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The individual and the problem of self-definition in
Faulkner : isolation and gesture in *Light in August*,
The sound and the fury, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and
As I lay dying

Betty Jean Seymour

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THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DEFINITION
IN FAULKNER: ISOLATION AND GESTURE IN LIGHT IN
AUGUST, THE SOUND AND THE FURY, ABSALOM, ABSALOM!,
AND AS I LAY DYING.

BY

BETTY JEAN SEYMOUR

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
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PREFACE

Perhaps the primary task of the writer is the communication of that which is most significant in human experience. This paper has grown out of an interest in contemporary literature as an expression of this function. Literature, like other art forms, can appraise, analyze, reflect, and, sometimes, provide direction for, the plight of modern man.

William Faulkner deals with haunting, overwhelming questions; his work is an exploration into the fundamental problem of human identity.

The reader of Faulkner does not always tread on familiar ground. Faulkner uproots the old definitions with which most of his audience would feel at home, and his stories blast the world that is settled, comfortable, secure, predictable. The reader who is genuinely interested in this author's understanding of human life must be willing to have these familiar expressions of his experience exploded before him and be ready to look, in a fresh though poignant way, at himself and the import of his life in the world.

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INTRODUCTION: THE OUTRAGE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, to examine Faulkner's view concerning the problem of the alienation of the individual and the factors behind that estrangement, and, second, to propose the "gesture" as Faulkner's attempt to overcome this separation and thereby to achieve a sense of self-definition.

This study is made on the basis of an examination of four of Faulkner's great novels: Light in August, The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom!, and As I Lay Dying. These were chosen from what has been called the author's greatest period.¹ Two other works which fall within this approximate period are Sanctuary and Pylon. Concerning the former, Faulkner himself admits

¹
William Van O'Connor, William Faulkner (Minneapolis, 1959), p. 43.

that the book was "basely conceived...I thought I would make a little money...And I thought of the most horrific idea I could think of and wrote it."² Of Pylon, O'Connor says that it

is a failure, at least when seen in relation to the several books published immediately before it and to Absalom, Absalom!, published the year following it.³

The attempt to discover the meaning of the human in Faulkner is difficult at best. The guidelines are indirect and the clues are oblique. His statements concerning the human enterprise are not usually made in an explicit way; they are imbedded deep in his material. If he wishes to discuss morality, he does not have a character make a speech on the subject. One must go deep below the surface, for it is there that the burden and the privilege of human life are sustained. One must not only look within a particular character but he must also consider that character's place in the framework of an entire novel--i.e., all that makes up his environmental context. Only then is it valid to attach significance to that character's performance and thus formulate some judgment about his moral stance.

Before one can make a legitimate assumption about Faulkner's view, he must consider not only numerous characters but also the symbols and techniques which

2

Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, Faulkner in the University (New York, 1965), pp. 90-91.

3

O'Connor, William Faulkner, p. 25.

Faulkner uses--i.e., his entire performance. Insofar as any conclusions are drawn in this paper, they are at best tentative ones in that they represent only what can be determined from these four novels of the author's great middle period.

It is not the purpose of this paper to use these four books as propaganda vehicles for any particular religious or philosophical bias. This would unquestionably violate the literary endeavor. To be sure, one easily gathers from Faulkner's work various obvious positions. For example, there is a strong reaction against the inadequacy of the institutional church and its representatives, official and lay. At least one writer says that Faulkner stands between Stoicism and Christianity.⁴ Another sees in his work a sociological document--i.e., a commentary upon the decay of the South.⁵ There is also to be found in his novels a strong affinity with the philosophy of Existentialism. The recurrence of such Existentialist themes as the pain of isolation, the supreme value of the individual and his

⁴ John W. Hunt, William Faulkner. Art in Theological Tension (Syracuse, 1965), p. 27.

⁵ Malcolm Cowley, The Portable Faulkner (New York, 1946), p. 13.

capacity for decision, and the burden of anguish carried by those sensitive to the absurdity of the world, particularly the ever-present reality of death, has been indicated by such Faulkner students as Ciancio,⁶ Penick,⁷ and McCorquodale.⁸ All of these critics have been able to find supportive material in Faulkner, though they may be guilty of extrapolating only those ideas which support their own particular angle of vision. Literature, nevertheless, must be taken on its own terms. And one must always be mindful of Faulkner's own caution:

I was just trying to write about people, which to me are the important thing. Just the human heart, it's not ideas. I don't know anything about ideas, don't have much confidence in them.⁹

Faulkner has been condemned for a seeming preoccupation with the sordid situation and the perverted character. He may, however, simply be pointing up the ambiguous structure that is a part of every man's environment. To be sure, he is not interested in the conventional propriety which a given community (be it church or

6

Ralph A. Ciancio, "The Existentialist Affinities," Studies in Faulkner, Carnegie Series in English, vi (1961), 69-91.

7

See the unpubl. diss. (Yale, 1953) by Edwin A. Penick, "A Theological Critique of the Interpretation of Man in the Fiction and Drama of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus."

8

See the unpubl. diss. (Texas, 1953) by Marjorie Kimball McCorquodale, "William Faulkner and Existentialism."

otherwise) might paste in a moral lawbook. Further, he is not interested so much in a "good" or "nice" person as he is in the human person. The affairs of the human spirit vitally concern him. He illustrates again and again the unbelievable measures the corrupt human heart will take to achieve its own ends. But this does not necessarily mean that he is proposing such action as positive. "Witch-hunting," therefore, must be abandoned.

One broad, yet honest, statement that may be legitimately read out of Faulkner is that he is committed to those values which serve to make life more human. Hunt says that his "commitment to the meaning these values entail is the source of the brooding sense of loss... [felt] ...when this meaning is absent."⁹

William Barrett observes that the themes which obsess...modern art...are the alienation and estrangement of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal.¹⁰

There is specific and powerful articulation of this in the art of William Faulkner. He explodes the world that

⁹

Hunt, p. 172.

¹⁰

William Barrett, Irrational Man (Garden City, 1958), p. 56.

is settled, comfortable, predictable. Waggoner says that

his stories chart and plumb, isolate and define, Faulkner's situation and our own. Exploiting to the limit the fracturing of the image of man, the destruction of any given, assumed meaning, they carry on a continuous conversation on the possibility of finding or creating another image, new or old, which will affirm and foster life, not deny or defeat it. ¹¹

The four novels which are the subject of this paper are part of the saga of Yoknapatawpha (an Indian word, meaning "water runs slow through flat land") County, a mythical kingdom Faulkner has created in northern Mississippi and of which he has claimed to be the sole owner and proprietor. But the geography is no more confined to Mississippi than are the problems and the people for which Yoknapatawpha provides the location. The county is not on any map because, as Melville says, real places are not to be found there. Penick states:

Most of Faulkner's writings can be discussed in terms of a particular human yearning that has once again acquired intense pertinence and poignancy in our contemporary era: the longing for assurance that human life has purposefulness,--the quest for meaning in human existence. ¹²

¹¹

Hyatt H. Waggoner, William Faulkner, From Jefferson to the World (Lexington, 1959), p. 254.

¹²

Edwin A. Penick, "The Testimony of William Faulkner," Christian Scholar, XXXVIII (1955), 121.

Faulkner has chosen to tell the human story, not in logical or abstract propositions, but through flesh and blood characters who are part and parcel of the massive human problem. We must place Faulkner's world in the individual human heart. Indeed, he himself has said that this is the only subject worth writing about.¹³ The heart which he examines and exposes to us (sometimes ruthlessly and sometimes gently) is many-faceted and complex.

We shall begin this discussion by looking at that part of the human situation which is characterized by Faulkner as "outrage." In whatever form it may appear, it makes up the burden found in the individual human life. The outrage is a "given." It is built into the complexity of man's own nature and into the structures of existence itself. Such outrage produces anguish in man as he slowly comes to realize what his situation is really like. And his very endeavors to come to terms with this condition may be so anxiety-ridden that they themselves may ironically contradict the style of life in which persons can operate as human individuals. In this sense, then, the outrage provides for man the basis of his isolation. We shall examine at this point two

¹³

Faulkner's Nobel Prize Speech, quoted in Saturday Review (July 28, 1962), 20.

major categories--time and society--and propose them as two fundamental causes of isolation.

The second half of this study will deal with the "gesture" which, says Howe,¹⁴ denotes for Faulkner man's declaration of who he is. There are numerous inadequate gestures, but that declaration which most fulfills human life is the decision for, and the act of, responsible involvement in community. Man is always potentially capable of the gesture because he is moral and free. Although he must operate within the contexts of time and society, he is nevertheless a free man. Freedom, then, is the condition which permits the gesture to be made. Because man works with the tool of freedom, however, his gesture may be either adequate or inadequate.

We shall deal in this section of study with the two Faulknerian themes of language and "design"¹⁵ and propose them as two examples of the abortive gesture. Finally, we will propose as the ultimate meaning of gesture that decision to live responsibly in the middle of human life, enduring the failure and suffering of human relationship with patience and love.

¹⁴

Irving Howe, William Faulkner, A Critical Study (New York, 1951), pp. 104-105.

¹⁵

"Design" is used specifically to refer to Thomas Sutpen's carefully conceived plan for his life--a plan which would insure him success. It is expanded in this paper to include any attempt to manipulate and control all the factors which make up the scope of one's life.

Literature gives location, time, and faces to abstract and philosophical ideas. The writer's job is to make us more aware of that which constitutes the fundamental significance of human existence. This Faulkner surely does. And he goes beyond. In his Nobel Prize Speech in 1950, he said,

The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail. ¹⁶

16

Faulkner's Nobel Prize Speech, quoted in Saturday Review (July 28, 1962), 20.

CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM OF ISOLATION

Self-definition is, for Faulkner, the ultimate human quest. His stories are filled with people who are engaged in the search for themselves. Likewise, the ultimate human tragedy is never to discover who one really is. Of Joe Christmas, a character in Light in August, the author says,

his tragedy was that he didn't know what he was and would never know, and that to me is the most tragic condition that an individual can have-- to not know who he was. ¹⁷

The burden and the privilege of "searching out" oneself falls squarely and finally upon the individual himself. It is not a "given." Qualifications of race or family and social position are not ultimately determinative. Each man must carve from life the significance of his own individual existence. And he finally declares

¹⁷

Gwynn and Blotner, p. 118.

who he is by the ways he chooses to involve himself in the realities of that existence.

There is ample illustration in Faulkner of the individual who has never found himself. Thomas Sutpen of Absalom, Absalom! never grasps the meaning of his life because he can never understand the cause of its failure. Darl, of As I Lay Dying, sometimes speaks of himself in the third person, revealing self-estrangement. And once he cries, "I dont know what I am. I dont know if I am or not."¹⁸ The question of being is also the fundamental one for Quentin Compson of The Sound and the Fury. But Joe Christmas is Faulkner's example par excellence of man in search of himself.

Christmas does not even have a real name. He is called "Christmas" because he was found on a door-step during that holiday season. Perhaps Faulkner had in mind the Biblical meaning of a "name"--i.e., that which signifies the essential nature or the inmost being of a person. This would, in any case, be appropriate to Christmas. He is Camus' "Stranger," rootless and removed.

Faulkner once said that "man is the victim of...his fellows, or his own nature, or his environment."¹⁹ It

18

William Faulkner; As I Lay Dying (New York, 1930), p. 76--hereafter cited as Dying.

19

Gwynn and Blotner, p. 118.

appears that these three categories constitute the basic threat of the outrage of life.

What may be said about man's "own nature"? Reinhold Niebuhr says that man "stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity."²⁰ Man is finite, limited, and time-bound. But he is also spirit, and he is capable of transcending his boundaries. It may appear that while "he was playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate...was already striking the set and dragging on...the next one."²¹ Man is, of course, subject to some limitation, but he is also free to choose the final meaning of his life. Even Christmas, one of Faulkner's most "fated" characters, recalls "the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be."²² There is, then, a kind of frightening irony implicit in the ambiguity of man's nature. Vickery remarks that the "price of man's capacity for bravery and repentance is his ability to sin and to be a coward."²³ Cash Bundren, in

²⁰
Reinhold Niebuhr,
p. 181.

²¹
William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York, 1936), pp. 72-73--hereafter cited as Absalom.

²²
William Faulkner, Light in August (New York, 1932), p. 232--hereafter cited as Light.

²³
Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner, A Critical Interpretation (Baton Rouge, 1964), p. 290.

his simple way, puts the idea in his own words:

But I aint so sho that ere a man has the right to say what is crazy and what aint. It's like there was a fellow in every man that's done a-past the sanity or the insanity, that watches the sane and the insane doings of that man with the same horror and the same astonishment. 24

And so, man at times may be a "stuffed doll,"²⁵
 or "the sum of his misfortunes,"²⁶ or the "stalemate
 of dust and desire."²⁷ At other moments, he is also
 the man able to see in an idiot "de Lawd's chile,"²⁸ and
 who, though pure himself, is willing to undertake life-²⁹
 long responsibility for a prostitute.

Dilsey and Byron know what it means to assume the human burden. Byron, with simple insight totally unacquainted with the sophistication of ethical and religious philosophies, states:

'it's the good men that cant deny the bill when it comes around. They cant deny it for the reason that there aint any way to make them pay it....

24

Dying, p. 228.

25

William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York, 1929), p. 194--hereafter cited as Sound and Fury.

26

Sound and Fury, p. 123.

27

Sound and Fury, p. 143.

28

Sound and Fury, p. 333.

29

Byron Bunch in Light.

Maybe it takes longer to pay for being good than for being bad." 30

The tensions of outrage derive, then, first of all from the complications of man's own nature. He lives suspended between what he knows and has not the courage to achieve and between what he can dream and what he can actually accomplish. And his anguish is born in his ability to distinguish between what life "looks like" and what it really is.

But man's nature provides only one source of his complicated problem. As he looks upon his world with any degree of awareness, he is overwhelmed by an environment which greets him with an alien face--itself ambiguous and outrageous. The irony of his situation exists in the fact that he is nevertheless dependent upon that world--both its individuals and its institutions--for the meaning of his own life. Living is a complex web of human relationships. As Judith Sutpen says:

"You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying it and you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont know why either ex- 31
cept that the strings are all in one another's way...."

30

Light, p. 341.

31

Absalom, p. 127.

The web of relationship may be complex, but it is also superficial. Byron Bunch is an enigma to his small town because the people cannot understand why he chooses to remain at the mill and work every Saturday afternoon. In a passage in which he discusses the town's confusion about this, Faulkner states:

Man knows so little about his fellows. In his eyes all men or women act upon what he believes would motivate him if he were mad enough to do what that other man or woman is doing. 32

The human community is a brotherhood of strangers. Each man recapitulates in his own experience what Howe meant when he said of Joe Christmas that he "remains forever an orphan, his world a chaotic enlargement of the asylum of his childhood."³³ Joe, like most of the other major characters in these four novels, cannot bring into clear focus a definition of himself primarily because he is unable to relate himself meaningfully to other human beings. The basic functions of personhood--love, hate, sacrifice, compassion, and the like, mean nothing apart from relationship. Of this search for self-definition, Vickery says:

32
Light, p. 41.

33
Howe, p. 51.

In each case identity is contingent upon a precise relationship to the common humanity of mankind. For Faulkner, common humanity seems to resolve itself into the capacity to aspire and so to choose acceptance, rejection, or evasion of the eternal verities--courage, honor, pride, compassion, pity. ³⁴

These "verities" are not abstract truths. The very nature of the words indicates that they cannot be attained apart from community.

The basic need for a sense of belonging comes out clearly in Faulkner. As I Lay Dying concerns the death of a mother and a family's renewed search, in the face of that tragedy, for the meaning of kinship. The sons, in the simplest of ways, tell us of their need for identification. Vardaman, the youngest, says, "Jewel is my brother. Cash is my brother." ³⁵ Again, he cries, "Darl. Darl is my brother. Darl. Darl." ³⁶ Darl's own words are haunting: Darl is our brother, our brother Darl.... "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes." ³⁷

Absalom, Absalom! is the story of a man driven to submerge family relationships beneath his "design."

³⁴ Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 298.

³⁵ Dying, p. 200.

³⁶ Dying, p. 242.

³⁷ Dying, p. 244.

(The term "design" symbolizes the ambition of Sutpen's life. As a young boy, when subjected to a humiliating experience because of who he was, he determined exactly what he wanted from life and how he would achieve it. Each step was carefully planned and executed.)

The design so smothered familial ties that Sutpen even refuses recognition to one of his sons because he is part Negro. Another son, Henry, learning the truth about his friend (also his half-brother) Charles, says, "You are my brother."³⁸ Charles (who has fallen in love with Judith, his half-sister), replies, in his frustration at having been refused the human recognition he so desperately needed, "No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister."³⁹

One of the basic themes of The Sound and the Fury is the development into maturity of the Compson children, a maturity which destroys the innocent relationship which has existed between brother and sister. With the shattering of this close, happy, intimately personal world, the lives of at least two of the brothers--Benjy and Quentin, remain forever uprooted.

38

Absalom, p. 357.

39

Absalom, p. 358.

Not only is man unable to find his sense of belonging in these unorganized relationships, but he also may be the victim of social groups which refuse him identity. Indeed, the very institutions and codes to which man clings for recognition--e.g., the traditional racial, social, and religious structures--do not help him. They may either refuse him entry, or, if he is allowed access to their sanctuary, may emasculate him. Faulkner explodes the security-myths of heritage, race, religion. Hunt says that the author

embodies in his fiction the modern anguished disappointment...that the traditional formulation of the resources for meaning gives us a hope contemporary experience too often fails to justify. ⁴⁰

The ultimate outrage with which man must come to terms is death, that "blank face of the oblivion to which we are all doomed...." ⁴¹ In Faulkner, one is not permitted the comfort of looking forward to an after-life which will equalize with solace and comfort the miseries he presently endures. Heaven is described as being "like a bed already too full if what you want to find is a chance to lie still and sleep and sleep and sleep---" ⁴² Mr. Compson, in a letter to his son, writes

⁴⁰

Hunt, p. 174.

⁴¹

Absalom, p. 129.

⁴²

Absalom, p. 128.

that

"if there can be either access of comfort or cessation of pain in the ultimate escape from a stubborn and amazed outrage which over a period of forty-three years has been companionship and bread and fire and all, I do not know that...." 43

Though Faulkner's characters often make such speculations about death, the condition at the terminus of life, it is not this definition which is the author's primary concern. For him, it is death in the midst of life which supremely reminds man of his finitude. Again, Mr. Compson says to his son Quentin that

"If aught can be more painful to any intelligence... than a slow and gradual confronting with that which... it has been taught to regard as irrevocable and un-plumable finality, I do not know it." 44

Nevertheless, to understand one's life, one must come to understand this characteristic of that life. In this sense, death is, as Ciancio reminds us, "the light-bearer--but it always brings 'light without radiance.'" 45

The novel in which the meaning of death is most obviously depicted is As I Lay Dying. The story is about the journey of life in the midst of which stands the spectre of death. The rotting corpse of Addie Bundren

43

Absalom, p. 174.

44

Absalom, pp. 173-174.

45

Ciancio, p. 79.

is carried to Jefferson for burial. Ciancio says that death "hovers above the story (the vultures) and behind it (the ominous sound of Cash's hammer banging nails into Addie's coffin)."⁴⁶

The Bundrens' failure to grasp the real significance of death is seen in the way in which Addie's corpse controls her living family. Their journey seems a ridiculous ritual. Howe states:

The inability of the Bundrens to distinguish between formal promise and actual responsibility to the dead body is that moral undercurrent, at once pathetic and absurd, of their wretched journey. Darl alone senses how preposterous this journey has become, and to end it he fires a barn in which the rotting body has been sheltered.⁴⁷

Darl muses, "It would be nice if you could just ravel out into time."⁴⁸ But this cannot be. Though it is painful, death must be faced. The ironic reaction of her husband to Addie's death is powerfully articulated in his words spoken immediately following her demise: "God's will be done....Now I can get them teeth."⁴⁹ Following the burial, Anse not only acquires new teeth but also a new wife. Perhaps Vardaman, the youngest child, best faces the

⁴⁶

Ciancio, p. 85.

⁴⁷

Howe, p. 43.

⁴⁸

Dying, p. 198.

⁴⁹

Dying, p. 51.

situation. He has a dead fish and, half-comprehending that his mother, too, is lifeless and is no longer his mother, he says, "My mother is a fish."⁵⁰ Addie herself believed that life's purpose, as her father had said, was "to get ready to stay dead a long time."⁵¹ For her, Anse had already died a long time ago.

Faulkner pictures in vivid scenes the absurdity of the Bundren journey in which death literally moves through life. During the trip to Jefferson, as the family crosses a swirling river, the mules drown, the coffin slips off the wagon, Cash breaks his leg, and Anse, in order to save money, sets it in concrete. In another scene, Vardaman, the young child, sensing that his mother needs air in order to breathe from within the coffin, cuts holes in the top of the box. Two of them are bored into Addie's face. Darl alone seems to sense that the journey is without meaning. Jewel copes with death by using his horse as a substitute mother, and Dewey Dell sees in it the opportunity to get much-needed abortion pills. Even to Addie, whose request prompted such a trip, the journey is meaningless. Volpe states:

She believes that Anse is incapable of responding

⁵⁰

Dying, p. 79.

⁵¹

Dying, p. 161.

to her real being, her reality, during her life, and she vindictively forces him to cope with the reality of her dead body. 52

In another comment upon this novel, Volpe observes that

here the meaninglessness of existence is viewed as a macabre joke. In an absurd world, who is to say what is sane and what insane? Surely, no reader of As I Lay Dying can unequivocally declare the Bundrens either heroic or idiotic, their funeral journey an epic or a burlesque. 53

The reality of death is also found elsewhere in Faulkner's work. Rosa Coldfield senses the meaning of death in the present moment when she says that

"living is one constant and perpetual instant when the arras-veil before what-is-to-be hangs docile and even glad to the lightest naked thrust if we had dared, were brave enough...to make the rending gash." 54

The reality of ever-present death largely colors the meaning of Quentin Compson's entire existence. Faulkner says of him that he

loved death above all,...loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death.... 55

When Faulkner was asked why he omitted the capitals at the beginning of some of the names and why he put the "I's" in small letters in the last part of Quentin's section, he

52

Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York, 1964), p. 131.

53

Volpe, p. 127.

54

Absalom, pp. 142-143.

55

Sound and Fury, p. 9.

replied:

Because Quentin is a dying man, he is already out of life, and those things that were important in life don't mean anything to him any more. 56

Mr. Compson senses Quentin's anguish and his preoccupation with death and tells him that his contemplated suicide will not solve his problem. Death is not the answer to life's burden.

Finally, it is of interest to note that this "outrageous" element in life seems underscored by the endings of all four of the novels we are surveying. Note the surviving characters: the idiot Benjy, the greedy Jason, the demented Jim Bond, Anse, irresponsible and passive and his new "duck-shaped" ⁵⁷ wife, and the stupid Lena Grove who, remarkably removed from the tragic incidents which have taken place about her during the last few days, comments as she leaves town with an illegitimate baby and a protective suitor:

"My, my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee. 58

In summary, it may be said that the individual in Faulkner often finds himself in a remarkably strange world which is not always friendly to him. His own

56

Gwynn and Blotner, p. 18.

57

Dying, p. 249.

58

Light, p. 444.

complex make-up and the personal and social structures of his existence are highly ironic. Death, supremely reminding him of the limited condition of his life, is the ultimate absurdity. Most of Faulkner's characters, in the midst of their ironic world, remain isolated and apart. Perhaps more than one would agree with Mr. Compson that life is "a stubborn and amazed outrage."⁵⁹

Nevertheless, man must continue to live his life. And though he lives it as individual man, he must also live it in the basic context of time and community. These two dimensions--time and society--seem fundamentally important for Faulkner. Time serves to remind man of the contingent nature of his life, and society, too, recalls to him the necessity of living, not only in temporary, make-shift involvements, but also in the more fundamental relationship of deep and mutual dependence.

We shall use these two categories of time and society as the basic sources of man's isolation. Through the first, we shall also indicate how the individual himself may be the cause of his own estrangement; and through the second, we shall show that society is so structured that it may be the cause of the individual's separation.

As we shall see at a later point in our discussion,

Faulkner has been accused of being deterministic. This is primarily because of the way in which his use of time has been interpreted. Over and over again characters seem to be overwhelmed by the influence of the past upon them. What has already taken place seems to determine what is happening at present and to anticipate what is yet to be. Quentin Compson of The Sound and the Fury is Faulkner's prime example of a man completely obsessed with the meaning of time. Gail Hightower of Light in August is a second illustration of a man whose living is being done in the past tense. He has withdrawn from the present and has bought and paid for this luxury of non-involvement.

To begin our discussion concerning Faulkner's use of time, we shall first look at Jean-Paul Sartre's criticism of Faulkner's metaphysics which the French writer analyzes in an essay on The Sound and the Fury. Sartre believes that time is the theme of this novel. He says:

A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics....it is immediately obvious that Faulkner's metaphysics is a metaphysics of time. Man's misfortune lies in his being time-bound. 60

Sartre says that Faulkner is deterministic; his characters are explained only in terms of what they were. The freedom of the characters is limited by the past. Sartre says that "Faulkner's heroes...never look ahead. They face backwards...." ⁶¹ As an example, he cites Quentin Compson. Of him, he states:

The coming suicide which casts its shadow over Quentin's last day is not a human possibility; not for a second does Quentin envisage the possibility of not killing himself. This suicide is an immobile wall, a thing which he approaches backwards, and which he neither wants to nor can conceive.⁶²

Quentin's suicide, then, is, according to Sartre,

not an undertaking, but a fatality. In losing the element of possibility it ceases to exist in the future. It is already present, and Faulkner's art aims at suggesting to us that Quentin's monologues and his last walk are already his suicide.⁶³

In spite of Sartre's comments, it appears, nevertheless, that real time for Faulkner is present. He himself has said 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. If was existed, there would be no grief or sorrow.⁶⁴

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Sartre, p. 84.

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Sartre, p. 85.

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Sartre, p. 85.

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In an interview with Jean Stein for The Paris Review, quoted in "The Cosmos of the Artist," Saturday Review (July 28, 1962), 21.

To be sure, in Faulkner the is includes the was. He says that

to me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. And so a man, a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him.⁶⁵

It is possible, however, that one will not be able to bring the past (as a valuable and valid influence) into the present. Quentin Compson could never reconcile these two time categories.

Quentin, a Harvard freshman, is a young man of ideals-- expressed in words rather than in action. He agonizes over the disparity between the possibilities life promises and the torments it provides. His world focuses upon his sister Caddy. Faulkner says of him that he

loved...some concept of Compson honor precariously and...only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead....⁶⁶

Quentin's preoccupation with meaning and value is centered on Caddy's chastity. Since the loud world can provide no significance for him, he must create this himself by isolating himself and Caddy through sexual innocence. Her innocence, especially, is his criterion for meaning because this idea is a central feature of the

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Gwynn and Blotner, p. 84.

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Sound and Fury, p. 9.

traditional moral code which he has been taught, and which he has learned too well. Quentin is moralistic rather than moral. Of this tradition, Hunt states:

The tradition testifies that Quentin is rationally right in focusing upon Caddy's frail chastity. His rationalistic and moralistic sensibility allows him to salvage from the tradition only an ability to identify its talismans, its fetishes, and does not afford him a vision beyond...to the vital spirit generating the code itself. ⁶⁷

When Caddy, through a sex affair with Dalton Ames, falls Quentin, he is plunged into despair. This disappointment precipitates a new obsession: his preoccupation with time. He associates honor with a past time, which he thinks held strictly to the eternal verities in which he believes. Time, however, has moved beyond the past and flowed into the present where there apparently are no such values to be had. Quentin concludes that time is his enemy; it obliterates everything that is significant. As Sartre says, "time is, above ⁶⁸ all, that which separates."

Quentin had tried to relate sex to time. When Caddy thwarts his desire for isolation through sexual innocence, Quentin seeks this through a reversal of innocence--i.e., through incest, or sin. As Hunt

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Hunt, p. 56.

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Sartre, p. 84.

observes, he makes the

effort to find some act sinful enough to establish that there is something worthwhile in the present because there is some value that can be outraged. 69

Quentin believes that even negative meaning is good; for if one violates meaning, he thereby establishes meaning. Incest, for him, represents the most damning violation of his code and would insure his and Caddy's being cast from the meaningless world into hell where he could guard her forever. Hunt says, again, that "Quentin's uncanny strategy is to coerce damnation in terms which will relate his life to traditional structures of meaning."⁷⁰

He is unable to commit incest with Caddy, however, even when she provides him the opportunity. He lies to his father, nevertheless, and tries to get him to believe that this is the kind of relationship he has with his sister. Quentin has by now become so estranged from the present through his memory and his imagination that he could never become this much involved with anyone.

Vickery says,

Committing incest would destroy his order completely by involving him in the terrible reality of experience. But through a lie he can circumvent experience...." 71

⁶⁹Hunt, p. 9.

⁷⁰Hunt, p. 60.

⁷¹Olga W. Vickery, "The Sound and the Fury: A Study in Perspective," PMLA, XLIX (1954), 1027.

Quentin, then, cannot even establish moral significance by violating it. He finally turns to a preoccupation with death and concludes that only suicide can terminate his involvement in a meaningless world.

Quentin's father, recognizing his son's problem, says to him that "man is the sum of his misfortunes....⁷² time is your misfortune." When Mr. Compson gives the boy his grandfather's watch, he cautions:

"Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire.... 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.... 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. 73

On the last day of his life Quentin also recalls his father's words about time's being a "gull on an invisible⁷⁴ wire attached through space dragged." Interpreting this, Vickery says,

The illusion of flight, the reality of the invisible wire, the illusion of being free and in control, the reality of finding oneself after all only a dupe-- that is the irony implicit in man's involvement in time. 75

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Sound and Fury, p. 123.

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Sound and Fury, p. 95.

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Sound and Fury, p. 123.

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Vickery, "Sound and Fury:...Perspective," 1028.

Time conquers everything. Even Christ, Mr. Compson said, "was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels."⁷⁶ Quentin is forced to conclude that nothing is really significant because time, moving invisibly, changes all that is. It will even erase the matter of his incest with his sister Caddy. Quentin remembers his father's words:

"That's sad too, people cannot do anything that dreadful at all they cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today."⁷⁷

Even Quentin's hurt, the only significant thing left for him, will be swept away by time. He again recalls his father's saying that "you cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you like this...."⁷⁸

Quentin, nevertheless, as Swiggart has pointed out, "dramatizes it [time] as remembered reality in the mausoleum of the present."⁷⁹

Meaning, then, for Quentin, does not last through time into the present, and he becomes obsessed with the past as the locus of what he believes to be valuable and significant. His section of the novel is written largely

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Sound and Fury, p. 96.

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Sound and Fury, p. 99.

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Sound and Fury, p. 196.

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Peter Swiggart, "Moral and Temporal Order in The Sound and the Fury," Sewanee Review, LXI (1953), 222.

in the past tense, and his coming suicide is presented as something already accomplished. He says, "I was.
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I am not."

Gail Hightower portrays a minister in Light in August. For him, as well as for Quentin, time becomes an escape mechanism to avoid involvement in the present, and thus it is the source of isolation for him. In a real sense, his life died before it was born; he was buried with his grandfather, a cavalryman, who was killed during the Civil War. He now lives in memory, lost in the glamour of his ancestor-hero who was shot from a galloping horse during a night raid in Jefferson.

Even as a young seminarian, Hightower early displays his tendency to evade responsibility. He believes that
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"if ever there was shelter, it would be the Church."
His life as a minister would be "serene...where the spirit
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could be born anew sheltered from the harsh gale of living...."
The seminary itself means "quiet and safe walls within
which the...garmentworried spirit could learn anew serenity to contemplate without horror or alarm its own
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nakedness."

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Sound and Fury, p. 192.

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Light, p. 419.

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Light, p. 419.

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Light, p. 419.

Even his marriage cannot force him into involvement; it, too, is unreal for him. He muses, "Perhaps they were right in putting love into books....Perhaps it could not live anywhere else."⁸⁴

Hightower is called to the parish at Jefferson and quickly alienates himself from his congregation.

Faulkner tells us that when he preached

he couldn't get religion and that galloping cavalry and his dead grandfather shot from the galloping horse untangled from each other, even in the pulpit....up there in the pulpit with his hands flying around him and the dogma he was supposed to preach all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory just as when he tried to tell them on the street about the galloping horses, it in turn would get all mixed up with absolution and choirs of martial seraphim....⁸⁵

His home situation is no better. Finally, his wife begins making trips to Memphis, and one morning the newspaper carries the story of her death there. She had either jumped or was pushed from a hotel window. A man with whom she was staying was arrested. The congregation forces Hightower to resign. Much to their dismay, he purchases a small house and remains in their midst. For all practical purposes, he is a recluse. From dawn to

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Light, p. 421.

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Light, pp. 53-54.

sundown, he sits near his study window at a desk, musing or reading. He believes he has bought and paid for his isolation; indeed, he has forfeited his whole life for it. He says, "I have bought immunity. I have paid. I have paid."⁸⁶

Hightower's one contact with life outside his house is with Byron Bunch, a simple mill-hand. In his quiet, unsophisticated way, Bryon, in talking about himself, pinpoints Hightower's problem when he says that

"a fellow is more afraid of the trouble he might have than he ever is of the trouble he's already got. He'll cling to trouble he's used to before he'll risk a change. Yes. A man will talk about how he'd like to escape from living folks. But it's the dead folks that do him the damage. It's the dead ones that lay quiet in one place and dont try to hold him, that he cant escape from." 87

It is Byron who is ultimately the instrument of whatever measure of salvation Hightower can claim. At the young man's prodding, the minister finally is able to make a gesture toward involvement. He delivers the baby of Lena Grove, the unwed mother, and he makes an effort, gallant but late, to save the life of Joe Christmas.

There are several conclusions that may be validly

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Light, p. 270.

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Light, p. 65.

drawn with respect to Faulkner's use of time. There is mechanical, chronological time, the passing of which is recorded by clocks and calendars. The existence of many persons is reduced simply to this. Vahanian, in commenting upon Mr. Compson's statement that time is Quentin's "misfortune," states:

Time will not redeem man from his misfortune, nor will it redeem itself in becoming man's misfortune. In other words, existence is not self-authenticating. Is not this what Faulkner implies, when most of this novel's [The Sound and the Fury] characters run against time, run out of time in a desperate effort to assert and authenticate themselves? 88

Quentin is the representative of man who is time-bound. He says that "its not despair until time its not even time until it was." ⁸⁹ He is so totally obsessed with the problem of time that it becomes the source of his isolation from reality and experience. Past time represents all that is valuable; present time contains all that is meaningless. Time is his enemy, and he tries to conquer it through suicide.

Hightower, a rather self-conscious martyr, commits another kind of suicide: he simply withdraws from life for twenty-five years. He buys immunity from responsible involvement which present time makes possible and retreats

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Gabriel Vahanian, "William Faulkner: Rendez-vous with Existence," Wait Without Idols (New York, 1964), 108.

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Sound and Fury, p. 197.

to the dead past. Since his church does not prove to be the sanctuary he wishes, he takes refuge in the glamour and gallantry of the Civil War and becomes lost in the life of his dead grandfather. However, Hightower must be given credit for some measure of redemption from his bondage to the past. When he learns that his grandfather was actually killed while raiding a chicken coop, he is able, as Quentin was not, to view this realistically and, in some measure, to sense the folly of his commitment to the past.

Faulkner's view of time appears to be much more realistic and positive than Sartre will admit. For him, time provides for man the context, or medium, of the opportunity for authentic existence. Vahanian notes that

there is time and time, so that the impression of resignation and bondage to time...calls for a correction; we must not confuse temporality with chronology. Does not Faulkner himself all too plainly warn us against that, if only by the absence of chronological sequence so emphatically characteristic of the novel [The Sound and The Fury]? Not time so much as its facsimile, the time-table, is man's misfortune--routine, automated existence. When time looks like a schedule, then temporal existence surely does become a curse from which to flee without ever winning the victory even through suicide. Quentin realizes this when he says: "Because Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life."... Which amounts to saying that being...is when time has come to life. 90

Time, then, does not have to be simply the symbol of our restricted mortality or the means by which we are slowly and finally led to our death. Vickery states:

The ultimate relationship between man and time is one that will admit man's involvement in time while leaving scope for distinctively human dreams and aspirations. Man's dignity consists of submitting to time and change while preserving his identity and his sense of continuity. 91

Very obviously, as Dylan Thomas says, "Time held me green and dying...."⁹² And in this sense, man is time-bound--i.e., his nature is temporal, and he is a creature contingent upon time. But to be so obsessed with time that it becomes for one all that there is of reality (as it was for Quentin) or so that it becomes the luxury of escape from the present (as it was for Hightower) is to make oneself alienated from life and to make of time the "mausoleum of all hope and desire."⁹³

Not only may time be a source of the individual's isolation but society also may serve this function. Society, by its very definition, is a binding together of human life. And yet, it is largely structured according

⁹¹ Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 258.

⁹² Dylan Thomas, "Fern Hill." Quoted in The Literature of England, II, 4th ed. (Chicago, 1958), 1173.

⁹³ Sound and Fury, p. 95.

to rigid patterns which classify, categorize, and separate life. In looking at society as a second source of isolation, we shall consider two basic structures of community--the religious institution and the complex of relationships which we call "social heritage." Waggoner says that even the "conventional life-saving stations"⁹⁴ are inadequate to give man a sense of identification. Two such stations which have the most bearing upon our discussion are the church and social tradition.

As Faulkner shapes his picture of the church, it becomes at best a highly irrelevant institution and at worst, a destructive, negating influence. One of the most forceful images of its irrelevance and lack of awareness in the very midst of life is depicted in Light in August. Percy Grimm is marshalling troops which he will lead in the search for Christmas, accused of murder, and he sends the men on periodic patrols about the town square. The atmosphere is tense and expectant, and Grimm, self-appointed leader, is ringed in an aura of sinister pride. Faulkner makes his point about the church by placing this scene in juxtaposition with a scene of the local church. Across the square, while the storm of hostile feeling gathered in

⁹⁴Waggoner, From Jefferson to the World, p. 216.

intensity, the "quiet church bells rang and the congregation gathered in decorous clumps of summer colors."⁹⁵

Even on Sunday, God's day, He is strictly removed from the poignant human drama that occurs outside the church walls. This illustrates what Slabey calls the difference between "the prose of moral tags and the poetry of

action."⁹⁶ The church at its worst is described by Hightower who sees

the churches of the world like a rampart, like one of those barricades of the middle ages planted with dead and sharpened stakes, against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven which is the life of man. 97

The dominant religious influence of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels is that which is rooted in the Calvinistic-Puritan tradition. Basically, this is seen as a rigid, stern, stony viewpoint. In describing Quentin's plight, Faulkner says that he "loved not the idea of the incest which he would not commit, but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment...."⁹⁸ Hightower says of the town's religion that even

⁹⁶ Robert M. Slabey, "As I Lay Dying as an Existential Novel," Bucknell Review, XL (December 1963), 20.

⁹⁷ Light, p. 427.

⁹⁸ Sound and Fury, p. 9.

the music has...a quality stern and implacable, deliberate and without passion so much as immolation, pleading, asking, for not love, not life, forbidding it to others, demanding in sonorous tones death....Pleasure...they cannot seem to bear: their escape from it is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying....so why should not their religion drive them to crucifixion of themselves and one another? 99

Religion is, in this sense, life-denying. When Hightower watches the crowd which is so eager to lynch Joe Christmas, he says that

to pity him would be to admit selfdoubt and to hope for and need pity themselves. They will do it gladly, gladly. That's why it is so terrible, terrible, terrible. 100

Two other characters who see themselves as good, religious people are Doc Hines and Mr. McEachern of Light in August. Both, however, personify cruelty sanctified in the name of God. Hines believes he is doing the will of God when he kills his daughter's lover, and when he refuses to have a doctor at the birth of his grandson. (As a consequence, his daughter dies.) He believes he is following the wish of the Almighty when he puts the child Joe in an orphanage and gets a

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Light, pp. 321-322.

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Light, p. 322.

job there himself where he can remain God's haunting, disturbing presence for the boy. And, finally, he is firmly convinced that he is acting as a dedicated Christian when he screams for Joe's lynching. He says, summing up his life: "It was the Lord. He was there. Old Doc Hines...I am gone now, because I have set My will a-working and I can leave you to watch it." ¹⁰¹

McEachern is another "instrument" of God's will. He beats Joe because the boy will not learn his catechism. Then, that night, he kneels to pray with him and asks that the Lord may be as magnanimous as he was in his forgiveness of the child! Again, when he discovers Joe has slipped from the house to attend a country dance, he bursts into the tavern as God's representative and flings the curse and judgment of God upon them.

Joanna Burden is also God's ambassador. She tries to befriend Joe; indeed, they have a torrid love affair. But she, too, is concerned to "save" him. She even tries to get him to pray with her. O'Connor points out:

Joe Christmas knows that her helping the Negro is a duty undertaken, but that it is abstract and impersonal. She acts not out of sympathy for other human beings but out of an obligation to carry out God's design in a depraved world. 102

Again it must be said that one who acts under these auspices believes himself to be thereby absolved from responsibility for his acts. He does not need justification for anything he does if he believes it is the will of God.

In As I Lay Dying, the minister Whitfield is presented in a most unsympathetic light. He is Addie's lover, and, indeed, the father of one of her children. Whitfield is also only a man of words. When he hears that Addie is dying, he confesses to God his adultery with her and runs to make his confession to Anse because he fears that Addie, on her death-bed, will admit to him their sin. When he discovers, upon entering the house, that Addie is already dead and his secret apparently safe, he decides not to reveal their affair to Anse. He rationalizes by saying that God "will accept the will for the deed, Who knew that when I framed the words of my confession it was to Anse I spoke them, even though

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 he was not there." Of Whitfield, O'Connor remarks:

He is treated in a passage taut with contempt, not because he has sinned with Addie Bundren, another man's wife, but because he is so quick to allow his rhetorical gifts to create for himself the role of a prodigal son and to glory in it, until he learns that, Addie dead, no one knows of his sin. 104

Cora Tull, of the same novel, patterns her life about a rigid religious code. A woman of words, she often prays for Addie's soul. Addie believes that since "sin" is just a word to Cora, probably "forgiveness" is only a word, too. Vickery says that Cora's help

is offered in the name of duty not love, and it is meant, whether she realizes it or not, to be one more step to salvation....[She is unaware of] those agonizing and exalting human experiences which stand outside her rigid system of ethics, resisting and disrupting its smooth simplification of existence. 105

The religious, the layman, and the institutional church itself are irrelevant to their defined task of making life more human. Indeed, their so-called ministry is harmful. Rather than offering forgiveness and love, a stifling system is extended--a system in which righteousness

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Dying, p. 171.

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O'Connor, "Protestantism in Yoknapatawpha County,"

154.

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Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 64.

illegitimately usurps the place of God. There seems to be little that is distinctively "Christian" about such righteousness. Indeed, such religion is just one among several "reinforcements" of the social values of the society. In some ways, social and religious values are identical.

Henry Sutpen, who came out of this culture, is described as a man out of a

granite heritage where even the houses, let alone clothing and conduct, are built in the image of a jealous and sadistic Jehovah...." 106

In Yoknapatawpha County, one moves among an attenuated Christian society.

Faulkner is certainly not anti-religious or anti-moral. He is simply wary of the kind of moral order whose vitality and strength have been lost in the quotation marks of tradition. One cannot go to an index, look under "Morality," and expect to find, neatly catalogued, Faulkner's view on the subject. Unlike some of his most religious characters, he is not a man of words. As Howe once observed,

moral affirmations are imbedded in his materials and cannot finally be separated from them. Dramatic gestures, not theoretic statements; characters seen in

motion, no comment released in stasis. Accessible to people of every social grade, integrity is placed in a wide variety of situations--though Faulkner inclines to extreme situations from a wish to submit all that is "indomitable" and "intractable" in human character to the most urgent pressures. 107

Any redemption to be found in Faulkner must be looked for amid the "sound and fury" of existence; it does not run through life on a separate celestial track.

In addition to the religious code, there is a second isolating factor in the general cultural situation of Yoknapatawpha County. This is its devastating racial pattern. Those individuals who do not fit the pattern are shut off from the best of what society has to offer. Absalom, Absalom! and Light in August are perhaps the best illustrations of this narrow pattern of social thought.

Joe Christmas' problem--i.e., that he never is sure whether he is black or white--is aggravated by the rigid social stratification of the region of his birth. As the little boy plays and works about the orphanage, Doc Hines closely watches this "devil's walking seed."¹⁰⁸ Hines asks, "Why dont you play with them other children like you used to?...Is it because they call you nigger?"¹⁰⁹

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Howe, pp. 103-104.

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Light, p. 335.

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Light, p. 335.

Gavin Stevens astutely observes that it was not Joe's thirty years alone which brought him finally to the hands of a crazed mob. He says that it was

all those successions of thirty years before that which had put that stain either on his white blood or his black blood, whichever you will, and which killed him. ¹¹⁰

Such an attitude as Stevens suggests is recapitulated by Quentin Compson who says, "a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among." ¹¹¹

The deadly pattern is accepted by Joanna Burden who explains in another context, that "a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act." ¹¹² Indeed, her own father recognized this with regard to the racial situation and had instilled in her a strong sense of duty toward the Negro. He told his daughter that "in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level." ¹¹³ Joanna lives constantly under the "burden" (note here the significance of her name) which she must bear with regard to the Negro, whose presence casts

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Light, p. 393.

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Sound and Fury, p. 105.

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Light, p. 223.

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Light, p. 222.

a giant black shadow about her.

It is noteworthy that Joe, invading a Negro church, repudiates the two concepts of race and religion which have molded and destroyed him. Volpe says that the

concept of racial superiority, with its attendant fear and guilt, molds and controls the individual, just as the Calvinistic-rooted religion, with its emphasis upon sin and punishment, death and damnation, steers him away from life by directing his gaze toward death...the novel Light in August ... is fundamentally a study of the effect of any absolutist view that makes the human being its servant and victim. 114

Concerning the roots of such an absolutist racial view, Vickery says that

what starts as a category becomes a myth, for certainly the word "Negro" is a compressed myth just as the stock response to that word is a compressed ritual. The result is that men...who can neither fit nor be fitted into these categories...are either sacrificed to or driven out of the society whose cherished beliefs they threaten. 115

Thomas Sutpen's entire design (his life-plan) and its tragic consequences can be traced back to one critical image in Absalom, Absalom!--i.e., the moment the dirty, ragged youth was refused entrance at the front door of the manor house by a Negro servant. (This, doubtless, was a part of the prescribed ritual of the social code). From that moment, Sutpen conceived his design and carefully built it step by step. He never

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Volpe, p. 173.

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Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 69.

again would be humiliated because he was poor. He, too, would own land, a plantation house, slaves, and have the right wife. Then his children after him would continue the pattern. His son Henry is described as a boy

whose entire worldly experience consisted of sojourns at other houses, plantations, almost interchangeable with his own, where he followed the same routine which he did at home--the same hunting... the same square dancing...the same champagne....¹¹⁶

Sutpen recalls the strange relationship--inherited but uncomprehended--that existed between Negroes and whites in his boyhood town. He remembers the silent looks that passed between them--the looks of antagonism on the white faces which the Negroes returned by being oblivious to them. In his memory, he re-lives the night when his father boasted that he had whipped a Negro--a man the father had never seen and did not know. When the boy asks his father what the Negro had done, the only response he received was "Hell fire, that goddam son of a bitch Pettibone's nigger."¹¹⁷ Of these recollections, Hunt says,

What he saw was images of himself, his sisters, and his father in attitudes of outrageous frustration, victims and agents in a dehumanizing situation they could not even describe or understand. ¹¹⁸

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Absalom, p. 108.

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Absalom, p. 231.

¹¹⁸

Hunt, p. 123.

His own thought and feeling came second. One followed what the racial code dictated. Vickery says that such social patterns are but partial truths and that their

truncated nature is indicated by their tendency to substitute rigidity and opposition to change for universality, logical coherence for organic unity, and either intellectual conviction or authority for immediate recognition of truth. 119

One such authority which sanctions Yoknapatawpha's attitude of racial superiority is Protestantism. This religious community believes that "the Bible said

[niggers] had been created and cursed by God to be
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brute and vassal to all men of white skin...."

Surely Joe Christmas or Charles Bon (Sutpen's half-Negro son) or his son Velery all find their "Negro-ness" absurd in a world in which "whiteness" has been sanctioned by God.

It is small wonder that these three use strange methods to try to gain the human recognition they so desperately need. Christmas seeks recognition through violence and through the rejection of human ties; Charles Bon seeks recognition through using Judith to force his

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Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 241.

120

Absalom, p. 282.

father to admit Charles is his son; and Velery seeks it through choosing the blackest woman he can find to be his wife. Of the terrifying racial patterns which occasion this kind of response, Vickery says:

Such subtle communal pressures are forever forcing individuals to assume social masks, which depersonalize both their natures and their words. Their language takes on the vocabulary, tone, and even rhythm of a catechism, a catechism of society. Against a background of conflicting emotions, they rehearse a litany founded on fear, insecurity, and hate; ordered by over-simplification....¹²¹

Sometimes even a Thomas Sutpen will stop and view this monstrous situation with integrity that causes him to admit that

you could hit them [niggers]and they would not hit back or even resist. But you did not want to, because they...were not it, not what you wanted to hit....¹²²

But to have a moment when one is aware of truth, and admits it, is not enough. And so the pattern goes on, and the rigid racial separation continues.

In this chapter, we have analyzed three aspects of human existence--man's own nature, the difficulty of significant relationships, and death. These, it appears, characterize the human situation as "outrageous" and

¹²¹

Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 245.

¹²²

Absalom, p. 230.

provide the basis for man's isolated condition. We considered further two of Faulkner's fundamental categories--time and community--and used them as illustrations of two major sources of man's alienation.

A cursory look at Faulkner's technique relative to man's isolation is now in order.

The first source of isolation is time, and Faulkner presents the idea of time by means of various symbols and techniques. Since Quentin Compson has been used as Faulkner's prime example of a man whose major problem is time, he will also serve here as an illustration around whom we can demonstrate Faulkner's techniques in regard to time.

Quentin's section of The Sound and the Fury is introduced with words which set the complete stage for what is to follow:

When the shadow of the sash appeared on the curtains it was between seven and eight oclock and then I was in time again, hearing the watch. 123

The reader is immediately made aware of Quentin's obsession with time and the startling sense of reality which the watch invokes for him. Quentin smashes his

grandfather's timepiece, but still the watch ticks on. It was a "blank dial with little wheels clicking and clicking behind it, not knowing any better."¹²⁴

Quentin's unusual preoccupation with the matter of minutes and the timepieces which record their passage is more understandable, perhaps, if we remember that his section in the novel takes place on the final day of his life. The hour of his death is fast approaching, and he has only a little time left.

All during the day, Quentin is unable to escape from time symbols. He goes once to a jeweler on the pretense of having his broken watch repaired. He notices all the faces of the clocks in the window--each, as though mocking him, telling him a different time. All time for him is "out of joint." Other symbols recall time. Volpe states:

The position of his shadow, the sound of the bells, of the factory whistle, even the gnawing hunger pangs in his stomach remind him of time and reality.¹²⁵

For Quentin, time is the great controller of life. Man only goes through the motions; real change and real movement belong to time alone. In another novel, Quentin

124

Sound and Fury, p. 99.

125

Volpe, p. 115.

relates to his roommate Shreve an incident out of Thomas Sutpen's childhood in which his family is moving from their old home to another place. He describes the old cart upon which the family is riding---and, indeed, he depicts the journey itself--as something which

did not seem to progress at all but just to hang suspended...the world, rising about them and flowing past as if the cart moved on a treadmill. 126

Zink says that this image "describes the sense of futile motion, continuous but unrelated to the inexorable pull of change and time."¹²⁷ And the image of the gull and wire, previously discussed, also depicts this same idea.

A very powerful time image, the shadow, serves a double function. It not only symbolizes the movement of time but also serves to depict the highly illusory quality of Quentin's involvement in reality. (Because he is obsessed with past time, present experience, from which he is isolated, is shadowy and unreal.)

Through his last day of life, Quentin is constantly at odds with his shadow because it reminds him of time and reality. Note the following illustrations:

126

Absalom, pp. 224-225.

127

Karl E. Zink, "Flux and the Frozen Moment: The Imagery of Stasis in Faulkner's Prose," PMLA, LXXI (1956), 297.

I stood in the belly of my shadow and listened to the strokes [of the chimes]I went back to the postoffice, treading my shadow into pavement. 128

Trampling my shadow's bones into the concrete with hard heels and then I was hearing the watch.... 129

I stepped into sunlight, finding my shadow again. I walked down the steps just ahead of it. The half hour went. Then the chimes ceased and died away. 130

The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of railing, my shadow leaning flat upon the water, so easily had I tricked it that it would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned.... 131

Niggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time. 132.

This shadowy quality of his present experience is vividly depicted in the following passage:

I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey halflight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who. 133.

128

Sound and Fury, p. 119.

129

Sound and Fury, p. 115.

130

Sound and Fury, p. 101.

131

Sound and Fury, p. 109.

132

Sound and Fury, p. 109.

133

Sound and Fury, p. 188.

Again, in the context of his relationship with Caddy, Quentin's inability to face some of the distasteful facts about her is presented in this same shadow figure.

Vickery observes:

It is significant that he sees only those aspects of Caddy as shadows which he cannot incorporate into his world: it is her love affair and her marriage which he finds perverse, mocking.... 134

Quentin's whole life is but a shadow. For him, even
135
"tragedy is second-hand."

It is to be noted that Faulkner uses two additional techniques which serve to underscore Quentin's problem. A great deal of his section of the novel is written in the past tense (where he really lives). As an example, the opening sentence of the section (noted above) is in the past tense, even though it depicts his present awakening to the beginning of a new day yet to be lived. Finally, Faulkner's technique of disarranged time sequence serves also to point up the problem of Quentin's frustration because of time. Such confused chronology is very demanding upon the reader. Without warning, he must move from present external happenings to past memories which take

134

Vickery, "The Sound and the Fury:...Perspective," 1030.

135

Sound and Fury, p. 135.

place in Quentin's mind. Although Faulkner presents these past-tense reveries in italics usually, it is, nevertheless, disrupting. It does, however, clarify in an ingenious way the agony of Quentin's fragmented life.

Quentin could never grasp the significance of his father's saying that

clocks slay time....time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life. 136

For him, time can never be seen as the present--that moment offering the opportunity for new decision and real change. And so, Quentin, describing himself, can only say, "i temporary...."¹³⁷ Since life holds no significance for him, it also has nothing to offer which is permanent and enduring.

The isolation of Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower, both separated human beings because of society, is symbolically depicted by Faulkner mainly by the use of one symbol. This is the image of the circle--used most forcefully in connection with Joe Christmas, an outcast because of his race. Several examples will suffice.

136

Sound and Fury, p. 104.

137

Sound and Fury, p. 197.

As Joe reflects upon the thirty years of his life which he spent running, and upon the past week in which he specifically has been running as a fugitive from the law, he thinks,

I have been farther in these seven days than in all the thirty years....But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring.... 138

Once, during his boyhood at the McEachern farm, he decided to run away. He felt strong, like an eagle. The feeling soon passed, for "like the eagle, his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage."¹³⁹

In a sense, even the geography of his life journey--beginning in Mississippi where he was estranged, and ending there in the same dilemma--is circular, and it characterizes his futile search.

In the same novel, a variation of the circle symbol characterizes Gail Hightower who has chosen to withdraw himself from life. (He rationalizes this by thinking of himself as a misunderstood martyr, cast aside by society). His final meditation in the novel

138

Light, p. 296.

139

Light, p. 140.

takes the form of an extended image of a wheel-- which again signifies a solitary life. In his memory, he recalls persons with whom his life has been cast but with whom he has remained uninvolved. He sees himself for the first time as his congregation must have seen him, and he accepts responsibility for his wife's death and for the failure of his own life. Vickery states:

The image of the great wheel...echoes and passes judgment on all the other solitary circles that have collided violently without ever establishing contact with one another. What he finally comes to recognize is the interdependence of the individual and society,...the interdependence of individuals within the public world. 140.

Building the wheel image, Faulkner makes its movements parallel the pace of Hightower's thinking. At first the thoughts are slow and confused, and the wheel also turns slowly:

Out of the instant the sandclutched wheel of thinking turns on with the slow implacability of a medieval torture instrument, beneath the wrenched and broken sockets of his spirit, his life:... I am the instrument of...despair and death...I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed. 141.

Then, Hightower having made this admission, Faulkner

¹⁴⁰ Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 79.

¹⁴¹ Light, pp. 429-430.

says that the wheel

released, seems to rush on with a long sighing sound. He sits motionless in its aftermath, in his cooling sweat, while the sweat pours and pours. The wheel whirls on. It is going fast and smooth now, because it is freed now of burden, vehicle, axle, all. 142.

It is to be noted, finally, that one further technique used by Faulkner to develop the theme of isolation is the way in which the reader must gather his information about the major characters. Joe Christmas, Thomas Sutpen, Addie Bundren, Caddy Compson-- the major characters of the four novels under discussion-- are all seen largely from the outside. We learn about Joe from Doc Hines, Mrs. McEachern, and from Mr. McEachern primarily. What we know of Thomas Sutpen is very incomplete. Though Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and the imagination of Shreve and Quentin all contribute to his story, there is still much that is ambiguous and unknown. Except for one brief section of her own and very sparse comments placed throughout the other sections, Addie is seen through the eyes of the many narrators of As I Lay Dying. We learn of Caddy from the viewpoints of her three brothers Benjy, Quentin, and Jason.

Thus we see certain of Faulkner's techniques in depicting the theme of isolation. We conclude, then, that the condition of man's life is one of basic outrage, and that time and society contribute to his isolation within that existence. We turn now to consider possible solutions to this problem.

CHAPTER II

THE GESTURE AS THE MEANS OF SELF-DEFINITION

The basic factor in the complex make-up of man's situation which provides for him the hope of overcoming his isolation is the condition of freedom. Faulkner maintains man's freedom in the midst of such circumscribing limitations as time and society. Precisely because of his ultimate belief in the dignity and capacity of human life (He said in his Nobel Prize speech that "man will not merely endure: he will prevail."),¹⁴³ Faulkner cannot be deterministic. To be human is to possess some measure of moral responsibility.

Obviously, there is not to be found in Faulkner (or in many places elsewhere) complete and absolute freedom.

143

Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech, quoted in Saturday Review (July 28, 1962), 20.

Man's choices, though they are his, are made in the context of environment, time, and community. Man's world is already upon him when he enters it. Ciancio remarks:

The Faulknerian character is neither philosophically determined nor totally defenseless. Thrown into the world without his volition, he nevertheless is free, as Heidegger would say, to discard his "thrownness"...to permit it to frustrate him, or-- as in the case of...Byron Bunch, Dilsey and others-- seize it, grapple with it, and force it to yield meaning. But he can prevail only if he acknowledges and stands up to the fierce grimace of authentic existence. 144

Man works with the internal tool of free will and the external tool of his circumscribing context. Faulkner, when asked whether he believed in free will for his characters, replied,

I would think I do, yes. But I think that man's free will functions against a...background of fate.... sometimes fate lets him alone. But he can never depend on that. But he has always the right to free will and we hope the courage to die for his choice. 145

There has been extended criticism directed at Faulkner (as we have previously mentioned) for his seeming sense of fatality. A cursory look at some of his characters seems to substantiate this.

Joe Christmas moves with "blind obedience to whatever

144

Ciancio, pp. 88-89.

145

Gwynn and Blotner, pp. 38-39.

Player moved him on the board."¹⁴⁶ He believed that "the
 Player who moved him for a pawn likewise found him
 breath."¹⁴⁷ He also "believed with calm paradox that he
 was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he
 believed that he did not believe."¹⁴⁸

Christmas might well be used as Faulkner's best
 example of the "determined" or "fated" human being.
 He is driven by a merciless grandfather who believes
 himself to be the instrument of God's will and by a
 step-father who camouflages his cruelty to the child
 under the same guise. But it is Christmas himself
 who ultimately chooses who he is. Longley makes the
 point that Christmas is neither black nor white because
 that is precisely what he chooses to be. Is Joe
 Negro? Longley says, "This is probably the most
 crucial point in the book....Christmas is free to
 choose what he will be."¹⁴⁹ Joe himself speaks of his
 life as "the savage and lonely street which he had
 chosen of his own will...."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶

Light, p. 405.

¹⁴⁷

Light, p. 405.

¹⁴⁸

Light, pp. 244-245.

¹⁴⁹

John L. Longley, Jr., "Joe Christmas: The Hero in
 the Modern World," VQR, XXXIII (1957), 239.

¹⁵⁰

Light, p. 225.

The turning point in Joe's life, when he decides to direct his own footsteps, occurs when McEachern lunges upon him at the dance hall. Joe beats his step-father and runs out, "exulting perhaps at that moment...of having put behind now at once and for all the Shalt Not...."¹⁵¹ And it is most certain that Joe never surrenders to his environment except in the last days of his life. And then it is his free decision to do so.

Thomas Sutpen often seems to be

playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony--the stage manager, call him what you will--was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic¹⁵² and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one.

And yet, Sutpen, exercising his free will, moves far beyond his childhood background to become the biggest landowner and cotton-planter in the county. And Sutpen believes that

there was something about a man's destiny (or about the man) that caused the destiny to shape itself to him like his clothes did, like the same coat that new might have fitted a thousand men, yet after one man has worn it for a while it fits no one else and you can tell it anywhere

151

Light, p. 180.

152

Absalom, pp. 72-73.

you see it even if all you see is a sleeve
or lapel....¹⁵³

Jacobs speaks of "seeming Fate" in Faulkner. He uses this term because he believes that Faulkner "plainly makes this Fate a matter of human contrivance, not divine."¹⁵⁴ Sutpen contradicts his heritage, carves out the design of his life, and imposes it on his environment, thereby creating the context in which he conducts the business of his life.

The Compson family is another illustration of this. It does not inherit "doom"; it creates it itself. Even Quentin believes that "every man is the arbiter of his own virtues...."¹⁵⁵ Quentin is free to become lost in the opinions of the tradition that fostered him just as Caddy is free to reject them or Jason to ignore them. Vickery says that human freedom

consists not so much in limitless opportunities for all conceivable actions as in an indefinite variety of responses to those actions which man either can or must perform. ¹⁵⁶

153

Absalom, pp. 245-246.

154

Robert 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), 179.

155

Sound and Fury, p. 197.

156

Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 305.

In a sense, even the talk of Fate and man's being determined by a higher power--whether it be the Joker, the Opponent, the dark diceman or any metaphor Faulkner might choose--is itself a kind of evasion of responsibility. Man may use his god--whatever(or whoever) he may construe it (or him) to be-- as a means of shifting from himself the responsibility of his own life. Perhaps this is one of the things Faulkner is trying to say. There are a thousand ways in which men may abdicate their existence. Vahanian has said: "History is too human...to justify any kind of blind, fatalistic, or superstitious belief."¹⁵⁷

The existence of a moral order where choice is significant is well illustrated by the picture which forms the ending of Absalom, Absalom! and the climax of Sutpen's design. The idiot great-grandson of Sutpen stands howling among the smoking ruins of the lost magnificence of Sutpen's mansion.

But it was not the fire which ruined the plantation house. It represents a magnificence which Sutpen built and then destroyed. The moral order is implicit in the fact that Sutpen creates his own doom as he makes his

¹⁵⁷

Vahanian, p. 116.

choices against the moral structure inherent in human life. Vickery states that man "bears his destiny in his own character and his motives shape the contours of his life...."¹⁵⁸

Man does not have to be the helpless victim. If the circumstances of heritage and environment place him in a disadvantaged position, he is still free to choose the way in which, and the degree to which, these factors shall affect his life.

Fulfillment in and for human life--for Faulkner-- is found in what we will term the "gesture," or the act of responsible involvement. It is the gesture in community which is the mark of the human person and thus is the means of establishing self-identity. Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, remarks again and again that one cannot be a human being apart from community, and he goes further to make the distinction between social intercourse-- which often is shallow relationship--and the "interhuman"-- which represents deep, personal relationship.¹⁵⁹

The act of involvement always entails risk. As Dewey Dell remarks, "the process of coming unalone is terrible."¹⁶⁰ But the effort must be made and the risk

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Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 263.

¹⁵⁹

Martin Buber, "Elements of the Interhuman," The Knowledge of Man, trans. Maurice Friedman and R. G. Smith (New York, 1965), 72-88.

¹⁶⁰

Dying, p. 59.

assumed. In freedom man has the capacity to transcend the bounds of time; he may overcome the past and live in the present moment with hope. Because he is free, man also has the ability to overcome alienation from community. But also because of his freedom, he may choose to make the gesture which is not responsible. Of the gesture in Faulkner, Howe has said:

It can be a gesture of rebellion or submission; it can signify adherence to ritual or the need to accept defeat in total loneliness; it can be an arbitrary sign of selfhood or a last assertion of indifference. But always it is the mark of a distinct being, the means through which a man defines himself. An affirmation of human capacity or a paltry insistence on human limitation, the gesture marks each man in his singularity. 161

We shall consider several gestures which prove themselves to be inadequate as the means of self-definition, and, finally, we shall look at the kind of gesture which is the affirmation of man's capacity.

It seems clear that a prerequisite for one's making the adequate gesture is his willingness to view life as it, for him, really exists. One cannot manipulate life by coercing it to conform to his own idea of it; he must come to terms with it as it actually exists.

The first of the abortive gestures to be considered--that of language--is often used to create the reality in which persons who cannot face the demand for responsible self-involvement can exist. This, of course, is to live in a world of illusion like Ellen Sutpen who goes about "speaking her bright set meaningless phrases out of the part which she had written for herself...."¹⁶² Hers is a world from which reality is absent.

Quentin Compson, unable to face the act of incest (which he believes might redeem him) because it will involve him in experience, rationalizes the situation when, talking to his father, he says that if he "could tell you we did it would have been so...."¹⁶³

This attempt to evade reality is also amply illustrated in the life of Mrs. Compson. She changes Maury's name to Benjamin and refuses to let Caddy's name be spoken in her presence, as if these acts could abolish her relationship as mother to an idiot and a prostitute.

Hightower's words might well be applied to all of

162

Absalom, p. 69.

163

Sound and Fury, p. 195.

these persons. He thinks to himself how

ingenuity was apparently given man in order that he may supply himself in crises with shapes and sounds with which to guard himself from truth. 164

Faulkner's comments upon the scene in which Quentin watches some little boys fishing are apropos. The boys, trying to catch a trout for which a reward has been offered for twenty-five years (and which no one thus far has been able to claim), are already arguing about how they will spend the money. Faulkner says their voices are

insistent and contradictory and impatient, making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words. 165

It is to be expected that those who depend upon language to shoulder the burden of communication with other human beings are passive people. Anse Bundren is a supreme illustration of such a man. Motion, for example, is alien to him. He says of God, that

if He'd aimed for man to be always a-moving and going somewheres else, would't He a put him long-ways on his belly, like a snake? It stands to reason He would. 166

164

Light, p. 419.

165

Sound and Fury, p. 136.

166

Dying, p. 35.

Anse plants his legs firmly and rests on self-pity. He says, "I am the chosen of the Lord, for who He loveth, so doeth He chastiseth."¹⁶⁷ Anse is a man who lives only by his words. After Addie's death, he tells his daughter Dewey Dell not to grieve. People are hungry, and she will need to get supper ready. Dewey Dell, burdened by her secret pregnancy, thinks:

You could do so much for me if you just would. If you just knew. I am I and you are you and I know it and you dont know it and you could do so much for me if you just would and if you just would then I could tell you....¹⁶⁸

Anse never shoulders his share of any problem.

Darl observes, speaking of his father;

There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt. He was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two years old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it. ¹⁶⁹

Addie, Anse's wife, points up the contrast between herself, a person who has been involved in life, and her husband, with the words, "I would be I: I would let him be the shape and echo of his word."¹⁷⁰ Anse is "a

167

Dying, p. 105.

168

Dying, p. 50.

169

Dying, pp. 16-17.

170

Dying, p. 166.

significant shape profoundly without life like an
 empty door frame....."¹⁷¹

People who are involved in experience, those who
act and do things, do not need words to name what they
 do. Addie says that

motherhood was invented by someone who had to
 have a word for it because the ones that had
 the children didn't care whether there was a
 word for it or not. ¹⁷²

At the birth of her first son Cash, Addie says,

That was when I learned that words are no good;
 that words dont ever fit even what they are
 trying to say at. ¹⁷³

Of her righteous neighbor Cora Tull who prays for

Addie (defined as "sinner" in Cora's word-life),

Addie says, "people to whom sin is just a matter of
 words, to them salvation is just words too."^{174.}

Addie illustrates the difference between the worlds
 of "doing" and "speaking" with these comments:

I would think how words go straight up in a thin
 line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing
 goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that
 after a while the two lines are too far apart

171

Dying, p. 165.

172

Dying, p. 163.

173

Dying, p. 163.

174

Dying, p. 168.

for the same person to straddle from one to the other....¹⁷⁵

The preacher Whitfield of the same novel is also a man who uses words in lieu of acts. It was he who had been responsible for violating Addie's aloneness through an illicit sex affair (but which, nevertheless, represented for her the act of involvement). We have already mentioned this situation, and it is sufficient to say that he is too cowardly to make the gesture of confession to Anse. He rationalizes this by saying that his confession to God was the same thing as a confession to Anse. Vickery says of him:

Confession, repentance, and even penance are carried out in his mind, thereby obviating any necessity of embracing them in an act. ¹⁷⁶

The inability of words to render truly effective communication is also articulated by Mr. Compson who, in talking to Quentin of Judith, Bon, Henry, and Sutpen (who do not understand one another), tells him that

you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens;...just the words, the

¹⁷⁵

Dying, p. 165.

¹⁷⁶

Vickery, Critical Interpretation, p. 64.

symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. 177

Language is never adequate to bear the responsibility of vital relationship. General Compson says that language is only

that meager and fragile thread,...by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either....178

Those who cling to language as the means of self-involvement fall far short of what Faulkner expects of the human being. Horsch says:

Each man struggles to build the web of language which will link him to his fellow men, but he finds this web at times constricting and suffocating as it demands that he give of himself in order to fulfill the act of communication and accumulate the ideas of another soul. 179

The mark of Faulkner's hero is commitment. Such a man does not depend upon words to express himself. Language is only a function of social relationship; it is not synonymous with it.

177

Absalom, p. 101.

178

Absalom, p. 251.

179

Janice Horsch, "Faulkner on Man's Struggle with Communication," The Kansas Magazine (1964), 77.

Language is not the only insufficient kind of gesture. Thomas Sutpen moves beyond mere words to express himself through genuine action. However, his gesture, too, is inadequate because it is devoid of real self-commitment.

Sutpen is the moving force of Absalom, Absalom! He discovers what he believes to be the secret of a successful life, and he is absorbed in making it a categorical solution to the problem of existence. For Sutpen, the picture of life is like that of a puzzle. If one can find the individual pieces and fit them together in the correct order, the puzzle will automatically be solved. The whole is simply equal to the sum of its parts.

Sutpen had spent his boyhood in a region where the virtues of hard work, integrity, and simplicity were the common lot of all. No man would have considered building a fence to indicate which property was his, and there was nothing in Sutpen's experience that could be identified as social class or privilege. As a child, he was sent to a large plantation house with a message. The Negro servant who greeted him at the front door took one look at his tattered overalls and uncombed hair and would not

admit him. This not only stunned the poor, unkempt boy but also shattered forever the attitude toward life which he had held until that very moment. From that point in his life, he began to construct his design, a plan which would insure him against such another humiliating experience.

Sutpen reasons that one needs a manor house, slaves, the proper kind of wife, and a progeny through which he can live on after his death. This would constitute and guarantee his success. He goes to the West Indies and marries a young girl. Finding her to be part Negro, he leaves her and their son and returns to the states. He feels totally justified in doing this because he leaves her most of his money and possessions. He does not mean to be ruthless. His flaw is

that innocence which believed 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. 180

Sutpen then goes to Mississippi, gets land which he calls "Sutpen's Hundred," constructs a large, beautiful mansion with his own hands (and with the help of several slaves he has secured by some unknown method),

marries, and has children. From this point on, his story reads much like the Biblical tale of King David (the source of the novel's title), who was plagued by family troubles.

Ellen, Sutpen's wife, in the course of time, makes a simple and sudden exit from reality. Henry, the son, meets a dashing friend at college, and the two serve together during the war. The young friend is in reality Charles Bon, Sutpen's first son. Charles and Judith, Sutpen's daughter, fall in love. The family story ends tragically for all. Lind observes:

Sutpen's incapacity for feeling has caused the death of Charles, the exemption of Henry from meaningful existence, the unbridled widowhood of Judith, and all the ills which are yet to befall the remaining Bon descendents. 181

As all of this builds to a climax, Sutpen is really unaware of the trouble. He could never be persuaded of his immorality and inhumanity toward his family and friends. They have all been necessary, though incidental, to his design. He casts aside his first wife upon learning that she is part Negro because she does not fit his plan. He uses his second wife, like the first, primarily to provide him with a male heir.

Unlike David, who cries again and again, "O Absalom, my son, my son," Sutpen refuses the gesture of recognition to his Negro son, Charles, who wants only the slightest word of acknowledgment. He treats Rosa Coldfield, Ellen's sister, as a mere object when he makes the producing of a male heir the provision for their marriage. And he uses Milly Jones for the same reason and casts her aside for her failure. As he tells the story of his bitter disappointment to General Compson, he is totally perplexed. He says,

"You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate." 182

Commenting upon this, Lind observes:

His inability to locate his error dooms him to a repetition of his sins. At best, he can think only in terms of some practical mistake, some miscalculation in "strategy" which threw him off the "schedule" he had set himself for the completion of his project. The actual source of his frustrations remains concealed from him; he questions neither the limitations of his own rationalism nor the justice underlying the design itself. 183

182

Absalom, p. 263.

183

Lind, "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom!" 294.

Sutpen cuts himself off from significant human relationships because of his manipulation of the people involved in his life. He objectifies them by making them "things" in his design. By trying to control all of his experience, he tries to make life more simple than it can ever be. For him, there is no risk, nothing not anticipated. The result, as Jacobs has pointed out, is that

within one lifetime his domain has reverted to the wilderness from which it was torn, the mansion he reared almost with his blood has burned down upon the head of his aged and dying son, a fratricide, and his sole descendent is an idiot mulatto, howling about the ruins. ¹⁸⁴

Jason Compson, in The Sound and the Fury, also survives by manipulating people and controlling events although his pragmatism is much less spectacular than Sutpen's. Jason's design for his life is an existence in which everything is under his control; nothing unpredictable must occur. The precise ticking off of minutes and days symbolizes his life. He represents the self-interest of man who "struts and frets his hour upon the stage." Of Jason, Waggoner says:

Though he is the only "practical" and "sane"

184

Jacobs, "Faulkner's Tragedy of Isolation," 170.

narrator...concerned with action, with public events, with "reality," yet in his section the quality of the actual present is rendered hardly at all. His mind moves back and forth between a colored version of the past and a wishful projection of the future....¹⁸⁵

In his personal relationships Jason is cold, calculating, and legalistic. Rather than give away a circus ticket to a Negro boy who cannot pay his price of five cents, Jason burns it in the stove. His brother, Benjy, is to him only somebody else who must be cared for. He refers to him as "the great American Geld-¹⁸⁶ing...." Of his brother Quentin's suicide, he remarks sarcastically that at Harvard "they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim...."¹⁸⁷

Jason boards Caddy's illegitimate daughter Quentin, but in return he keeps the money Caddy sends the child each month. He believes that he is really entitled to this money. When Caddy comes to visit her daughter, Jason promises that she may see her. He keeps the promise only in the letter of the law, however. Jason and his business associate work on a strictly legalistic basis, and he also has a kind of "contract" with his mistress

185

Waggoner, p. 42.

186

Sound and Fury, p. 280.

187

Sound and Fury, p. 213.

in Memphis. (He is a bachelor and childless.) Vickery remarks:

All these arrangements constitute Jason's way of protecting himself from an intrusion of the irrational. It is his method of assuming control over experience by preventing himself from becoming involved in circumstances he has not foreseen. 188

Another characteristic of Jason's life is his extreme concern with appearances. When Caddy's pregnancy is discovered, he is interested only in finding her a husband. This will correct the situation which, for him, is the way the affair will look in the eyes of the town. Sin is a violation of law, not of persons. He equates the legal with the moral. Because he pays his mistress well, he believes himself to be morally blameless. He insists that all the family eat together at the appointed hour, but it is obvious that this is only to keep up the "appearance" of a gentility which has long since disappeared.

Jason's view of reality is what he can calculate and, therefore, control. He keeps his money and possessions under lock and key. Vickery says: "The money placed in a strong box, hidden in a closet, kept in a locked room is the symbol of Jason's world." 189

188

Vickery, "The Sound and the Fury:...Perspective," 1031-1032.

189

Vickery, "The Sound and the Fury:...Perspective," 1033.

In interpreting Jason's section of this novel, Volpe says that it is "a bitter invective against modern society, its commercialism, its inhumanity, its superficial and moral codes...." ¹⁹⁰

Jason's gesture, then, is only surface appearance. Though he lives in the public world and even has a mistress, his life is not really involved with the lives of others. He confidently boasts, "I can stand on my own feet." ¹⁹¹ Though his pragmatic attitude allows him to get along fairly well in the world, he never even begins to define himself as a human person.

We come now to the gesture which affirms the human capacity. This is the decision of responsible commitment and involvement. Two of Faulkner's most positive and redemptive characters are Byron Bunch of Light in August and Dilsey, the servant, of The Sound and the Fury. We are allowed to witness the actual change in Byron's life. We see him before the situation which demands from him his positive act. When we are introduced to Dilsey, her life is already (and we feel

190

Volpe, p. 124.

191

Sound and Fury, p. 229.

it has always been) one of humility, courage, and selflessness.

Byron Bunch is a simple mill worker. Other than that, little is actually known about him. He does not frequent the town bars and barber shops on Saturdays. After the noon whistle blows, he remains at the mill, works, and thus keeps out of trouble. On Sundays he rides out into the country to a small church.

Then Lena Grove comes to town looking for the man by whom she is pregnant. She believes the man is working to make enough money so that he can send for her. Although Byron falls in love with her, he arranges a meeting between Lena and her alleged sweetheart. The man is a complete scoundrel, and he has no intention of marrying her. Byron provides her a place to stay, gives her food, arranges for the delivery of her baby, and finally leaves town with her (though he has had no encouragement of affection from Lena and no kind of commitment from her).

Before the advent of Lena, Byron seems a quiet, passive, almost neutral workman. But as one follows him through the novel, he becomes more and more a redemptive character. Finally, he undertakes responsibility for Lena and her infant. Elkin says of him:

The gesture of love, and action, has equipped Byron for his real salvation as a human being. At first against his will, but now with a real eagerness, and a confirmed sureness, Byron commits himself.¹⁹²

His resolution is quite apparent. When Byron approaches Hightower's house with the information that the baby is almost due, Hightower senses something newly-positive about him and comments, "He has done something. He has taken a step."¹⁹³

The quiet but resolute decision which launches him upon his course of action is beautifully described in another context. Byron is riding his mule, and he approaches a hill. He thinks to himself:

Well, I can bear a hill...I can bear a hill, a man can....It seems like a man can just about bear anything. He can even bear what he never done. He can even bear the thinking how some things is just more than he can bear. He can even bear it that if he could just give down and cry, he wouldn't do it. He can even bear it to not look back, even when he knows that looking back or not looking back wont do him any good.¹⁹⁴

Not only does Byron himself make the positive gesture, but he also leads Hightower out of his isolation.

192

See the unpubl. diss. (Illinois, 1961) by Stanley Lawrence Elkin, "Religious Themes and Symbolism in the Novels of William Faulkner," p. 137.

193

Light, p. 272.

194

Light, p. 371.

He draws the minister into involvement with Joe Christmas. Hightower is persuaded to protect Christmas by saying that the two of them were together the night Joanna Burden was murdered. Hightower, after screaming of the immunity he has bought and paid for, finally makes this one human gesture. It comes too late, but it comes.

Of all Faulkner's characters, Dilsey, the Negro servant in The Sound and the Fury, is the most redemptive. Her love and patience in the midst of the twisted, unhappy people for whom she works serves as judgment upon the ways in which the Compsons meet life.

Dilsey fulfills the mother role in the Compson household. She has always taken care of the endless needs of the children, and she continues to do so now that they have become adults. She even caters to Mrs. Compson's selfish whims. The following words, spoken by Mrs. Compson, represent a bit of choice irony. She says to Dilsey,

"You're not the one who has to bear it....It's not your responsibility. You can go away. You dont have to bear the brunt of it day in and day out." 195

Jason looks upon Dilsey simply as "somebody in the kitchen to eat up the grub the young ones cant tote off." ¹⁹⁶ To him, she is just "an old half dead nigger...." ¹⁹⁷ Jason does not pay her, and he cannot understand why she remains in his house.

Quentin, Caddy's young daughter (from whom Jason steals the monthly checks), is the only person in the house (except Dilsey) who is not afraid of Jason. Quentin is a young rebel, often skipping school and sometimes forging her grandmother's name on her report cards. Once, when this happens, Jason becomes furious with her and takes off his belt to beat her. Dilsey intervenes:

"Hit me, den," she says, "ef nothin else but hittin somebody wont do you. Hit me," she says. ¹⁹⁸

When Mrs. Compson speaks of changing Maury's name to Benjamin because it is "a better name for him than Maury was," ¹⁹⁹ Dilsey realizes what is taking place.

¹⁹⁶ Sound and Fury, p. 203.

¹⁹⁷ Sound and Fury, p. 203.

¹⁹⁸ Sound and Fury, p. 203.

¹⁹⁹ Sound and Fury, p. 77.

Mrs. Compson is virtually disowning him. (He is Benjamin, literally sold into Egypt.) Following the decision to change the name, Dilsey's reaction is depicted by Faulkner in the following scene which takes place between her and Quentin:

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

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

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

Can you read it, Caddy said.

Wont have to, Dilsey said. They'll read it for me. All I got to do is say Ise here. 200

One of the scenes which is most expressive of Dilsey's love and care is one in which she is holding Benjy:

Dilsey led Ben to the bed and drew him down beside her and she held him, rocking back and forth, wiping his drooling mouth upon the hem of her skirt.

"Hush, now," she said, stroking his head, "Hush. Dilsey got you." 201

Dilsey's love is drawn from her spiritual resources. In the last section of the novel there is a vivid and powerful account of an Easter service which Dilsey and Benjy attend. Listening to the sermon, she sits,

200

Sound and Fury, p. 77.

201

Sound and Fury, p. 332.

"crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the
 blood of the remembered Lamb."²⁰²

Leaving the church, they walk quietly down the street toward home. Dilsey, with the resurrection morning in her heart, does not speak. The significance of this day and its deep meaning for her life are beautifully portrayed by a simple description:

Dilsey made no sound, her face did not quiver as the tears took their sunken and devious courses, walking with her head up, making no effort to dry them away even.²⁰³

Dilsey's faith is practical and totally relevant to all of her life. Time, for instance, is no problem to her, and the kitchen clock which ticks the days away from her one by one poses no threat. She does not fight against time. She lives completely in the present, and hers is time fulfilled. Living in the midst of the sound and fury of the Compson existence, she posits beside it a life that testifies that the meaningful can be woven out of the texture of the helpless and the near-hopeless experience. Dilsey,

202

Sound and Fury, p. 313.

203

Sound and Fury, p. 313.

like her minister, sees "de power en de glory."²⁰⁴
 Her faith issues in her assumption of responsibility
 for all the lives about her own. "I does de bes I
 kin," she said, "Lawd knows dat."²⁰⁵

Dilsey is one of Faulkner's symbols of hope; and
 hers is a legitimate kind of hope because it has been
 ground out of the daily round of suffering. When
 toward the end of the novel she expresses, very simply,
 her Easter faith, the reader believes it. Both that
 and the intriguing church service have been prepared
 for. She, like the preacher, "sees Calvary.... and
 de resurrection...."²⁰⁶ Dilsey puts this into her
 own words: "I've seed de first en de last...."²⁰⁷

While we admire the radiance of Dilsey's faith,
 we must remember that, for all practical purposes, she
 is far removed from the complexities of a society
 that can--and did--produce a Compson family. Hope,
 therefore, is to be seen in the context of idiocy,

204

Sound and Fury, p. 313.

205

Sound and Fury, p. 332.

206

Sound and Fury, p. 312.

207

Sound and Fury, p. 313.

greed, and despair--i.e., Benjy, Jason, and Quentin (whose lives embody these qualities) are unchanged by the presence of Dilsey's faith and hope. Faulkner tells us this in another way. After the powerful scene at the Negro church, he plunges again into passages about Quentin, Jason, and Benjy.

Faulkner makes no attempt to resolve the tensions existing between hope and despair or between love and greed. Both are powerfully built into the structures of life, and he lets them both remain. The final scene of The Sound and the Fury, where Benjy and Luster (a young Negro boy) are at the monument is concerned with order and correctness, but there is no resolution. Of this, Slatoff says,

This final scene does not negate the moderate affirmation of the Dilsey episode, nor does it really qualify it. Rather it stands in suspension with it as a commentary of equal force....In short, the ending seems designed not to interpret or to integrate but to leave the various elements of the story in much the same suspension in which they were offered, and to leave the reader with a high degree of emotional and intellectual tension.²⁰⁸

Faulkner does not cheat us with redemption too easily won. Even concerning Dilsey, he will not commit himself

beyond this statement he made about her: "They
 209
 endured."

One final statement concerning the gesture must now be made. In Faulkner, there is no guaranteed solution or success for the man who responsibly acts. His hero is often like Sisyphus, climbing his mountain again and again. The assumption of the burden does not automatically bring alleviation of the burden. The noble goal and the constancy of the suffering struggle toward it are the measure of worth. When Faulkner was asked what he considered his best book, he replied:

The one that failed the most tragically and the most splendidly. That was The Sound and the Fury--the one that I worked at the longest, the hardest, that was to me the most passionate and moving idea, and made the most splendid failure. That's the one that's my--I consider the best, not--well, best is the wrong word--that's the one that I love the most. 210

In his National Book Award address in New York in 1955, Faulkner said that it was of great importance to tell the world, the time itself....That even failure

209

Sound and Fury, p. 22.

210

Gwynn and Blotner, p. 77.

is worthwhile and admirable, provided only that the failure is splendid enough, the dream splendid enough, unattainable enough yet forever valuable enough, since it was of perfection. 211

In an interview in which Faulkner was confronted with the fact that apparently more of his characters fail than prove successful, he is reported to have carried on this conversation:

WF: That's all right. That they go down doesn't matter. It's how they go under.

INT: And what is the way to go under?

WF: It's to go under when trying to do more than you know how to do. It's trying to defy defeat even if it's inevitable. 212

When asked his opinion of his contemporaries Wolfe, Caldwell, Hemingway, and Dos Passos, Faulkner replied that they had all failed (and he added that he himself had failed as well). Rating them on the basis of the "splendor" of their failure, he placed Wolfe first. Of him, Faulkner said that he had made

tremendous effort...to try to put all of the history of the human heart on the head of the pin. That is, to tell all in each paragraph until he

211

Faulkner's National Book Award address, New York, 1955, quoted in Saturday Review (July 28, 1962), 25.

212

Cynthia Grenier, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview with William Faulkner--September, 1955," Accent, XVI (Summer, 1956), 172, quoted in Hunt, p. 47.

died as though he had a premonition of his own early death....he failed the best because he had tried the hardest, he had taken the longest gambles, taken the longest shots. 213

To illustrate this point of his philosophy, we return to his novels. We should note the "victories" achieved by those who undertake involvement: Joe Christmas is betrayed by Barbara (his first love) and (he believes) by Joanna Burden, and is finally castrated and murdered; Hightower goes back to sit before the study window in lonely solitude; and Darl is committed to an insane asylum. In a real sense, these persons are destroyed because of the human gesture which they had attempted. Those who survive are the stupid fertility goddess Lena Grove, the idiot Benjy and the calculating Jason, the demented Jim Bond, passive Anse, and Dewey Dell, his promiscuous daughter.

Even though failure may loom large before us, Faulkner still places his faith in the human effort.

Judith Sutpen says:

"You get born and you try this and you dont know why only you keep on trying...and it cant matter,

you know that, or the Ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying or having to keep on trying....maybe if you could go to someone, the stranger the better, and give them something--a scrap of paper--something, anything, it not to mean anything in itself and them not even to read it or keep it, not even bother to throw it away or destroy it, at least it would be something just because it would have happened...." 214

If one looks for conclusive solutions to spring from Faulkner's final pages, he will be sorely disappointed. Faulkner is well known for his ingenious techniques of suspension: the fluid idea not ever really finalized, the withholding of information from the reader so that he is vitally involved in the experience of the novel and begins to anticipate the mystery of the future just as the characters themselves do; and, finally, his technique of ending some of his novels (including all four of those we have been considering) in a state of suspension. Concerning the latter device, Slatoff suggests that

the endings of all his novels not only fail to resolve many of the tensions and meanings provided in the novels but also seem carefully designed to prevent such resolution. Above all, they leave unresolved the question of the meaningfulness of the human efforts and suffering we have witnessed, whether the sound and the fury

is part of some larger design or whether it has signified nothing in an essentially meaningless universe. ²¹⁵

Perhaps the ever-present tension between involvement and isolation, between problem and solution, between outrage and gesture is the reason Faulkner does this. There are no categorical answers for every person. Each man, in freedom, must declare who he is by the ways in which he chooses to involve himself in the structures of his existence.

Sometimes, for each man, this will be the gesture of responsible commitment; sometimes, it will be the gesture of withdrawal; sometimes it will simply be the gesture of conformity. Whatever the gesture, Faulkner does not allow escape from the uncomfortable and insecure world. After all, as Darl says, "the safe things are just the things that folks have been doing so long they have worn the edges off...." ²¹⁶

215

Slatoff, "The Edge of Order: The Pattern of Faulkner's Rhetoric," 186.

216

Dying, p. 125.

CONCLUSION

The world about which William Faulkner writes is an accurate presentation of the world which exists beyond fiction; and, therefore, as one reads Faulkner, he also reads a significant philosophical commentary upon reality.

To the individual who looks upon the author's world with any degree of awareness, there is much to justify Mr. Compson's cynical remark that life is a "stubborn and amazed outrage."²¹⁷ Two of the major categories in which man exists--and which are of fundamental importance to Faulkner--are time and society. Both of these structures appear to substantiate Mr. Compson's opinion.

Time engulfs us all. The statement concerning Dewey Dell might well apply to us. Her pregnancy will soon be

 217

Absalom, p. 174.

made obvious to all

by the womb of time: the agony and the despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events....²¹⁸

Likewise, our stable structures are destroyed by the passage of time and our secrets exposed by its revelations. And, of course, it is time which draws us closer and closer to the final outrage of death.

The second category, society, also seems to justify an ultimate belief in the outrage. It is the refusal of responsible involvement with other persons that constitutes the great failure of our humanity. Horsch says:

Each man on his island...casts out his bridges to other islands, at first tentatively and then desperately, only to see them washed away by the floods of not-hearing, not-understanding, not-caring.²¹⁹

The longing and need for the gesture of recognition is almost unbearably poignant in Darl's words, uttered when he has been committed to an insane asylum by his family:

Darl is our brother, our brother Darl. Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams. "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes."²²⁰

218

Dying, pp. 114-115.

219

Horsch, "Faulkner on Man's Struggle with Communication,"

83.

220

Dying, p. 244.

Man, nevertheless, must identify himself with other persons. We all long to break outside the circle of isolation. Addie's words articulate our own wish:

My aloneness had been violated and then made whole again by the violation: time, Anse, love, what you will, outside the circle. ²²¹

The principal reason we do not make the effort to break out of our alienated state is expressed by Byron Bunch who says, "It is because a fellow is more afraid of the trouble he might have than he ever is of the trouble he's already got." ²²²

Faulkner, however, believes that man can prevail over that which constitutes the outrageous because he believes in the possibility of genuine freedom. Though man cannot always choose his situation, he can choose its meaning. Faulkner says,

that he has the free will to choose and the courage... to die for his choice, is my conception of man, is why I believe that man will endure. ²²³

Faulkner's hero, though not the isolated man, is the individual man. He accepts for himself the risk

221

Dying, p. 164.

222

Light, p. 65.

223

Gwynn and Blotner, p. 38.

and burden of freedom. He alone must make his own decisions. He alone can either assent to or withdraw from those personal responsible commitments which declare who he really is.

At any given moment, a man may alter the course of his whole life by the kind of gesture he makes. Two of Faulkner's greatest failures, Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower, are able, through positive gestures, to recover their roots in the human community. That they fail again does not matter; that they have made the gesture is all-important.

The change in Hightower is to be noted. When Byron comes to his home to ask him to deliver Lena's baby, he approaches the minister's bed and hears him snoring. Byron notes that the sound is not one of exhaustion, but one of surrender, as though Hightower

had given over and relinquished completely that grip upon that blending of pride and hope and vanity and fear, that strength to cling to either defeat or victory, which is the I-Am, and the relinquishment of which is usually death. 224

Hightower rises to the occasion. The baby is delivered safely. And the minister later risks himself to protect Joe Christmas. He is suddenly aware of the change that finally stirs in his sheltered heart. He no longer

believes himself to be victim or martyr. He confesses:

"After all, there must be some things for which God cannot be accused by man and held responsible. There must be."²²⁵

Even Joe Christmas, having chosen his isolation for a quarter of a century, finally makes the gesture which marks him as a human being. At first, he asks but a simple question, "Can you tell me what day this is?"²²⁶ Then, having several times rejected food, the symbol of fellowship, he finds himself eating with an unknown Negro family. That same night, before sleep, he tries again to recall the name of the day that has passed. This appears to be one way of establishing a bond with others who also live the same days and hours. Christmas' ultimate gesture comes at the end of his life when he refuses to kill Percy Grimm, a man sworn to murder him.

The gesture does not have to be spectacular. For Cash Bundren, it is expressed in his making the very finest coffin he can for his dying mother. He follows the

olden right teaching that says to drive the nails down and trim the edges well always like it was for your own use and comfort you were making it.²²⁷

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Light, p. 427.

226

Light, p. 290.

227

Dying, p. 224.

For Darl, it is the effort to burn down the barn which houses his mother's rotting, smelling corpse in an attempt to salvage whatever of her dignity he could. For Caddy, it is perhaps so simple a thing as her presence with her idiot brother Benjy for whom she is warmth and security.

The gesture motivated strictly by duty is the restricted gesture. Joanna Burden befriends Joe out of a sense of duty to the Negro race. The Negro is the white man's burden. She will not fully accept Joe, for as they make love in her bedroom, she screams the words that mark the important difference between them: "Negro! Negro! Negro!"
228

Finally, for Faulkner, the gesture, it will be recalled, guarantees no security, no solutions, no success. Indeed, it is almost inevitable that it will yield suffering. Nevertheless, the gesture constitutes the human being's most creative and positive response to the bewildering outrage of his world. The improvement of whatever is valuable in human life will be made by the responsible man.

Irving Howe says:

The opposition of curse [outrage] and gesture forms the dramatic and moral pattern of Faulkner's work,

and within that opposition he declares the items of his moral bias: his respect--almost awe--before suffering, his contempt for deceit, his belief in the rightness of self-trust, his enlarging compassion for the defeated. At its greatest, the gesture suggests that for Faulkner heroism signifies exposure, the taking and enduring and resisting of everything which comes between birth and death. At its smallest, the gesture is an assurance given by each man to himself, that in some indestructible and ultimate way he too is a sentient human being, capable of pain and therefore of joy. 229

In concluding this discussion of Faulkner's themes, it is best to listen to his own words. He states that the task of the writer is

to show man as he is in conflict with his problems, with his nature, with his own heart, with his fellows, and with his environment. That's all, in my opinion, any book or story is about. Of course it has mutations. The problems fall into the categories of money or sex or death. But the basic story is man in conflict with his own heart, with his fellows, or with his environment. 230

Faulkner greatly admired Camus because he achieved the first aim of the writer. Of him, Faulkner says:

I think highest of him. He is one man that has-- is doing what I have tried always to do, which is to search, demand, ask always of one's own soul....to search his own soul...is the writer's first job. To search his own soul, and to give a proper, moving picture of man in the human dilemma. 231

229

Howe, p. 106.

230

Gwynn and Blotner, p. 132.

231

Gwynn and Blotner. pp. 281-282.

Faulkner, too, has looked within himself. He has laid aside the many pretensions of society by which its myths are perpetuated, and he has stated his propositions concerning life as he honestly sees them. It goes without saying that his insight is profound and challenging. Concerning Faulkner's vision, Waggoner says:

There may be more to be endured than to be enjoyed in Faulkner's world....starting from a perception of man's absurdity, he recalls us to a knowledge of our condition and our hope....he warns us against expecting redemption by a celestial railroad. His tragic vision...does not...suggest that we try to escape the world: rather, that we do what we can to transform it, and be prepared to endure it. His tragic vision does not deny or restrict freedom; it demands and magnifies it, but recognizes the forces that limit it....he affirms the underlying worth of the common life, even in a situation replete with tragedy and absurdity.... Faulkner says in his work that only moral choices freely made are ultimately significant. 232

There is something of the prophetic in Faulkner. He is a visionary, but his great worth lies in his ability to translate his profoundest thought into practical language and situation so that it becomes recognizable to every man. Reading Faulkner's novels is disturbing, for one is brought to the abrupt realization that he is Faulkner's subject.

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