nigger. That suggestion itself might have aroused enough of the furies in Joe's background to bring on the murder. But it does not. These seven chapters are showing that, far from being a sudden outburst, the crime was moved toward with excruciating gradualness.

Joanna has still to commit the third part of her offense:

> "Kneel with me," she said.
>
> "No," he said.
>
> "Kneel," she said. "You won't even have to speak to Him yourself. Just kneel. Just make the first move."
>
> "No," he said. "I'm going."(265)

Later, as Joe spends the twenty-four hours before the murder, knowing he will commit the act, he thinks, "She ought not to have started praying over me."(104)

By the time the murder itself is interposed in the text for the second time(267), it seems as if Joe

Christmas has been groomed from age three, determined by all the force of his experience and environment, to kill Joanna Burden. "Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something,"(97) Joe was telling himself in chapter five, and later, even still before the fact, "He was saying to himself I had to do it already in the past tense; I had to do it."(264) Faulkner intends the reader to feel the suck of inevitability, Joe's destiny running inexorably from the first sight of the orphanage up to the Burden bedroom the moment Joanna dies. With almost Calvinistic determinism, Faulkner has set this lot, apparently inescapable, to Christmas, while leaving doorways to salvation open to his other characters, like Lena and Byron. Has Joe's life, his experience, his choices--or has his character itself--been his doom? "Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders," the central section began: background determines before cognition decides and articulates. That seems to say that the accidents of Joe's life, not any deterministic Force, have made him a murderer. And yet "Memory believes before knowing remembers" is not always the case. It is true for Joe, who, by his nature, operates in the conscious believing mode. But it is not true for Lena.

Because she is by nature instinctual, knowing for her precedes believing, just as she knows she will find Burch though she has no reason to believe it. Faulkner is being Calvinistic then, if in establishing the dialectical opposition between his two main characters, he has damned one and saved the other with the act of assigning them their natures.

But the novel overall is not Calvinistic. What it expresses is a moral vision more flexible than determinism. What it expresses, in fact, is a narratively effective version of Faulkner's epigramatic Nobel-Acceptance-Speech view of man, as a demonstration of which A Fable was so laboriously and consciously contrived: Man will not merely endure: he will prevail. The souls of Byron and Hightower are the material over which the struggle for salvation or damnation is waged. If Lena and Joe are absolutes, Byron and Hightower are human, ambivalent and not yet determined. The moral drama of the book is whether each of them will be won back to life by Lena's influence or carried into a premature spiritual grave by Joe's.

Chapter fourteen provides the last intimate view of Joe Christmas. Again, as in chapter five, the chapter preceding the murder, which it is symmetrically balanced against, Christmas is presented neither as a public idea

nor as a multi-dimensional individual but simply as an anonymous fugitive, a man with no past, a third person pronoun. This chapter falls into place to close out the story of Joe Christmas the person (as opposed to his myth, the account of which continues for several chapters). He enters Mottstown, in a precise reenactment of Lena's entrance into Jefferson, but with the futility of his struggle in ironic contrast to her imminent success--riding atop a stranger's wagon. "Mottstown. Dar tis,"(321) the Negro youth announces to Joe, just as Lena's driver had said simply, "Jefferson."(26) And then, "Looking, he(Joe) can see the smoke low on the sky,"(321) exactly as the smoke from the Burden fire s tood before Lena. This column of smoke, from wherever it emanates, announces the end of Joe just as the other announced the end of Joanna. He is a defeated individual, and he recognizes the fact:

> . . .he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. . . .It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled further than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. "And yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years," he thinks. "But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo". . . .(321)

He has never escaped the power of what his own memory, and those of the others who categorized him, *believed*, the determining force of his own background and public identity. He has never broken out of the circle. He has never emerged from the womb.

Faulkner's treatment of Christmas is heavily deterministic here. The author makes use of a second coincidence to show ironically that the span of Joe's life has been even more narrowly circumscribed than he suspects. It is entirely unknown to Joe, but in Mottstown, the town where he decides to perform his next-to-last act of masochistic release by getting himself caught, are living his own grandparents, including Doc Hines, the man responsible for branding him with the category--*nigger*--that plagued him throughout his life.

The dialectic-by-proxy between Byron and Hightower is resumed in chapters thirteen and sixteen, as before, in the study of Hightower's house. On the Tuesday evening following the murder they debate the moralities and practicalities of what is to be done about Lena. Hightower's opinion is rigid, dogmatic, again a position in the *believing* mode:

> "The thing, the only thing, for her to do is go back to Alabama. To her people."

"I reckon not," Byron says.(285)

Byron's position is a hopeful knowledge, based on nothing external or rational: "'There are ways, things that can be done. . . .'"(289)

At that point Byron is bending toward Lena's influence. By Wednesday evening he has been completely won to her mode of living. "Tonight Byron is completely changed. It shows in his walk, his carriage. . . .suddenly Hightower says, almost aloud: 'He has done something. He has taken a step.'"(294) What he has done is set Lena up in the Burden cabin to have her child, seen to the details and made the decisions--even the moral decisions--himself. It has brought him back to life and into the world. Hightower is still believing, making dogmatic general rationalizations: "'For the Lena Groves there are always two men in the world and their number is legion: Lucas Burches and Byron Bunches. But no Lena, no woman, deserves more than one of them.'"(299) Byron responds exactly as Lena would, with an agreeable ignorance and an inner dedication to his own instincts:

> "I reckon you are right," Byron says. "Anyway, it ain't for me to say that you are wrong. And I don't reckon it's for you to say that I am wrong, even if I am."
>
> "No," Hightower says.

> "Even if I am," Byron says. "So I reckon I'll say good night."(299)

This is the culmination, for Byron, of the dialectic, the battle for his soul between the modes of Lena and Joe. For Hightower, the culmination is still to come.

The following Sunday, in chapter sixteen, Byron returns to Hightower's house, bringing with him as always the disturbing influence of the world, in the persons of Doc and Mrs. Hines, and this time also a specific moral demand: "You could say he was here with you that night."(369) This is an offer for Hightower to save Christmas, but more importantly to save himself, by performing the human act of sacrifice. Hightower is still suspended, not yet committed irreversibly to either mode. He is not ready to assume the responsibilities of the world. He claims to have bought his immunity from human affairs.

In chapter seventeen he is swung drastically close to Lena, and for a time he reenters the flow of life. Unwilling, unsuspecting, unprepared, he is called by Byron to deliver the child of Lena and he performs the delivery, surprising even himself. For a few brief hours, from that Monday morning into the afternoon, Hightower is living. "'I showed them!' he thinks. 'Life comes to the old man yet, while they get there too late.'"(382-383)

But Hightower has not committed himself to a mode of life or non-life yet. He is still balancing on the fence. Presumptuously, he believes now that by his heroic obstetrics he has bought immunity from the need to work at the hard labor of living.

> ". . . .And this must be all."
>
> But it is not all. There is one thing more reserved for him.(392)

That final thing makes Faulkner's treatment of Hightower appear almost as deterministic as that given Christmas. Hightower's lot is decided through another fateful coincidence. Monday afternoon, having temporarily escaped from the deputies in a last fling of masochistic release, Christmas runs through the town, dodging around buildings and gulleys, pursued by Percy Grimm. Christmas breaks, apparently utterly at random (despite the Town's later hypotheses) for a nearby house, and disappears in the back door. It is Hightower's house. There, in the preacher's kitchen, he is killed and castrated. The effect on Hightower is spiritual paralysis. His new re-embracement of life is not strong enough to withstand such a test. He is reminded that the world of the present is too brutal, too discouraging and too arbitrary,

to be participated in with only a half-hearted commitment. "I am dying," he thinks at the window that evening, and he is correct. He has been drawn back into a state of detachment from life, from the present, presumably permanently this time. Like Christmas, he has never quite escaped the pressures of background and society that circumscribe his life. He has not got out of the circle.

The form of the narration in chapter nineteen--despite the fact that the chapter contains the exciting scene of Joe's death--begins the very definite and conscious decreasing of pace, which brings the novel, through the last three chapters, to a gradually slowing end. New characters are introduced. Exposition is injected to cushion the intensity of what second-by-second narrative action there is. The castration scene is shown not as the climax of Joe Christmas's tragedy, but as material for gossip in the town, a matter for the speculation of Gavin Stevens, an event in the life of Percy Grimm:

> About the suppertables on that Monday night, what the town wondered was not so much how Christmas had escaped but why when free, he had taken refuge in the place which he did. . . .
>
> There were many reasons, opinions, as to why he had fled to Hightower's house at the last. "Like to like,"

> the easy, the immediate, ones said. . . .
>
> Gavin Stevens though had a different theory. He is the District Attorney, a Harvard graduate, a Phi Beta Kappa. . . .(419)
>
> . . .
>
> In the town on that day lived a young man named Percy Grimm. . . .(425)

Without question, Faulkner could have told this part of the story in a more intense fashion if he had cared to. But the real melodrama of the book is over by this time; Christmas's circle has been closed. And Faulkner is working his way back out to the more placid, mundane surface of life as it carries on from year to year, to the halcyon outer layer of Lena.

Chapter twenty is a totally static interlude, in relation to the rest of the story. It occurs in Hightower's mind as he is seated before his study window, watching the afternoon light fade on the street. It is a looping-back into Hightower's past, a miniature version of the "Memory believes before knowing remembers. . ." section of Joe. It tells the reader that Hightower's memory, too, believes before his knowing can remember. It tells that this--the story of his Confederate grandfather, his father, his wife, his mission, and his own warped relation to them all--is what memory believes.

To drop the thread of the story abruptly one step from the end and go off on a 25-page exploration of the memories of one of the secondary characters, is unorthodox narrative technique. It may seem that the entire chapter is a structural flaw, that if Faulkner had planned his novel more carefully or executed it more smoothly he would have been able to weave this material into the story earlier, or been wise enough to leave it out completely. But it seems to me that, besides continuing the winding down of the pace toward Lena's final appearance, the chapter balances appropriately, on opposite sides of the story of Christmas, with the introduction given, in chapter two, to Byron Bunch. Byron and Hightower have been the intermediate characters, fluctuating in the space between Lena and Joe. Lena is the follower of instinct; Joe, the Man Determined. Lena has no significant past; Joe is no more than the sum of his past. Byron Bunch is the most past-lacking character in the book. We know less about his background than we do about Lena, Joanna Burden, Joanna's grandfather, Percy Grimm or even Gavin Stevens. Yet Byron is one of the four main characters. In chapter two, where Byron is first presented as the curious town recluse, in place of any information about him the reader

is given the suspicious rationalization: "Man knows so little about his fellows."(43) But the point emerges that no information from the past is needed to understand Byron, because when he breaks out of his lonely suspension, it is to exist in the present, and even more, in the future, along with Lena. For the same reason Hightower's past is relevant, and most relevant at the place in the novel where he has just surrendered to moribundity, because it is that past which he dies back into at that point.

The account in the last chapter of the furniture dealer who made a trip into Tennessee sounds almost like the beginning of a new story. In a way it is. But at the same time it completes the symmetry between the two halves of the book. The furniture dealer and his wife are mirrors of Armstid and Mrs. Armstid in the first chapter. Lena is back out in the world, the Town, being assisted, observed and judged by various married couples. She is on the road again in this last glimpse, walking doggedly, unrealistically, ignorantly and hopefully after Lucas Burch. Byron is with her now, living in her mode, as dogged and hopeful and almost as unrealistic as Lena. The end of the book offers no suggestion that Lena is likely to accept Byron's

affections. Byron's prospects are left carefully unresolved. What is important is that, in her image, he is now facing the problem of life with a determination that is based only on an inner, instinctive hope. Lena has a negligible chance of ever inducing Lucas Burch to marry her; but it does not matter, as long as commitment to that goal allows her to live. And Byron has little encouragement from Lena; but that does not matter either. He does not need to trouble over whether or not he <u>believes</u> he will win her, because he <u>knows</u> that he <u>must</u> win her. And his life is now as simple as that.

Lena is the placid, instinctive female presence that encloses the entire book, beginning and end. It is her mode of life that prevails in the book, by being able to endure all, and then push on one more step, moved by blind hope. She is like a mother to all the other characters: her chapters, the first and the last, surround the rest of the story like a womb. Her all-accepting mode enfolds the novel. Particularly striking is the way Joe Christmas, the orphan-child who never escaped from the circle, rests like the fetus at the center of that womb. His seven-chapter story of childhood and growth suggests an embryo within Lena's pregnant enclosing presence. Joe's mode, the contrapuntal opposite

of Lena's, has failed to prevail in the book. His tendency toward masochistic self-exile has succumbed to her enclosure. In that figurative sense, he is Lena's unborn child. But it is an ironic sense. The misfortune of Joe, who is destroyed by himself and the Town on the same day that Lena's actual child is born, is that he was not born to her, as the anonymous bastard child of a gentle and simple girl. He was born instead into a very different set of circumstances. And those circumstances, because he was too self-conscious and too rigid to escape from them, shaped his fate.

PART FOUR

Conclusion

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

This analysis of the individual structures of nine novels reveals, I believe, the degree to which Faulkner relied on the principles of centripetalism and counterpoint, in arranging the elements of his books. Five of the novels, including both the intricate demonstration of structural virtuosity, Absalom, Absalom!, and the casually disjointed The Hamlet, are cast around single individual characters who, paradoxically, are never themselves presented directly in the narratives. Three other novels work out their themes through dialectic between two opposing principles. These centripetal and contrapuntal groups include all of the author's most respected work and (with the exception of Sanctuary) every important book written during his singular fourteen-year period of greatest creative effort. The question remains: What, if any, broader aspects of Faulkner's artistic vision may be related to these technical characteristics?

An acute consciousness of the past is one of the most distinctive features throughout Faulkner's work.

"For Faulkner. . .the past is unfortunately never lost," Sartre wrote in 1939; "it is always there, almost as an obsession."[1] Unfortunate or not, part of the explanation for this is quite simple. The source Faulkner tapped for much of the material from which his fiction was made was local myths, legends and history. Particularly, he had a knowledge of the historical background of his area of northern Mississippi during the 19th century, in which his grandfather, as one of the early influential citizens, was a key figure. Since legend and myth naturally reside in the past, in the same way that personal experience resides in the present, Faulkner, who unlike many writers very seldom drew his fiction out of personal experience, seems obsessed with the past.

But there is more to it. According to Gavin Stevens, Faulkner's sometime spokesman, the past is never dead; it is not even past. If that is so, just what <u>is</u> the past? Where is it, if not in the posterior temporal distance? What is its role, in relation to the human situation, to what we think of as present experience?

Faulkner was always reluctant to portray experience

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1. Sartre, from <u>Three Decades of Criticism</u>, p. 229.

as some sort of an horizontal spectrum, to view time as a linear continuity stretching, from "back" in the past, "forward" into the future. In his major novels, he scrambled time. The narratives of The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses all unfold in an order that is drastically and deliberately non-chronological. As I Lay Dying, while its narrative generally progresses chronologically, contains the one obvious violation of that order when Addie delivers her soliloquy many pages after she has died. The Hamlet, alone among the centripetal novels, maintains a chronological order for its episodes. Many of the novels not among the centripetal group also violate chronology, in the sequence in which their narratives proceed. Sartoris was the first Faulkner novel in which narrative flow was interrupted and sizeable set-piece reflections into the past allowed to intrude. The Wild Palms opens at a point very near the end of the story, looping back to cover the beginning and middle, before returning to the final events. Intruder in the Dust, like any good detective story, begins just after the crime has been committed, and probes into the past for a solution. A Fable describes the events of one week, but begins in the middle with Wednesday, and only then returns to go in order from

Monday through Sunday. Most telling of all, perhaps, is the sequence of Light in August, in which chapters six through twelve contain the chronologically earliest material, and lead the reader gradually toward the situation as it exists in chapter five. "The fact that I have moved my characters around in time successfully, at least in my own estimation, proves to me my own theory that time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as was--only is."[1]

And the common feature of the way Faulkner has moved those characters in time has been to place the past, the weight of significant previous experience, not before, nor behind, but within. At the core of every man's character and his situation, Faulkner seems to suggest through this type of organization, most obviously in the cases of Sutpen and Christmas, lies his past. The past, in Faulkner, is certainly not something to be forgotten. But it is not even something simply to be remembered. It is a first cause, upon which an individual's identity is built.

The centripetally structured novels--at least four out of five of them--deal very specifically with their characters' problems in coming to terms with the past.

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1. Paris Review interview, Lion in the Garden, p. 255.

Benjy, Jason, Darl, Jewel, Rosa, Quentin, Uncle Isaac, Sam Fathers, Samuel Worsham Beauchamp--all of these characters are seen to struggle with a past that is part of them, which they can neither change, escape nor recapture. What they must each do is achieve a reconciliation, find a healthy relationship with the past, which means building a satisfactory present on the stubbornly protruding ruins of the past. Some succeed, to a complete or partial extent, like Sam Fathers and Isaac. Some fail and surrender, like Quentin and Darl. Some simply endure--that is, continue the effort unsuccessfully, with a certain pathetic integrity--like Benjy and Samuel Worsham. But for each of these characters, the past that is part of them is embodied as a single other individual. Where Faulkner might have chosen certain historical facts, such as slavery, the Civil War, or the downfall of the Old South, to serve as the core of bitter experience within his characters' pasts, he chose instead people, who embodied those facts.

And so Caddy Compson, Addie Bundren, Thomas Sutpen and old Carothers McCaslin occupy the centers of their respective novels, just as they rest at the core of the experience of each of those characters who is struggling to reconcile present with past. The past exerts a

constant, inescapable determining force on the present, in Faulkner, yet it is itself untouchable, unchangeable, always beyond recovery. And just so, Caddy, Addie, Sutpen and old Carothers are the preeminent, determining factors in their family situations. Yet none of them, with the single exception in Addie's brief monologue, are ever directly presented in their narratives. They are the unseen centers, and the first causes. In some cases, deep at the core of their own unreachable pasts lies a single event to which can be traced the network of causality that has shaped the entire story. The boyhood encounter of Thomas Sutpen, with the liveried "monkey nigger" at the door of the Tidewater plantation, is a perfect example. If Sutpen had not been told to go around to the back, Charles Bon would not have been shot and Quentin would never have met Henry Sutpen. The incestuous offense of Carothers against his daughter Tomey can be isolated in the same way. Very little that happens in Go Down, Moses would have been the same, were it not for that act. Single events, in the cases of the Compsons and the Bundrens, are not quite so important. The mere existence of Caddy and Addie, the fact that they lived and were the people they were, is what was crucial to Benjy, Jason, Jewel, Darl and

the others. Still, even the story of the Compsons can be traced back to a single vignette which, if not causal, was at least emblematic. This, as identified by Faulkner, was the image of the seven-year-old girl with the dirty drawers, climbing a tree: "--and it took the rest of the 400 pages to explain why she was brave enough to climb the tree to look in the window."[1]

The past is not dead, nor discarded, nor forgotten, nor escaped. Where is it? It is at the core of the individual, deep at the center of his experience. And what is it? It is a first cause to whatever the individual is. That seems to have been Faulkner's conviction, and he has clearly reflected it in the structures of four of his centripetal novels.

The Hamlet, of all Faulkner's important work, has the least connection with the past. At its center, Flem might be said to embody, not the past, but the future. He is the new wave, stealing upon Frenchman's Bend and overcoming its late-19th century ruralism with a calculating modern mercantilism. At the same time, The Hamlet differs from the other four novels in being focused on a much broader assortment of characters.

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1. Faulkner in the University, p. 31.

The Hamlet is almost a sociological study, rather than a portrait of any individual or related group of individuals: it reflects, more than any Faulkner novel, on the way the community works, on the vices, virtues, situations and relationships of which a community is composed. Insofar as individual lives are examined--Ab Snopes, Mink, Jack Houston--the past of those characters is often an important part of their story. But that there is no flesh-and-blood protagonist in the novel, and that no major examination of the past gives the novel historical dimension, are probably related circumstances.

It is hard to say as much about the three contrapuntal novels. They are, on the whole, somewhat less complex works. Requiem for a Nun, published in 1951 and therefore the latest by almost ten years of all the books considered here, has a structure that shows the strain of great self-consciousness. The idea of drama counterpointed by history is interesting in the abstract, and we can easily see how it came as a natural step from the author's earlier work, but it fails entirely to contribute toward a smooth and effective total impression. I believe that the novel belongs with Faulkner's failures, and that it fails more because of

the abstract structural idea that was forced upon it, than for any other reason.

The tendency to narrate in terms of a dialectic between two opposing principles, then, must be accounted for mainly according to its presence in The Wild Palms and Light in August. The dialectical oppositions in those novels have a good deal in common. In each case, the contrast is between two antithetical modes of living, as embodied in the unconscious philosophies of two individual characters. And in both Light in August and The Wild Palms the contrast appears, at least on first scrutiny, to be between the self-conscious individual, and the primitive. Faulkner's primitive, as the word is used here, applies to a character in whom simple, mindless nobility takes the place of a set of more complex motivations.

Light in August, as we have seen, balances the inflexible, socially conditioned self-destructiveness of Christmas, with the unreflective optimism of Lena. Joe is very clearly a demonstration of Faulkner's principle that the past does not die, that it continues always to work its influence on the present. The interposition of chapters six through twelve at the moment in the narrative when Joe is about to murder Joanna Burden

announces, perhaps much too obviously, that Joe's past, more than any other factor, is responsible for determining his actions. Lena represents an opposite relation to the past. She is not without a past history of significant experiences: she has, after all, lost her parents at a young age, been seduced and made pregnant by a man who then deserted her, and undertaken in advanced pregnancy an exceptionally long and difficult journey. But rich with narrative possibility as those events may be, they are dismissed by Faulkner in a very brief summary, with the implication that past background is not the key to understanding the character of Lena Grove. To the contrary, with an almost willfully stupid disregard for the lessons of experience, Lena's behavior is entirely a function of a strong, instinctual optimism. She is a primitive.

In this, Lena is quite similar to the black characters, particularly Dilsey, in <u>The Sound and the Fury</u>, who were portrayed, sympathetically but condescendingly, as primitives. The epitaph applied to Dilsey and her family, describing the method by which they dealt with the adversity that filled their lives--"They endured."--expresses Faulkner's most familiar theme in relation to his primitives, and it applies to Lena as well.

She endured. It was simply part of her character to do so. Faulkner believed in the power of the past with what might be called an intelligent conviction, stemming perhaps largely from his own observations of the way the Civil War, and its related mid-19th century issues, continued to live for his fellow 20th century Southerners. The Confederate monument on the town square of Oxford, his home, still bears the inscription: "Truth Crushed to Earth Will Rise Again." At the same time, he seems to have always carried an emotional disposition that the most critical, and perhaps the most worthy, attribute that man possesses is a capacity for unlimited endurance. Later, at about the time of the Nobel acceptance and the publication of A Fable, this view had been revised somewhat to read: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail."[1] But in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when The Sound and the Fury and Light in August were published, the author showed an unfortunate tendency to separate his characters rather neatly into a class of complex individuals, who struggle for a reconciliation with the past, and a class of simple individuals, who endure. The former are mostly whites

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1. "The Stockholm Address", from Three Decades of Criticism, p. 348.

and/or males; the latter are mostly blacks and/or females.

The Wild Palms is significant because, in 1938, it dealt for the first time with the themes of endurance and the determining past, without mutually excluding them from being factors within a single individual. The laconic tall convict behaves very much like the typical primitive throughout the period in which he is saddled with the responsibility of the pregnant woman and the boat. But he remains a complex individual in the novel because the reader does know his past, and knows that it has been critical, from the early account of his crime, his capture, and the source of his "outrage". At the same time, Harry Wilbourne, the civilized man who appears to live out his desperate story in a self-conscious and self-destructive rebellion against his past, at the very last voices the statement that is no more than a complicated individual's version of the attitude that led Dilsey, Lena, Judith Sutpen and others silently forward through their sufferings: "Yes, he thought, between grief and nothing I will take grief."(324)

The Wild Palms, in many ways so spare and simple, probably does better justice, in its absolutely straight-forward use of the contrapuntal structure and its

avoidance of stereotypes, to the tension between man's natural indomitability, and the burden of the past, than even the intricate Light in August.

The contrapuntal pattern, finally, like the centripetal, is in almost all cases a device that Faulkner used to isolate structurally--whether on one side of a contrast or at the center of a circle--that single preeminent factor, the past, and thereby examine its role in the various lives of his characters.

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