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## **‘A MAN, AND A GOOD MAN’: YOUTH AND MISDIRECTION IN WILLIAM FAULKNER’S THE REIVERS**

**GAVAN LENNON**

The publication of Nobel Laureate William Faulkner’s *The Reivers: A Reminiscence*, on 4 June, may have been the major event in the literary calendar of the summer of 1962, were it not surpassed by its author’s death thirty two days later, on 7 July. Despite the author’s prominence at the time and in the five decades since, *The Reivers* has attracted relatively little critical assessment compared to the rest of Faulkner’s output in fiction. Indeed, Anne Goodwyn Jones has identified only two novels — Faulkner’s first, *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926) and *Pylon* (1935) — as having received less critical attention than *The Reivers*. ‘One reason for this lack of interest’, suggests Jones, ‘may be the novel’s apparent simplicity’ (55).

In this article I situate Faulkner’s last novel within the framework of his enormous cycle of interrelated texts in order to extrapolate the manner by which it uses an affectation of youth to simultaneously present and undermine a conservative blueprint for the construction of historical narrative. The misdirection afforded by the mask of youthfulness has encouraged several Faulkner scholars to engage with the text on less serious terms than is common in the study of his work. Published as it was at the beginning of the most politically explosive decade in the American twentieth century, *The Reivers* interrogates the conservative standpoint on issues of race and gender equality. Through readings of the manner through which the senses are used to describe racial difference in the text, I expose the text itself as a masked exposé of dogmatic historicising of the American South.

More than just the text’s ‘apparent simplicity’, I argue that a complex engagement with the qualities attendant on youthfulness allows an element of narrative misdirection which destabilises the political agenda of the novel’s problematic narrator. The novel cultivates an atmosphere of simplicity by staging its narrative as one of childish ignorance and personal development into adulthood. Indeed, many of those critics who have shown an interest in the text refer to its apparent simplicity as its defining factor rather than as part of a commentary on the American South in the early 1960s. Too frequently, these critics are swayed by the text’s affectation of simple, youthful exuberance to the point of being insensitive to what I see as the text’s nuanced strategy of

social criticism through narrative discourse. This essay traces the manner by which the affectation of a youthful voice has derailed certain critics of the novel, how such innocence is undermined by its position within Faulkner's body of work and what such misdirection means in terms of the text's position within contemporary sexual and racial politics.

According to Richard Gray's biography of Faulkner, the author asserted that his final novel was about 'a boy growing up fast to become "a man, and a good man"' and that Faulkner referred in correspondence to his work in progress as 'a sort of Huck Finn' (360). William Rossky, an early critic of *The Reivers*, seemed content to provide no more than superficial parallels between these texts, which he terms 'two very American novels', an assessment which suggests complicity in the propagation of American exceptionalism and obedient patriotism (377). Indeed, although humour in the work of Mark Twain has long been recognised for its subversive capacity, the same capacity has rarely been identified in the humour of *The Reivers*.

In his personal life, Faulkner himself went some way in corroborating the reading of *The Reivers* as a simple novel concerned with youthful innocence and personal growth. As well as his purported belief that his final narrator matured into 'a man, and a good man' Faulkner's public presentation of the novel was decidedly childlike. In his only public reading of the novel before his death, Faulkner mirrored his protagonist's appropriation of the voice of innocence in a characteristically disingenuous description of his own work. Richard Gray describes Faulkner's reading from the text to an audience in April of 1962: 'He began his reading by saying that he was going to "skip about a little to read about a horse race which to me is one of the funniest horse races I ever heard of"' (Gray 371). Not only is Faulkner's last narrative a narrative of misdirection but, it achieves its misdirection by employing the pretence of youth as its central narrative device.

The humour of *The Reivers* has been frequently misrepresented by its few critics. Joseph R. Urgo, in an otherwise sensitive reading of literary influence in the novel, asserts that 'The humor in *The Reivers*... does not run too deep; the book's more profound implications suggest that knowledge is not passed on by generational ritual but rather is stolen' (4). The critical consensus on the novel is that it is a light-hearted affair which lacks the sort of complex and disturbing engagement with southern history which characterise Faulkner's more critically lauded works, such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942). Most of Faulkner's considerable body of fiction is set in, and documents the history of, the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi and its main town of Jefferson.

This invented geography, built upon the blueprint of Faulkner's real-life home town of Oxford in Lafayette County, incorporates generations of southerners, all of whom are somehow scarred by the history of their region and of their families. The story of Jefferson, Mississippi, dispersed through so many texts, is one which evolves and grows and this is reflected in Faulkner's aesthetic model until the end of his career. Indeed, it becomes imperative to read *The Reivers* with an awareness of its position within the wider framework of Yoknapatawpha. As such, these fictional texts must be seen as contiguous and in constant conversation with each other. Studies of Faulkner's novels have sometimes neglected the significance of this variety of intertextuality upon a conception of the author's oeuvre.

Eric J. Sundquist finishes his seminal, if slightly outdated, study of Faulkner's 'major' novels with an analysis of the closing pages of the 'Delta Autumn' section of the author's 1942 novel *Go Down, Moses*. Of the passage, in which Isaac McCaslin must face the human face of his family's terrible legacy of incest and rape, Sundquist says: 'This is the most powerful moment in *Go Down, Moses* and perhaps, because of the moving achievement and perilous commitment is culminated, the most powerful in Faulkner's fiction. One might almost wish it were the last' (159). For better or worse, it was not. The last moment in Faulkner's prestigious career is the one in which Lucius Priest — another of Isaac's many relatives — is confronted with the child of the 'reformed' prostitute Everbe Corinthia and Boon Hogganbeck (TR 284). *Go Down, Moses* and *The Reivers*, though separated by two decades, interconnect with each other so much, though subtly, that the earlier novel gains new significance in light of its successor. To consider Faulkner as a talented writer only as far as 1942, when *Go Down, Moses* was published, as Sundquist does, would be to exclude a valuable part of the whole of his integrated narrative cycle.

Contrary to *Urgo's* reading, the novel's opening signals it as a cross-generational communication of ideology. The novel opens with the phrase 'Grandfather said' in stark capitals at a remove from the body proper of the text (TR 7). After this single excursion from the rest of the narrative, the novel is staged as an oral text delivered in the second-person. It is delivered by Lucius Priest II, to his grandson of the same name and recounts the cathartic events in the elder Lucius's development into adulthood. Lucius the younger is a conduit, then, between his grandfather's past, their shared present, the present moment of writing (transcription) and the future moment of reading. The temporal progression of the acts of iteration and transcription are inherently connected to pedagogy in that they are concerned with the

communication of understanding of youthfulness to the young. The generational gulf between narrator and narratee provides a subsidiary narrative which runs parallel to the elder Lucius' idealised and official narrative of development into maturity. The norms of 1905 are held up as superior to those of 1961 in a manner which is disguised within an ostensibly innocent, therefore innocuous, adventure tale. Early critics of the novel tended to take Priest's projection of childish innocence for granted, with Cleanth Brooks, William Rossky and James Meriwether all classifying the story as a heroic adventure narrative, 'inferior' to Faulkner's earlier works of modernist experimentation. Another critic who compares *The Reivers* to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, John E. Bassett, is misdirected by *The Reivers*'s ostensible simplicity. Although Bassett acknowledges the novel's framing technique of 'Grandfather said' as a means of creating a critical distance within the text he goes on to claim that:

Since no other signals in the book indicate irony between grandchildren and grandfather, or the reader and grandchildren, the narrative voice is fully reliable — without even the distancing in *Huckleberry Finn* governed by Huck's youth, for Lucius is a mature man not a teenager when speaking. (Basset 54)

Basset considers *The Reivers* to be 'the least ironic of Faulkner's novels' (54). This is plainly untrue. The sort of double-consciousness Lucius achieves by existing in the text as both elderly and youthful is, in itself, a narrative irony which Faulkner further manipulates to criticise the imperative within Lucius' character to sanitise and censor the history which he is propagating to the youth of the early 1960s.

Despite the text's subsequent relegation as a 'minor' Faulkner novel it was warmly received at the time of its publication and earned Faulkner a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1963, his second. The fact is significant because the winner of the same prize the year prior to the publication of *The Reivers* was strikingly similar in form and content. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) was almost certainly in dialogue with earlier Faulkner novels in its engagement with racial politics, childhood development and specific characterisation. Specifically, the character of Gavin Stevens, who appears in more novels in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha cycle than any other, including *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) is a crime-solving, politically opinionated lawyer who provides a template not only for Lee's Atticus Finch but for so many later southern lawyer/crusaders in

fiction and film. Like Atticus, Stevens is ubiquitously followed by a voice of youthful innocence and ignorance, his nephew Chick Mallison. I would like to suggest that *The Reivers*'s Lucius is a timely reaction to, and perhaps even parody of, Lee's narrator Jean Louise 'Scout' Finch.

Scout's youthful ignorance is figured as potent enough to prevent an act of racial violence. Unable, due to her youth, to identify the menacing intent of a lynch mob, Scout attempts to engage in polite, adult conversation:

'Don't you remember me, Mr Cunningham? I'm Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember?' I began to sense the futility one feels when unacknowledged by a chance acquaintance.

'I go to school with Walter,' I began again. 'He's your boy ain't he? Ain't he, sir?'

Mr Cunningham was moved to a faint nod. He did know me after all. (Lee, 169).

Scout manages, through youthful earnestness and ignorance, to embarrass a lynch mob into dispersing. This is a typically endearing episode in a novel which has been read, by Michael Kreyling in an article on race and southern pedagogy, as 'the white "get-out-of-jail-free" card'. Through a readerly appropriation of childhood innocence and humanity, the narrative of *To Kill a Mockingbird* evades social responsibility. Kreyling suggests that, in the abdication of culpability which the noble figure of Atticus Finch facilitates, 'What *To Kill a Mockingbird* misses completely is the anguish of Tom Robinson' (Kreyling 72). What the narrative of *Lucius Priest* achieves is very similar; by foregrounding the experience of a privileged white boy, he attempts to propagate a doctrine of white, male supremacy to his grandson. Where Lee's text endorses a simplified approach to contentious political issues in order to expose a perceived foolishness, Faulkner's later text immerses itself in ostensibly simple engagements in order to expose the potential for political situations to be appropriated by those in power.

The narrative of *The Reivers* is concerned with a young boy from a prominent and respected southern family who, in 1911, absconds with his grandfather's automobile — one of the first cars to be owned by an inhabitant of Faulkner's Jefferson, Mississippi — to exciting, dangerous Memphis, Tennessee. He is accompanied by two of his family's servants, Boon Hogganbeck and Ned McCaslin, an African American. Once in Memphis the car is traded for a horse which Lucius must race

against another horse in order to win back the stolen automobile. Lucius is aided and abetted by kindly prostitutes, corrupt policemen and former Confederate soldiers before returning to his rural home having learned what it is to be a gentleman. This raucous, entertaining narrative is, however, complicated by the fact of the novel's narrative present is not idyllic 1905 but tempestuous 1961 and the text's narrator is not the eleven-year-old Lucius Priest but his elderly older self. The Lucius of 1961 is himself a grandfather and his grandson, also named Lucius Priest, functions in the text as narratee.

Lucius Priest has an agenda, one which he uses an ostensibly oral narrative to achieve. Ironically, Lucius racialises his own speech act and admits that his role is one of preacher/ narrator, albeit jokingly: 'I was in the position of the old Negro who said, "Here I is, Lord. If you wants me saved, You got the best chance You ever seen standing right here Looking at You"'. By endeavouring to retain the innocence of the earlier self whom he recounts, Lucius is able to engage with questions of racial and gender politics without ever needing to admit to his own intellectual maturity. An old man, adopting the voice and knowledge of a pre-adolescent boy, Lucius also adopts the boy's lack of political responsibility. This is especially the case when the mature Lucius engages directly with the social atmosphere of the era in which he is telling his story.

Lucius mocks the contemporary atmosphere of sexual freedoms developing in the early 1960s outright:

In those days females didn't run in and out of gentlemen's rooms in hotels as, I am told, they do now, even wearing, I am told, what the advertisements call the shorts or scanties capable of giving women the freedom they need in their fight for freedom. (183)

Lucius's repeated interjection of 'I am told' is intended to highlight his own distance from the contemporary scene of sexual politics. Lucius intends it to be believed that such sexual and social crises are not part of his narrative, but of another one. By deferring to another voice the representation of modern women, Lucius avoids culpability in the patriarchal system. At the same time, however, he chastises the women for wearing improper clothing and suggests that their 'freedom' is a joke. By extension, Lucius is establishing a comprehensively socially conservative viewpoint. This conservatism insinuates itself into Lucius's narrative in a way which subverts its ostensibly simple intentions.

One instance of this sort of subversion occurs in exchange between Lucius and his companion Boon during the drive to Memphis is an exhibition of childish petulance followed immediately by the assurance of nostalgia:

‘We ain’t really got anything to worry about but Hell Creek bottom tomorrow. Harrykin Creek ain’t anything’.

‘Who said it was?’ I said. Hurricane Creek is four miles from town; you have passed over it so fast all of your life you probably don’t even know its name. But people who crossed it then knew it. (TR 60)

This seemingly inoffensive exchange subtly supports the indoctrination of a younger generation of southerners into arcane ways of thinking by masking such suggestion in the voice of youth. The ‘Who said it was?’ of the young Lucius is juxtaposed to the quiet condescension of his older self in direct communication with the younger generation. The elegiac tone of the narrative at the loss of some perceived connection with the environment is fairly innocuous in and of itself but is easily extended to incorporate a justification of less savoury elements of the social order of the past.

Lucius and the Priest family had featured in no previous novel or short story in Faulkner’s work. However, the family is not entirely new. The Priests are ‘the cadet branch’ of the enormous McCaslin family (TR 21). Lucius takes liberties with narrative elements presented elsewhere in the family sagas of the Yoknapatawpha cycle. The representation of Isaac McCaslin in *The Rievers* is strikingly different to his treatment in its predecessor, *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (1942), an episodic novel. The opening page of the earlier novel’s first episode, ‘Was’, introduces Isaac and situates him as the primary character of the novel which follows. The previous generation of McCaslins, Uncle Buddy and Uncle Buck (Isaac’s father), feature in the earlier novel *The Unvanquished* (1938). He is introduced in the discourse of family bonding: ‘Isaac McCaslin, “Uncle Ike”, past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated anymore, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one’ (GDM 5). Ike is depicted as someone intrinsically related to Yoknapatawpha County. He is a feature of the fictional locale’s mental landscape and he inhabits that landscape as an uncle: a wise and benign elder relative. Perhaps because of Lucius’s closer familial connection to Ike, or perhaps for other reasons, he is referred to as ‘Cousin Isaac’, ‘Cousin Ike’ and even ‘your cousin Ike’



(which establishes him as being as familiar a relation to Lucius's Grandson Lucius as to Lucius the elder) throughout *The Reivers* (TR 17, 22, 23 etc.). Although it may not seem to diminish Ike's character to have him relegated from Uncle to Cousin, the principles which Ike represents in *Go Down, Moses* are ones which need authority to be wielded correctly. In Faulkner's world, power is presented through patriarchy and the ascendancy of names for male family members. The Ike of the earlier novel refuted all his worldly belongings and his very birthright in order to escape the shame of his grandfather's adulterous, incestuous and inhumane sexual behaviour and in order to escape responsibility for the offspring of that behaviour. Ike lives a life of complete asceticism to atone for the sins committed by his ancestor who owned property, both agricultural and human:

Who in all his life had owned but one object more than could wear and carry in his pockets and his hands at one time, and this was the narrow iron cot and the stained lean mattress which he used camping... who owned no property and never desired to since the earth was no man's but all men's. (GDM 5)

This Ike, who faces the harshness of his family's past head on and sacrifices his own comfort to atone or at least escape it, is not the one we see in *The Reivers*. Although he is a relatively minor character in the novel and his appearances are few and far between, those appearances are telling of Lucius's approach to narrative. One story, related in both *Go Down, Moses* and *The Reivers* has Boon attempt five times to shoot a black man who has wronged him only for all five bullets to miss their target. When Boon fails to shoot his target with five attempts it is 'right at the corner in front of Cousin Isaac McCaslin's hardware store'. During the altercation Boon 'creases the buttock' of a black woman who happens to be passing. The store's proprietor, outraged not by Boon's recklessness but at his poor marksmanship, 'came jumping out of the store and drowned her voice with his' (TR 17). In the end, Boon is even forced to pay 'ten or fifteen' dollars for damage to Ike's window. The Ike of 'Was' doesn't own any property, yet the Ike described by Lucius not only owns a store and its stock but even demands remuneration for damages done to his property. To the Ike of the earlier text the broken window wouldn't belong to him but to 'all men', but in the later novel he 'drowns out' the African American voice which — in the earlier novel — he considered his to enfranchise. Lucius projects the same desire to sanitise the ugly truth which he himself displays in his narrative

to his grandson on to Ike, the stalwart hermit who has spent his life refuting property and atoning for the crimes he perceives as belonging to his family.

Avoiding responsibility for narrative and history is also achieved through the recollection of smell in the novel. In this vein, Mark Smith calls for a new understanding of southern race and southern racism in terms which are not so starkly visual:

White southerners believed [during the period of Jim Crow segregation] they did not need their eyes alone to authenticate racial identity, presumed inferiority, and...criminality.... Modern discussions of ‘race’ and racial identity are hostage to the eye...the preference for ‘seeing’ race is as much a social construction as ‘race’ itself. (Smith 2)

By appealing to the other senses as a means of understanding attitudes to race, Smith is able to determine the manner by which segregationist principles were able to sustain themselves ideologically while remaining allergic to the intellectual. The relative weakness of scent’s connection to conscious thought, compared to sight or sound, makes the experience of smell much more visceral. Unsurprisingly, olfaction was the sense most frequently called upon by segregationists to ‘prove’ that integration was unnatural, undesirable and unhygienic and to engender fear and disgust at the prospect that white southerners would be forced to interact with black southerners. Smell held a special place in the fears of segregationists because of the connotations it held with intimacy: ‘Because of its old associations with sex, disease, nearness and invasiveness, smell preoccupied segregationists during the years surrounding *Brown* [v. Board of Education, 1955]’ (Smith, 126).

One passage in which the description of scent as a means of avoiding description is at its most striking is when Ned McCaslin is discovered on the trip to Memphis. The trio is driving away from the town of Jefferson, though neither Boon nor Lucius realise that Ned has stowed away. Ned is Lucius’s great-great uncle but can never be recognised as such by the sanctioned discourse of the southern family in which Lucius indulges. All three inhabit the same automobile — a modernised equivalent to Huck Finn’s raft — but Ned’s secret presence is made known through scent:

Suddenly Boon said, ‘What’s that smell? Was it you?’  
But before I could deny it he had jerked the automobile

to a stop, sat for an instant, then turned and reached back and flung back the lumped and jumbled mass of the tarpaulin which had filled the back of the car. Ned sat up from the floor. (TR 68)

Ned is discovered in his own filth in the back of the car but, significantly, he is discovered before Lucius ‘has a chance to deny’ the smell and, by extension, his black cousin. The implication is that Lucius, representative of the white McCaslins, is responsible for the denial of family skeletons. The superficial separation of Ned from Boon and Lucius in the microcosm of the car is, in effect, a denial of the inequality of his position. Ned is a constituent of the trip to Memphis and of the McCaslin/Priest family. The fact that the young Lucius is forced by scent to recognise his cousin’s presence is an indication that the narrative of the mature Lucius is one which desires the experience of African Americans in the South to remain outside of historical discourse. Just as Lucius can, by his appropriation of youth, remove himself from responsibility for the actions he recounts, by related those events indirectly through the telling of smell, he can avoid confronting himself and his grandson with the reality of his experiences.

In a similar manner, Lucius’s first impressions of Minnie, the black servant in Miss Reba’s Memphis brothel, suggest a set of moral norms which excuse him — and his community — of historical crimes. These norms run opposite to the reality of his extended family which, as I have examined above, he must have known. Lucius feels exempted from sexual attraction to the black woman: ‘I was too far asunder, not merely in race but in age, to feel what Ned felt; I could be awed, astonished and pleased by it; I could not, like Ned, participate in that tooth’ (TR 110). Lucius’s decision to give race primary consideration over age concerning his sexual incompatibility with Minnie is laughable considering what we already know about the privilege white men of Jefferson — especially those in the McCaslin line — have exploited in order to have sex with black women. The contrast between Lucius’s and Ned’s statuses as potential lovers of Minnie serves to underscore the hypocrisy of Lucius’s presumption since Ned is himself the result of a white man’s ‘participation’ with a black woman. Lucius does his absolute best to deny his responsibility for the past of his community but, as in the case of his attempt to deny his participation in the atmosphere of the brothel, the repressed comes back to haunt his consciousness in the visceral experience of smell.

The Reivers implicitly suggests that the gradual development of American society through historical epochs is fundamentally similar to

the gradual development across space which modernisation facilitates. By arresting his narrative voice in his own childhood Lucius Priest attempts to arrest the progressivism of the 1960s. Priest thereby attempts to manipulate the social cargo of youthfulness, with its stores of innocence, naiveté and humanity, to mask the political imperatives of an elderly conservative. In presenting a narrator with this level of intricacy, Faulkner establishes an aesthetic which resists the writing of history by the victors. By suggesting the ways in which histories of the South can be allowed to neglect mature responsibility, Faulkner criticises his final narrator and the conservative social order he propagates.

## NOTES

### Abbreviations

TR	The Reivers, A Reminiscence.
GDM	Go Down, Moses and Other Stories.

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