

THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN SELECTED WORKS
FROM WILLIAM FAULKNER'S EARLY FICTION

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PREFACE

I first encountered the alienation theme in the fiction of William Faulkner while doing a term paper based on Faulkner's Light in August. Joe Christmas, the protagonist of that novel, seemed the epitome of the modern man who is isolated from society. Upon reading other novels of Faulkner's creative period, 1929-1942, I recognized the alienation theme to be a dominant one. My purpose is to treat this significant theme in selected works from Faulkner's early fiction.

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In his book, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, Cleanth Brooks observes that "the plight of the isolated individual cut off from any community of values is a dominant theme of contemporary literature. But by developing this theme in a rural setting in which a powerful sense of community still exists, Faulkner has given us a kind of pastoral--that is, he has let us see our modern and complex problems mirrored in a simpler and more primitive world."¹ In creating his mythic Yoknapatawpha saga, William Faulkner has indeed reflected the plight of the alienated hero in the modern world.

According to Melvin Backman, the theme of the alienated and divided self dominates the novels of Faulkner's great creative period that began in the late twenties and ended in the late thirties. The chief protagonists of these novels are essentially the alienated man who cuts "the bonds that once united him to family and nation and God," and then "turns inward upon himself, creating at times, a rich inner world, yet planting simultaneously the seeds of death."²

This study will focus on the isolated protagonists of Faulkner's early fiction; but since it would be a rather expansive task to discuss and draw parallels among all of Faulkner's alienated characters, I have selected four who best seem to fit the role of alienated hero. They are Bayard Sartoris of Sartoris (1929), Quentin Compson of The Sound and the Fury (1929), Joe Christmas of Light in August (1932), and

Thomas Sutpen of Absalom, Absalom! (1936).

Critics generally agree that these exemplify well Faulkner's alienated hero. Elmo Howell observes that Bayard and Quentin are sensitive young men who cannot come to terms with the Snopes-dominated twentieth century.³ Backman refers to these two as Faulkner's "sick heroes,"⁴ and claims that Joe Christmas so personifies the alienation and division characteristic of our century that he seems more a state of mind than a man.⁵ Alfred Kazin calls Christmas "the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme case conceivable of American loneliness."⁶ Loneliness and estrangement from society characterize all three of these young men. Each rejects humanity and the bonds of love and fellowship; they run from others and themselves to defeat and death. Colonel Thomas Sutpen does not exactly fit into the same mold as Bayard, Quentin, and Christmas. He is a much older man, and in his "innocence" is not as emotionally complex. Nevertheless, he too is isolated from family and society. Obsessed only with his "design," he severs the bonds of humanity just as the others do.

As seen by this recurrence of the alienation theme, the myth motivating William Faulkner's early fiction reflects a rather pessimistic view of man's existence. It is difficult, however, to attribute this view to any one ideology. Harry M. Campbell and Ruel E. Foster state that the myth of cosmic pessimism in Faulkner's works is "a very complicated one and seems in various places, often contradictorily, to be similar to certain aspects of Kafka, modern French existentialism, the Old Testament wrath of God, Greek Nemesis, primitivism, and naturalistic determinism."⁷ Apparently the contradictory elements to which Campbell and Foster refer are naturalistic determinism and existentialism.

While at times Faulkner's tragic protagonist appears to be at the mercy of some destiny that is beyond his control, at other times he seems to have the existential freedom of choice.

This contradiction has frequently been the subject of debate in criticism dealing with Faulkner's view of tragedy. Thomas Connolly contends that while Faulkner's later fiction (e.g. Intruder in the Dust) stresses man's ability individually to exercise a measure of control over his life, his earlier works demonstrate a heavy emphasis on determinism.⁸ Rabi claims that none of Faulkner's heroes has access to freedom.⁹ In contrast, Robert Jacobs feels that Faulkner presents not a determined universe but a moral one and that his characters are captains of their own souls who work their own doom.¹⁰ This is essentially the view of Irving Howe.¹¹ Many agree, however, with Campbell and Foster's thesis that the dramatic tension between determinism and individual responsibility is not resolved and that the resulting tragic myth made more tragic by irresolution is a significant contribution to Faulkner's art.¹² As Lawrance Thompson points out, Faulkner subscribes to the classical notion that tragedy reaches its height when the opposed factors of fate and free will are inextricably operative.¹³ In the Aristotelian sense, man is initially free to make choices, but some tragic flaw in his character causes him to choose the wrong way. From then on his doom is inevitable; fate is beyond his control. The fall is thus more meaningful and tragic because it is brought about at least partially by the actions of the hero himself. So the reader comes away from Sartoris or Light in August or Absalom, Absalom! asking himself who is responsible for the tragic isolation of the protagonist -- fate or the hero himself?

To pigeonhole Faulkner's myth of cosmic pessimism into one or the other philosophical attitude--naturalistic determinism or existentialism--would cushion the tragic impact to mediocrity since the very uncertainty of where to place the blame (on forces beyond the individual's control or on the individual himself) creates the dramatic tension that is such a significant part of Faulkner's art. Campbell and Foster have illustrated this point abundantly; however, more needs to be said about the specific philosophical implications of this paradoxical relationship between naturalistic determinism and moral responsibility. For example, one immediately wants to know how the two ideologies operate in the lives of the characters and how they contribute to the alienation and eventual tragic outcome of the protagonists. The purpose of this study will be to deal with this question of how by examining elements of determinism and existentialism as they operate in the lives of the four selected characters--Bayard Sartoris, Quentin Compson, Joe Christmas, and Thomas Sutpen. By applying a few of the existential concepts of Jean Paul Sartre, at least a partial resolution to this paradoxical tension in Faulkner's early fiction seems possible.

Before leading up to a more specific statement of thesis, it is essential here to discuss some of Sartre's ideas.¹⁴ The basis of his existential theory is "Existence precedes essence." That is to say, man is the only matter which comes into the world existent but without any prefabricated nature (essence). Therefore, a stone must always be a stone (its predetermined essence). It is être-en-soi (being-in-itself) and has no possibilities except merely to be. On the other hand, man is not "pre-defined" simply as man. Rather, he is an individual, an être-pour-soi (being-for-itself) with infinite possibilities to become

instead of merely to be. Sartre believes man is a conscious subject with not only the freedom but the obligation to define his own being. He makes a radical distinction between the picture of man according to naturalism (man is what he is because of heredity, environment, society, biological and psychological determinism) and according to existentialism (man is what he is because of his own free acts for which he is responsible). He states emphatically that because man is a conscious being, his freedom is inescapable; it is absolute and therefore dreadful:

...there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom... man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passions.¹⁵

To say there is nothing besides the existing individual means for Sartre that there is no God, no objective system of values, no built-in essence, and consequently no determinism. Man is left to face an absurd and chaotic universe completely alone; his resulting psychological condition is an encounter with nothingness—complete abandonment, despair, and anguish.

According to Sartre, then, man must have the courage to accept his terrible freedom if he is to live honestly and authentically. Sartre's ideal implies a stoic endurance as man creates his own being in an absurd cosmos. But many existentialists admit that the greater part of humanity fear freedom, responsibility, and coexisting anguish to such an extent that they flee from it. Hazel Barnes remarks that essentially the position is this:

Man cannot bear the realization that all the values he lives by, his purposes, his projects are sustained by his own free

choice; he finds it too great a strain to accept sole responsibility for his life. Therefore he takes refuge in the belief that somehow the external world is so structured that it guarantees the worth of its objects, it provides specific tasks which have to be done, it demands of each person a definite way of living which is the right one. Whether God, Nature, or a transcendent society is responsible, the order of things is absolute.¹⁶

Sartre terms this escape from responsibility and freedom mauvaise foi or bad faith. By deceiving himself, man ignores his being for-itself and settles for a being in-itself because it is much easier to passively be than to actively become. Therefore, the man who acts in bad faith hides behind the excuse of his passions or doctrines of determinism (heredity, environment, society, etc.). He becomes entirely dependent on absolutist or a priori concepts. In his self-deception, he merely plays a role, extinguishing completely his individuality.

It is my opinion that Sartre's concept of bad faith is at the very heart of the dramatic tension between naturalistic determinism and existential free will in Faulkner's early work. Bayard, Quentin, and Christmas all have the opportunity to make choices that would enable them to live as individuals authentically and honestly, but each fears the freedom of self-definition. Rather than face life responsibly and become, they exhibit their bad faith by resigning themselves to so-called deterministic forces which allow them to passively be. These forces which the protagonists let determine their behavior are somewhat interrelated, but can be categorized thus: (1) the past (Because they are so tied to the past, the characters exist merely as objects in the present and exert no effort toward shaping their future.); (2) heritage and environment (The protagonists allow themselves to be influenced by their ancestry or by members of society instead of actively creating themselves.); (3) absolutism (The characters rigidly

adhere to an absolute, a a priori concept.) Sartre would call the conduct of these three young men la lacheté or cowardice, a manifestation of bad faith characterized by a denial of free will as they hide behind deterministic excuses.

Thomas Sutpen, the dynasty builder of Absalom, Absalom!, does not exhibit this same pattern of cowardice and withdrawal from becoming. His efforts, however, serve to define him not as an individual, but as a type--the Southern aristocratic plantation owner (Sutpen is not, however, a true representation of all Southern plantation owners). His life is merely an acting out of this role. Thus, he too exhibits bad faith by rigid adherence to an absolute, unbending principle.

The body of this study will attempt to show how these four alienated protagonists (Bayard Sartoris, Quentin Compson, Joe Christmas, and Thomas Sutpen) fail to live authentically by acting in bad faith and what the consequences of this existential failure are. Such an analysis will hopefully suggest a possible way of explaining how the philosophies of naturalistic determinism and existentialism operate in Faulkner's tragic myth.

Critics generally agree that Sartoris lacks the artistry and profundity of Faulkner's best novels such as The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom!. But in this formative period the seeds of Faulkner's tragic myth were being planted. Bayard Sartoris, a prototype of the post-World War I lost generation, has very little depth as a character, but he roughly exhibits the same pattern of behavior that typifies Faulkner's more complex creations of alienated youth, Quentin Compson and Joe Christmas.

Bayard returns from the war blaming himself for his brother

Johnny's death in an air duel with German planes. He feels guilty about putting his own safety above that of his brother's, even though Johnny acted foolishly and recklessly. But the feeling of responsibility for Johnny's death is not the true reason for Bayard's guilt; it is the daring way in which Johnny died. The reader learns that Bayard has an ancestry of proud, reckless, irresponsible Sartorises who have died violent, unnatural deaths. His great-grandfather, Colonel John Sartoris, was a brave but violent man who ended his string of killings by allowing himself to be shot by a rival whom he had provoked. And the Carolina Bayard Sartoris, John's brother, died in a one man raid on a Union army headquarters to get a can of anchovies. The very repetition of the names John and Bayard through four generations of Sartorises stresses the power of the Sartoris legend. The names not only repeat the past verbally but create an obligation for their bearers to do so in action. In the climactic poetic passage at the end of the book the omniscient-author gives an appropriate mythical expression of the legend by associating the doom and martial glory of the Sartorises with the glory of the Crusaders and the Christian warriors of Charlemagne:

The music went on in the dusk softly; the dusk was peopled with ghosts of glamorous and old disastrous things. And if they were just glamorous enough, there was sure to be a Sartoris in them, and then they were sure to be disastrousFor there is death in the sound of it, and a glamorous fatality, like silver pennons downrushing at sunset, or a dying fall of horns along the road to Roncevaux.¹⁷

Bayard feels guilty because he does not possess the same reckless bravado of his quixotic Sartoris forbears and Johnny, who was truly an exemplar of the family tradition. In contrast to Johnny's casualness during the war, Bayard was tense each time he took a chance and risked his life. His dominant memory was one of "old terror" when "momentarily,

the world was laid away and he was a trapped beast in the high blue, mad for life, trapped in the very cunning fabric that had betrayed him who had dared chance too much" (p. 181). This reaction seems to suggest Bayard's will to live; but this nature was completely alien to the romantic Sartoris legend. No Sartoris must admit feeling like "a trapped beast" in the face of danger nor can he admit to a "mad desire for life." Therefore, the ghosts of the past coupled with guilt at lacking Johnny's recklessness incite Bayard's grim determination to prove himself a Sartoris even though it is contrary to his desire to live. From the time he returns from the war, his brief life is spent in playing a role. The untamed horse, the speeding car, the alcohol binges, and finally the untested fatal plane are all acts of conformity to the Sartoris legend of "glamorous fatality."

Thus, Bayard exhibits bad faith by denying himself the possibilities of self-definition and resigning himself to what might be considered determining factors--the past and his heritage. Because he is so absorbed in the past and in the Sartoris family doom, he rejects his essential freedom to shape a future of his own.

Quentin Compson is more emotionally complex than Bayard Sartoris. While Bayard is externally active, Quentin is inwardly reserved and inactive. The focus is on his psychological nature; he is sensitive, introspective, intellectual, and idealistic. He is like Bayard, however, in that he, too, fails to accept the existential challenge of becoming. Quentin allows himself to be molded not only by the past and by family, but also by a Puritanical code of honor.

Quentin's role as narrator in Absalom, Absalom! offers some valuable insights into his character that later become significant in

The Sound and the Fury.¹⁸ As he and his roommate fit the pieces of the Sutpen legend together, Quentin becomes intrigued with Henry's plight. Henry killed his beloved half brother Charles Bon, a mulatto, to prevent Bon from innocently marrying their sister Judith. Quentin identifies with Henry because he, too, assumes responsibility for protecting family honor--the Compson family honor represented by "the minute fragile membrane of her [Caddy's] maidenhead."¹⁹ From childhood he becomes obsessed with preserving his sister Caddy's virginity. Like Henry, his strict adherence to a code overshadows love and humanitarian concern.

Aside from revealing his obsession with the family code of honor, Quentin's behavior in Absalom! seems also to reflect his strong romantic tie with the past. Quentin is essentially an idealist who adopts a set of principles belonging to the antebellum South and tries to apply them to a twentieth-century culture. He is obsessed with protecting Caddy's honor because virginity was essential to the Old Order system of values. In his idealism, Quentin wants to preserve the Compson aristocratic tradition--a tradition that had perished with the changing of time.

At the very beginning of Absalom! the omniscient author informs us of the reason for Quentin's interest in the Sutpen legend--Sutpen is only one among many "wraithlike" figures that haunt Quentin's imagination:

His [Quentin's] childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts...²⁰

Sutpen's failure to establish a permanent dynasty is symbolic of the death of the Old Order and its absolute codes of conduct. The aristocratic South has fallen in an era of dynamism and rapid change.

Quentin has the choice of denying the "design" of the past and moving with the current of time. But at the end of Absalom! his passionate reiteration that he does not hate the South reveals his decision to perpetuate the "design" he has found in the past.²¹

In The Sound and the Fury, Quentin shows a complete withdrawal from the realities and responsibilities of existence and the possibilities of self-definition. Faulkner's recapitulation to past time through stream-of-consciousness in Benjy's and Quentin's sections lets the reader see the extent to which Quentin, acting in bad faith, has allowed himself to be shaped by the following so-called deterministic elements: the warping influence of his parents; the past; and a puritanical code of family honor.

The Sound and the Fury is perhaps the most poignantly tragic of Faulkner's novels because it portrays the deterioration of a family. Lawrence Thompson points out that all the Compson children seem poisoned and doomed by parental betrayals.²² The father, Jason Compson III, is an alcoholic with a nihilistic philosophy of life; Mrs. Compson is a whining, selfish hypochondriac who has no love to give her children. Quentin remembers that Caddy had said to him, "If I'd just had a mother so I could say Mother, Mother." And Quentin also remembers that he had said to Caddy, "There's a curse on us. It's not our fault. Is it our fault?" (p. 196). Thus, Quentin manifests his bad faith by blaming parental influence for his misfortune instead of freeing himself from this influence and defining himself. The agony and mental anguish over the shattering of his idealistic desire for Caddy's purity finally leads to acceptance of his father's pessimistic philosophy:

Father said man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you'd think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your

misfortune Father said. A gull on a wire attached through space dragged. You carry the symbol of your frustration into eternity (p. 129).

The influence of his father's nihilism is connected with Quentin's failure to face the reality of the present. Time, represented by clock imagery, becomes a significant symbol in Quentin's section which opens with Quentin's recollection of his father presenting his grandfather's watch to him [Quentin]:

I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools (p. 93).

Quentin has come to accept his father's pessimistic view of the present and future. Time has become, in a sense, his enemy leading him only to a reality which reveals the ineradicable misfortune and absurdity of human experience. Quentin's destruction of his grandfather's watch becomes the symbolic means and his suicide the actual means of halting the passage of time. Peter Swiggart feels that existential unity is dependent on viewing the past as experience on which to base the present and future.²³ Because Quentin is concerned only with the past, his concern for moral value is statically frozen there and is, therefore, deprived of a focus for application in the present. Thus, his obsession with destroying time and the resulting denial of the future can be interpreted as existential failure--an act of bad faith.

Closely associated with this romantic, self-destructive concept of past time is a final expression of Quentin's bad faith--his absolutism. To Quentin, Caddy's virginity is essential to upholding the family

honor and he begins preparing her early for this role. When they were playing in the branch as children, Caddy wanted to take her dress off to keep from getting it wet, but Quentin demanded that she "better not." She did so anyway and Quentin slapped her for disregarding his orders. At another time he scoured her head in the grass for kissing boys. After Caddy came upon Quentin and Natalie "dancing sitting down" in the barn, he smeared her with mud for not being shocked at his dirty game.

Quentin's strict, absolute ethical order is totally inflexible. Hence, Caddy's affair with Dalton Ames is a direct blow to this value system which he has tried to hold beyond time. Her pregnancy is a harsh reality of twentieth century society--a reality that Quentin, in his idealism, refuses to face. Quentin is disillusioned but he attempts to maintain order by trying to convince Mr. Compson that Caddy had not willingly submitted to Dalton Ames, but that he [Quentin] had committed incest with her. In his irrationality, Quentin thinks incest (though it is an everlasting sin) could isolate him and Caddy in hell together "beyond the clean flame," thus restoring the family honor that the intrusion of Dalton Ames had spoiled. But Mr. Compson doesn't believe the "confession" and Quentin's only recourse is to escape the harsh reality of Caddy's dishonor by destroying time--in essence, drowning himself. He is defeated because he was trying to achieve the absolute and unchanging in the midst of the limited and mutable. In his innocence he can see neither the falseness and inadequacy of the old chivalric tradition nor the irrationality of his devotion to it.

Robert Slabey summarizes Quentin's denial of the existential freedom to become:

By his treatment of Quentin, Faulkner implicitly censures that part of the romantic sensibility that runs away from

life, that cannot stand--or understand evil, that cannot reconcile the potentiality for evil within his own being, that is unable to stand face to face with reality, with life, with death, with the self, that is unwilling to come into an existential encounter with Being.²⁴

Colin Wilson begins his book, The Outsider, by discussing the alienated characters in the fiction of Barbusse, Sartre, Camus, and Kafka.²⁵ These existentialists see man as a forlorn, lost, and solitary figure against the world of nature and society about him. Some of the basic qualities of the Outsider are found in Joe Christmas, the hero of Light in August. He is self-divided and desires to be unified. Because he does not know whether he is white or black, Christmas' main concern, like the Outsider, is to find the way back to himself, to answer the question "Who am I?", to prove that he is a man and not a thing. The image in Light in August which re-enforces the Outsider theme is the road. Christmas' experience is related as a journey--a journey not to any outside destination but to the center of his own existence:

...he is entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. 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 farther than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle.²⁶

This is indeed an existential view of man; one that sees him as a wayfarer, always on the road, never at its terminus.

It is evident that Christmas is in many ways a much truer personification of the alienated existential hero than either of Faulkner's "sick heroes," Bayard or Quentin. While they flee from life and are relatively unconcerned about asserting their freedom to become, Christmas continually searches for self-identity. But in this search for self-identity does Joe Christmas really assert his individual

freedom? Or does he deny the responsibility of this freedom, finding it easier to merely respond to a set of absolutes created by the white Southern community? It is my contention that by failing to assert his freedom, Christmas acts in bad faith; throughout the novel he allows himself to be shaped and finally destroyed by the abstract patterns of Calvinism and racism that were so much a part of the Southern cultural community of the early twentieth century.²⁷

One of the tenets of Calvinism is a belief in the natural depravity of mankind which is a result of original sin. Only by the grace of a stern God of justice can man be redeemed from his sins; however, Calvinists believe that not everyone is able to achieve redemption. According to the doctrine of election or predestination, the whimsical God of Calvinism determines beforehand which individuals are to be saved and which are to be condemned. As evidence of one's redemption, the characteristic behavior (according to Calvinism) is a repression and constriction (rather than a regulation as in less rigid forms of Christianity) of natural impulse.

This aspect of Calvinism has a pervading influence on the career of Joe Christmas. As a youngster at the orphanage Joe is too young to recognize the guilt-punishment-release cycle as Calvinist dogma, but he nevertheless exhibits an adherence to it in the incident with the dietitian. While eating toothpaste in the dietitian's closet, young Christmas overhears her entertaining one of the interns on her bed. Instead of punishing Joe for his "sin" of eating toothpaste, she rewards him with money in hopes of keeping him quiet (as if the boy were aware of what she and the intern were doing). His previous treatment at the orphanage had conditioned him to expect justice rather than

kindness for disobedience. Therefore, the reward confuses him in its denial of the sin-punishment ritual which absolves and releases him from guilt.

The religious fanaticism of Christmas' "family," old Doc Hines (his grandfather) and Calvin McEachern (his foster father), plays a large part in molding Christmas into an absolutist. The Calvinist doctrine of election or predestination divides man into the mutually exclusive categories of the Doomed and the Elect. Doc Hines thinks of himself as one of the Elect--a prophet and instrument of God who insists that his grandson is the result of "bitchery and abomination" and that it is God's will to punish him. Similarly, McEachern prides himself on being guided by the Word of God in his attempts to "convert" Christmas by forcing the boy to memorize the Protestant scriptural catechism.²⁸

Christmas rebels against Hines' Puritanism (the "bitchery and abomination of womanfilth"), but his life of rebellion ironically demonstrates how strongly he has been influenced by this radical Calvinist fear and distrust of femininity. In his first sexual attempt as a teenager, he is so repulsed by the young Negro whore's menstrual cycle that he bathes his hands in sheep's blood in an attempt to symbolically purge himself of the filth. And in his affair with the prostitute Bobbie Allen, Christmas becomes nauseated when she explains her "sickness" to him one day. He comes to fear and distrust the female principle. He prefers the beatings of McEachern to the soft kindnesses of Mrs. McEachern, and he violently resists Joanna Burden's efforts to domesticate and convert him.

Christmas also rebels against McEachern's insistence on the

punishment-release pattern of Calvinist atonement. In the dramatic scene in the dance hall he brutally beats (and thinks that he has murdered) McEachern and begins his life of wandering. But he has been so influenced by McEachern's abstract pattern and by his earlier experiences in the orphanage he later yearns for punishment that will bring moral absolution.

This need for moral absolution is linked not only with Christmas' Calvinist spirit, but with a second absolute that greatly influences his behavior--racism. The racist code of the South was very simple--Negroes are inferior and subservient to whites.

Doc Hines, janitor of the orphanage where Christmas lives, encourages the other kids to derisively call young Joe "nigger." So before he even knows the meaning of the word "nigger," he intuitively associates it with inferiority and lowliness. As he gets a little older he realizes the dilemma first posed to him by the Negro gardener of the orphanage. "You don't know what you are. And more than that, you won't never know. You'll live and you'll die and you won't never know" (p. 363).

He is obsessed with proving himself either white or black, but the very lack of proof causes him to vacillate between the two. In his life of wandering he becomes an antagonist. When in the presence of whites he claims he is a Negro, and when in the presence of Negroes he claims he is white. Thus, he voluntarily subjects himself to the pattern of rejection that the strict segregationist code of the South represents. But by the time he has wandered as far north as Chicago and Detroit, he finds that a great many people will accept him on any terms regardless of his mixture of blood. That someone could simply

ignore the Negro-white separatist pattern that has become so ingrained in his personality fills Christmas with an indignant amazement and outrage. He beats the white prostitute who refuses to be horrified by the mention of his Negro blood. Her indifference challenges the validity of the premise that has become such an absolute concept in his life. "Negro" demands certain actions and attitudes on the part of all white people and must not be denied.

Christmas relinquishes his freedom to become by turning his back on the North where he would be accepted as a human being and by returning to the South. He feels the need of moral absolution because of his belief that he has "some nigger blood in him." This need for moral absolution (stemming from his subconscious adherence to the abstract patterns of Calvinism and racism) reaches climactic extremes in the murder scene in Joanna Burden's bedroom. Christmas murders Joanna because he feels threatened by what she was trying to force on him (marriage, God, race), but in another sense he murders her because he subconsciously yearns for moral absolution through the ultimate punishment--death--which he will receive for killing a white woman.

In summary, Christmas' adherence to the absolute codes of Calvinism and racism (even though it is subconscious) restricts his efforts to define himself as an individual and as a human being. Like Bayard and Quentin, he, too, demonstrates bad faith by denying his essential freedom to become and allowing himself instead to be molded by so-called deterministic factors.

✓ Colonel Thomas Sutpen (Absalom, Absalom!), the final protagonist selected for this study of Faulkner's alienated hero, differs considerably from the previously discussed characters. Bayard and Quentin

are barely out of their teens and Christmas is probably in his early thirties; Sutpen is a much older man--about 60 or 65 at the time of his death. The younger alienated protagonists are emotionally complex, confused, "sick"; Sutpen is simple, self-sufficient, well-balanced. The actions of Bayard, Quentin, and Christmas are irrational and self-defeating; the actions of Sutpen are quite the opposite--coldly rational, calculating, intended for self-improvement. It would seem at a glance that Sutpen has accepted the freedom to become that the others have denied, but as one looks more closely at his career, one realizes that ironically Sutpen's is also a life of bad faith.

Sutpen was born in the mountains of Virginia, but his family moved to the coastal region when he was a boy. One day he was sent on an errand to a large plantation, and unfamiliar with the custom that poor whites call at the back door, young Sutpen went to the front. He was quickly rejected by the "monkey nigger" butler. Outraged at being shamed by the "monkey nigger's" stare, "he knew that something would have to be done about it; he would have to do something about it in order to live with himself for the rest of his life..." (p. 234). While contemplating this event in a cave, he became aware of his absolute freedom to choose his own course of action.

This course of action develops into his "design" to build a plantation dynasty for himself in the South so he will never be shamed again as he was that day at the front door of the rich man's plantation house. He resorts to any extreme to achieve his "design": the repudiation of his West Indian first wife and child because they have Negro blood and will hinder his cause; the relentless carving out of a plantation in the wilderness of Frenchman's Bend; the marriage to

Ellen Coldfield because she will add to his design something he lacks-- respectability; the vain attempt to foster an heir to his dynasty (after his son Henry murdered Charles Bon) by a vulgar proposal to Miss Rosa Coldfield and by having a child (a female) by a sixteen year old poor white mistress, granddaughter of his hired man Wash Jones. General Compson called Sutpen's moral myopia "innocence." Indeed, Sutpen never awakens to the fact that others are suffering at his expense. He thinks that "the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (p. 263). That is why Sutpen can ask General Compson in his "innocence" not, "Where did I go wrong?," but, "Where did I make the mistake?" When Charles Bon first comes to his door, Sutpen does not call it "retribution, no sins of the father come home to roost; not even calling it bad luck, but just a mistake...just an old mistake in fact which a man of courage and shrewdness...could still combat if he could only find out what the mistake had been" (pp. 267-268).

Because he cannot foster a male heir, Sutpen's "design" is a failure; he accomplishes nothing of lasting value. It is true that his actions are marks of the existential hero, who by committing himself, creates himself; but he acts in bad faith by rejecting an infinite number of social possibilities and accepting only those of the particular class which he is imitating--the Southern aristocratic plantation owner. By adhering rigidly to the absolutism of his "design," he not only destroys those around him, but also destroys his own individuality by becoming the stereotype plantation owner. His entire life is a

mechanistic acting out of this role--a condition that Sartre would definitely call mauvaise foi.

The discussion has thus far intended to reveal how each of the four characters denies his freedom to become by acting in bad faith. One might call this existential failure their hamartia or tragic flaw, for by not accepting the freedom of self-definition, the protagonists render themselves puppets to the warping influences of the past, their heritage, and the absolutism of their society. In other words, individual freedom offers them various possibilities to become, but they find it easier just to be by letting determining factors mold their behavior.

It is necessary to look briefly at the consequences of the characters' unauthentic existence. Whether or not Sartre's philosophy implies a really satisfactory moral structure is difficult to determine; but one can safely assume that Faulkner is a moralist. His novels exhibit a growing awareness of the human need for fellowship, love, a sense of community, a feeling of belonging. His 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech communicates this same moral concern. So, the consequences of a life of bad faith (at least in Faulkner's characters) are moral consequences. By acting in bad faith, the protagonists are to a large extent responsible for their own alienation and tragic outcome. The downfall of each can be progressively diagrammed in moral terms: (1) self-conscious brooding (e.g. Bayard's concern with the Sartoris family doom, Quentin's obsession with protecting Caddy's virginity, Christmas' indecision about his race, Sutpen's obsession with his "design"); (2) rejection of humanity (e.g. revulsion toward sex--Bayard, Quentin, and Christmas; Sutpen's moral blindness in his use of

sex for selfish purposes); and (3) ultimate retreat into death as an escape from a chaotic existence.²⁹ These are the consequences of a life of bad faith.

In these early novels, Faulkner poses an alternative to bad faith by creating characters who attempt to live authentically. Dilsey (The Sound and the Fury), Lena Grove (Light in August), and Jenny DuPre (Sartoris) face life by stoically enduring whatever comes their way. Olga Vickery feels that "Dilsey is meant to represent the ethical norm, the realizing and acting out of one's humanity.... By working with circumstance instead of against it she creates order out of disorder."³⁰ Hers is a patient preoccupation with the present--the only possible way of living with time.³¹ Hyatt Waggoner sees the comic, idyllic relationship between Lena Grove and Byron Bunch at the end of Light in August as an affirmation of the possibilities of life.³² Miss Jenny DuPre seems to assert her own individuality over the Sartoris legend of doom. She can live in the present because, unlike Bayard, she is not tied to the past. This stoic endurance, this honest, authentic facing of life is, of course, the existential ideal that Sartre's philosophy implies. Faulkner summed it up when asked at Nagano if he considered human life basically a tragedy. He answered, "Actually, yes. But man's immortality is that he is faced with a tragedy which he can't beat and he still tries to do something about it."³³

In conclusion, it is not the intention of this study to advocate that Sartre's humanistic existentialism is ideal or even desirable. On closer examination, one finds his philosophy to be full of contradictions and far from being a practical and justifiable moral standard. I have merely used Sartre's concept of bad faith as a foundation on which to

base a possible explanation of how naturalistic determinism and existentialism are inextricably operative in Faulkner's tragic myth. Such an explanation hopefully offers a new perspective in viewing the dramatic tension between the two philosophies that elevates the tragedy of the alienation theme in Faulkner's early novels.

END NOTES

- ¹Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven, 1963), p. 54.
- ²Melvin Backman, "Faulkner's Sick Heroes: Bayard Sartoris and Quentin Compson," Modern Fiction Studies, II (Autumn, 1956), 25.
- ³Elmo Howell, "Faulkner's Jumbies: The Nonsense World of As I Lay Dying," Arizona Quarterly, XVI (Spring, 1960), 72.
- ⁴Backman, "Faulkner's Sick Heroes," p. 95.
- ⁵Melvin Backman, Faulkner: The Major Years (Bloomington, 1966), p. 86.
- ⁶Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of Light in August," William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing, 1960), p. 253.
- ⁷Harry M. Campbell and Ruel E. Foster, William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal (Norman, 1951), p. 114.
- ⁸Thomas E. Connolly, "Fate and 'the Agony of Will': Determinism in Some Works of William Faulkner," Essays on Determinism in American Literature, ed. Sidney J. Krause (Kent, Ohio, 1964), p. 52.
- ⁹Rabi, "Faulkner and the Exiled Generation," William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing, 1951), p. 134.
- ¹⁰Robert D. Jacobs, "Faulkner's Tragedy of Isolation," Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore, 1953), p. 171.
- ¹¹Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York, 1951).
- ¹²Campbell and Foster, pp. 114-139.
- ¹³Lawrance Thompson, William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York, 1963), p. 41.
- ¹⁴Sartre presents his rather complex philosophy of humanistic existentialism in Existentialism, tr. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1947) and Being and Nothingness, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1956). I am grateful to Ernst Breisach's Introduction to Modern Existentialism (New York, 1962) and Hazel E. Barnes' The Literature of Possibility:

A Study in Humanistic Existentialism (Lincoln, 1959) for help in constructing a summary of some of Sartre's existential concepts.

¹⁵Sartre, Existentialism, pp. 27-28.

¹⁶Barnes, The Literature of Possibility, p. 48.

¹⁷William Faulkner, Sartoris (New York, 1953), p. 317. Subsequent references to Sartoris will be from this (Signet Book) edition. Page numbers will be indicated parenthetically within the text.

¹⁸Although Absalom, Absalom! (1936) was written seven years after The Sound and the Fury (1929), according to Yoknapatawpha chronology the latter part of Quentin's narration in Absalom! occurs in his room at Harvard in the winter of 1910, a few months prior to his suicide as recorded in The Sound and the Fury.

¹⁹William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York, 1946), p. 411. Subsequent references to The Sound and the Fury will be from this (Random House-Vintage) edition. Page numbers will be indicated parenthetically within the text.

²⁰William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York, 1951), p. 12. Subsequent references to Absalom, Absalom! will be from this (The Modern Library) edition. Page numbers will be indicated parenthetically within the text.

²¹Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner (Baton Rouge, 1959), p. 92.

²²Thompson, p. 41.

²³Peter Swiggart, "Moral and Temporal Order in The Sound and the Fury," Sewanee Review, LXI (Spring, 1953), 223.

²⁴Robert M. Slabey, "The 'Romanticism' of The Sound and the Fury," Mississippi Quarterly, XVI (Summer, 1963), 158. Slabey's use of "Being" is not intended here as a Christian existentialist expression of God.

²⁵Colin Wilson, The Outsider (Boston, 1956).

²⁶William Faulkner, Light in August (New York, 1932), p. 321. Subsequent references to Light in August will be from this (Smith & Haas) edition. Page numbers will be indicated parenthetically within the text.

²⁷Several critics have suggested that the theme of Light in August is the tendency of society to impose prescribed abstract social and religious patterns that warp and cripple the individual, making him incapable of responding naturally to the full scope of human experience: Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York, 1951), p. 156; Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York, 1964), p. 173; Hyatt H. Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington, Kentucky, 1959), p. 101; Michael Millgate,

William Faulkner (New York, 1965), p. 127.

²⁸Calvinism supports the belief that the will of God can be discovered through studying the Bible.

²⁹I have argued in their particular sections of the paper that Bayard, Quentin, and Christmas exhibit what might be called a death wish. But it is debatable whether or not Sutpen does the same. I have emphasized previously that Sutpen's behavior is in many ways different from the others and it may hold true here as well. On the other hand, Sutpen's insult to Wash Jones' granddaughter could be interpreted as a subconscious desire for death. Sutpen had failed in all attempts to foster a male heir; he was perhaps ready, then, to give up a life that had failed to produce something of permanence. If so, Sutpen's ill-treatment of Jones' granddaughter was just the thing to goad Jones into murdering him with the scythe.

³⁰Vickery, pp. 47-48.

³¹Ibid., p. 48.

³²Waggoner, p. 113.

³³Robert A. Jelliffe, ed., Faulkner at Nagano (Tokyo, 1956), p. 4.

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