

A STUDY OF DILSEY GIBSON: FAULKNER'S TRAGIC HEROINE  
IN  
THE SOUND AND THE FURY

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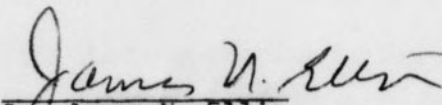
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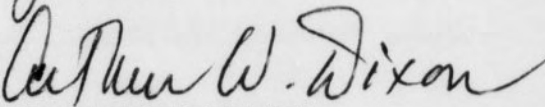
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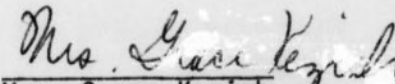
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William Faulkner's avowed purpose, in writing, is to tell a story of the human heart in conflict with itself, with others, and with its environment. The primary job that any writer faces, according to Faulkner is to tell a story out of human experience, i.e., "universal, mutual experience, the anguishes and troubles and griefs of the human heart, which is universal, without regard to race or time or condition." He wishes to tell the reader "something which has seemed to him so true, so moving, either comic or tragic, that it's worth repeating."<sup>1</sup> Faulkner has chosen the novel as the form best suited to his purpose and his genius for writing about the experience of "man in his comic or tragic human condition."<sup>2</sup>

In an age when many critics are eulogizing the death of tragedy in the modern theatre, the novel has become the primary vehicle of expression for the tragic vision of life. Richard B. Sewall observes, in The Vision Of Tragedy, that the work of William Faulkner, although not alone in its generation, has gone farthest "toward restoring to fiction the full dimensions and the true dialectic tension of tragedy." Sewall feels that Faulkner's major works: The Sound And The Fury, Light In August, and Absalom, Absalom! are tragic in their concern, method and purport.<sup>3</sup>

There is no consensus among critics as to which of these three major works is Faulkner's undisputed masterpiece. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, feels that Absalom, Absalom! is the greatest of Faulkner's

novels,<sup>4</sup> while Melvin Backman maintains that Faulkner "produced his masterpiece" in The Sound And The Fury--"one of the most tragic novels of the twentieth century."<sup>5</sup> Faulkner, himself, considered The Sound And The Fury as his "most gallant, [his] most magnificent failure," because it was the one he had anguished over the most, and worked at the hardest.<sup>6</sup> When asked which of his books he considered the best, Faulkner replied:

The one that failed the most tragically and the most splendidly. [sic.] 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.<sup>7</sup>

This novel, most loved by Faulkner, has been the subject of widespread interest and critical commentary. Faulkner's technique, in The Sound And The Fury,<sup>8</sup> and the theme of pride,<sup>9</sup> have been studied by Lawrence E. Bowling;<sup>10</sup> the structure investigated by Olga W. Vickery; the mirror analogues pointed out by Lawrence Thompson, and an explication of Faulkner's "metaphysics of time" given by Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>11</sup> Critical interpretation has ranged from eulogies on the Fall of the House of Compson to Irving Howe's thesis that the book is "a lament for the passing of a world, not the world of Yoknapatawpha and not merely the South."<sup>12</sup> Critics have analyzed in depth the psyche of the half-mad Quentin, examined at length "the sound and the fury" as told by the idiot Benjy, considered the Snopesian rapacity of Jason, and have written extensively about the beautiful but damned Caddy. Little in the way of major critical interpretation has been done, however, with Dilsey the



central figure of the fourth section of the novel.

Dilsey Gibson, the negro servant of the Compson family, is one of Faulkner's favorite characters. One may discern how he felt about her by recalling a statement he made to Jean Stein in an interview in 1956. On this occasion Faulkner said: "Dilsey is one of my favorite characters, because she is brave, courageous, generous, gentle, and honest. She's much more brave and honest and generous than me."<sup>13</sup> Faulkner also considered Dilsey as a character meriting full tragic status. When he was asked by a student at The University of Virginia which character in his writing "is the most nearly perfectly tragic," Faulkner replied that: "It would be between Sutpen and Christmas, Dilsey. I don't think I have a choice. It would probably be between those three."<sup>14</sup>

Dilsey is "regarded by many people as Faulkner's masterpiece,"<sup>15</sup> and by one critic as "one of the great sympathetic characters of all fiction."<sup>16</sup> Critics have interpreted Dilsey as a figure of "selfless suffering,"<sup>17</sup> as a symbol of resurrection and life,<sup>18</sup> as "one of Faulkner's noblest characters, chief among those who 'endure,'"<sup>19</sup> and as the "moral and emotional center of the Compson family."<sup>20</sup> To my knowledge no one, except Faulkner, himself, has suggested that she is a tragic figure.

John Lewis Longley, Jr., who gives, in The Tragic Mask, the most extensive exposition of Faulkner as tragedian to date, does not qualify Dilsey as a tragic protagonist:

The present writer [writes Longley] is willing to concede full, individual tragic status to only three of Faulkner's

characters... Colonel Sartoris, Christmas, and Sutpen. Yet, as noted in the case of Dilsey and the Compsons, we have the apparently contradictory situation of tragic effect without an individual tragic protagonist. 21

Other critics have designated Sutpen and Christmas as tragic heroes, but no one has considered Faulkner's classification of Dilsey as one of his three "most nearly perfectly tragic" characters. Many have noted Dilsey's greatness, her nobility and dignity; her heroic qualities of courage, strength, endurance and determinism, and her perception and self-recognition -- all characteristics traditionally associated with a tragic hero or heroine, but no one has applied these criteria in an analysis of Dilsey as a tragic figure. Since Faulkner considered Dilsey a tragic persona, and since she possesses the requisite characteristics of a tragic heroine, it is surprising that critics have either rejected this view or neglected to take it into account in an interpretation of Faulkner's tragic vision, for Faulkner could not have linked together under one genre label three more disparate characters than Dilsey, Sutpen and Christmas. I feel that Faulkner was serious in his estimation of Dilsey as one of his most tragic figures, and my purpose in this paper is to examine the textual evidence in The Sound And The Fury in order to arrive at an explanation as to why Faulkner considered Dilsey tragic, and then accepting the premise that she is indeed a tragic persona, to consider how Dilsey qualifies and adds to an interpretation of Faulkner's tragic vision.

I will begin by anticipating the objections that would be raised in considering Dilsey as tragic by the modern proponents of the clas-

sical tradition of tragedy, who insist that the tragic protagonist must be as Aristotle proscribed: "one who is highly renowned and prosperous - a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families."<sup>22</sup> Faulkner has interpreted Aristotle's theories of tragedy in his own way, as one may perceive from the following excerpt from an interview at The University of Virginia:

Q. Sir, what do you think of Aristotle's theories about tragedy? Do you- there's a lot of dispute about that now, The Death of a Salesman. Do you think he's right or-

A. What theory is this?

Q. That a tragedy must- the hero must be a man of high place so that he can fall all the further.

A. Well, I don't think Aristotle meant by high place what it sounds like. I think he meant a man of integrity, more than a man of aristocracy, unless- is that what you meant by high place?

Q. Well, I'm- that's what I say, I believe he does mean money-wise and society-wise rather than integrity. I'm not an authority, but that's-

A. Well, I think that was because he used the high place, the money, the riches, the title as symbols, that a king must be brave, a queen must be chaste, as simple symbols, as puppets. But tragedy, as Aristotle saw it, it's- I would say, is the same conception of tragedy that all writers have: it's man wishing to be braver than he is, in combat with his heart or with his fellows or with the environment, and how he fails, that the splendor, the courage of his failure, and the trappings of royalty, of kingship, are simply trappings to make him more splendid so that he was worthy of being selected by the gods, by Olympus, as an opponent, that man couldn't cope with him so it would take a god to do it, to cast him down. 23

Dilsey is, in my estimation, the noblest character in the whole



of Faulkner's work despite the fact that by classical standards she is a "low" character. One may even say that as a negro servant in the South in the first half of the twentieth century, she is a representative of the lowest stratum of American society in terms of economic and ethnological classification. But she is a woman of integrity, and this is, in Faulkner's opinion, a more important characteristic for a tragic persona than "high place" which is used as a simple symbol, a puppet. I shall return to a consideration of Faulkner's conception of tragedy in the conclusion of this paper, but at present, I would suggest that in analyzing Faulknerian tragedy one should consider Faulkner's interpretation, not Aristotle's.

The Aristotelian theory of tragedy is not adequate in defining Faulkner's tragedy, or modern tragedy in general, for that matter, just as it did not cover the wide scope or range of Shakespearean and Elizabethan tragedy, or the domestic or sentimental tragedy of the eighteenth century. The tragic protagonist of the modern age is no longer a king, like Oedipus or Lear, or a Titan, like Prometheus, but a common man, like Willy Lomen or Joe Christmas, or a common woman, like Dilsey Gibson.

In answer to the persistent question of whether tragedy is possible in the modern age, Elder Olson writes:

A very common belief is that it is not, for the reason that Kings and nobles have lost their aura of dignity. This seems to me utterly trivial. It is perfectly possible to make a person in ordinary, even low station in life into a tragic figure; and it is possible to load the stage with kings and nobles and not have tragedy.

It is not the natural subject which makes tragedy or comedy, it is the conceived subject matter, the dramatic conception, and the kind of art which is exerted to realize it. 24

Dilsey embodies that aura of dignity which "kings and nobles have lost." Her dignity, and her nobility is intrinsic rather than extrinsic, for it is achieved through integrity of character rather than position in the social hierarchy. Olga Vickery has noted that "Dilsey's attitude as she lives it, is formed by her instinctive feeling that whatever happens must be met with courage and dignity in which there is no room for passivity or pessimism."<sup>25</sup>

Faulkner suggests her qualities of courage and fortitude in a graphic physical description of Dilsey:

She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadding skin as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts, and above that the collapsed face that gave the impression of the bones themselves being outside the flesh... (p. 282) 26

The guts and skeleton are enough, as William R. Mueller points out, to see the Compson family through another day.<sup>27</sup> Day after day for over thirty years Dilsey has been the positive and sustaining force of the rapidly decaying Compson family she has served as servant and surrogate mother.

Robert Penn Warren notes that "only Dilsey, of the main characters in The Sound And The Fury is rendered objectively, and one is tempted to hazard that this objectivity is an index of her strength and fulfillment:

she really exists, objectively exists." <sup>28</sup> Dilsey exists as a positive, objective entity in the subjectivity of the modern wasteland world--the tragic Compson world of alienation, nihilism, doom, and decay. The Compson world is peopled by Jason Compson III, a dipsomaniac, nihilistic philosopher and titular head of the family; his wife, Caroline Bascomb Compson, a self-centered, self-pitying, hypochondriac; and their children: Quentin III, a half-mad idealist "who loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor... who loved not the idea of incest which he would not commit but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment... but who loved death above all..." (p. 9); Candace (Caddy), "the beautiful one," <sup>29</sup> who was "doomed and knew it..." (p. 10); Jason IV, a Snopesian monster and "the first sane Compson since Culloden and (a Childless bachelor) hence the last" (p. 16); Benjamin (Benjy), a thirty-three year old congenital idiot "who loved three things: the pasture which was sold to pay for Candace's wedding and to send Quentin to Harvard, his sister Candace, firelight" (p. 19); and Caddy's daughter Quentin, a belligerent, and promiscuous young girl.

While Mr. and Mrs. Compson shun all familial responsibility, Dilsey administers to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the Compson family. Among her duties and responsibilities: she has reared all the Compson children, and the grandchild Quentin, as well as her own children and grandchildren; supervised two households, white and negro; cooked the meals, cleaned the Compson mansion and negro cabin, nursed the sick, served as buffer, placater, and protector between parents and children, between the siblings, and between employers and servants;

cared for Benjy with love and patient tenderness, catered to the whims of the selfish, incessantly complaining Mrs. Compson, and provided the locus in quo love, strength and endurance is exhibited in the otherwise nihilistic and narcissistic world of the Compsons.

It is, therefore, in the finest sense of dramatic irony that Mrs. Compson should complain to Dilsey that she is not "the one who has to bear it... it's not your responsibility," says Mrs. Compson, "you can go away. You don't have to bear the brunt of it day in and day out. You owe nothing to them, to Mr. Compson's memory" (p. 288). Caroline Compson need not fear that Dilsey will leave for she is irrevocably bound to the Compsons by the self-made bonds of love and devotion. Years later when Jason assumes the responsibility as head of household he could not even force Dilsey, the only person he feared and respected, to leave "even when he tried to stop paying her weekly wages" (pp. 16-17). Ironically, it is Mrs. Compson, not Dilsey, who goes away, i.e., escapes to her bedroom when unpleasantness threatens to impinge upon her neurotic world. Caddy, for instance, knows her mother's tendency to become ill when she's upset. On one such occasion, when Mrs. Compson is disturbed by Benjy's crying, Caddy says: "Hush, Mother... You go upstairs and lay down, so you can be sick. I'll go get Dilsey" (p. 83). It is natural that Caddy seeking parental help should "go get Dilsey," for Dilsey is the only "mother" the Compson children have known. As Dilsey says when Caddy's baby Quentin is brought home: "Who else gwine raise her 'cep me? Aint I raised eve'y one of y'all" (p. 216)?

One may best envision Dilsey, as she goes about her daily routine



of cooking meals, supervising the household and tending to the children by examining her in her actions and speech. Faulkner portrays Dilsey objectively in this manner, rather than subjectively in abstraction and words as with Mr. Compson and Quentin. The tone of Dilsey's colloquial speech, for example, is authoritative, assured and matter-of-fact: "Eat your supper, Quentin," she says, "You all got to get done and get out of my kitchen" (p. 45), "You all needs to go to bed... Versh, can you get then up the back stairs quiet. You, Jason shut up that crying" (p. 46), "Luster, honey... will you think about yo ole mammy en drive dat surrey right" (p. 332)? "Dont you bother your head about her," she says to Roskus, "I raised all of them and I reckon I can raise one more."

Dilsey disciplines, scolds and threatens all of the Compsons and Gibsons, adults and children alike: She cautions Frony: "Hush your mouth... Aint you got no better sense than that. What you want to listen to Roskus for, anyway" (p. 51), and Luster: "Dont you sass me, nigger boy" (p. 74) "... you get Benjy started now en I beat yo head off" (p. 300). She scolds Mrs. Compson: "Aint you shamed talking that way" (p. 29), "You hush that, now... you'll get yourself down again" (p. 79), and Jason: "Well you tend to yo business and let her alone... I'll take keer of her ef you'n Miss Cahline'll let me. Go on in dar now and behave yoself twell I get supper on" (p. 271).

Dilsey's positive function in the Compson household, in assuming the role of surrogate mother, is revealed in her action.

As she dresses the children for play:



When Mother stayed in bed [Quentin recalls] Dilsey would put old clothes on us and let us go out in the rain because she said rain never hurt young folks. But if Mother was up we always began by playing on the porch until she said we were making too much noise, then we went out and played under the wistaria frame. (p. 188)

As she administers to Benjy's burned hand:

"Get that soda." Dilsey said [to Luster]. She took my [Benjy's] hand out of my mouth. My voice went louder then and my hand tried to go back to my mouth, but Dilsey held it. My voice went loud. She sprinkled soda on my hand.

"Look in the pantry and tear a piece off of that rag hanging on the nail." she said. "Hush now. You dont want to make your ma sick again, does you. Here, look at the fire. Dilsey make your hand stop hurting in just a minute. Look at the fire." She opened the fire door. I looked at the fire, but my hand didn't stop and I didn't stop. My hand was trying to go to my mouth but Dilsey held it. (p. 78)

As she beds down the children at night:

"Whyn't you got your nightie on." Dilsey said. She went and helped Caddy take off her bodice and drawers and scrubbed Caddy behind with them. "It done soaked clean through onto you." she said. "But you wont get no bath this night. Here." She put Caddy's nightie on her and Caddy climbed into bed and Dilsey went to the door and stood with her hand on the light. "You all be quiet now, you hear." she said. (p. 93)

To view the strength and greatness of Dilsey's character in its proper perspective one may juxtapose it with the weaker and less substantial characters of Mr. and Mrs. Jason Richmond Compson. The "cold, weak" (p. 315) neurotic Mrs. Compson, for instance, employs the role of

mother-hood as an excuse for her self-styled martyrhood. "What have I done," she wails, "to have been given children like these" (p. 121). She considers Benjy (born Maury, after her only brother) as a judgement on her (p. 25), and as a punishment for putting aside her pride and marrying a man who held himself above her (p. 122). She treats Benjy, not as a child of her flesh, but as a "thing."

Dilsey, in contrast, sees Benjy as "de Lawd's chile" (p. 333), and as a human being capable of feelings. When Frony suggests that Benjy is incapable of knowing anyone's name, not even his beloved Caddy's, Dilsey retorts: "You just say it and see if he dont... You say it to him while he sleeping and I bet he hear you" (p. 51). Dilsey cares for Benjy as her own child. When Benjy gives Dilsey a present of Caddy's perfume, she exclaims: "Well I'll declare... If my baby aint give Dilsey a bottle of perfume. Just look here, Roskus" (pp. 61-2). On his thirty-third birthday Dilsey "fixed him some birthday" (p. 79) by buying a cake to celebrate the event: "You all go ahead and eat this cake, now", she says to Luster and Benjy, "before Jason come. I dont want him jumping on me about a cake I bought with my own money. Me baking a cake here, with him counting every egg that comes into this kitchen" (pp. 75-6). Even as a thirty-three year old baby, when the very sight of Benjy's dead looking skin, shambling gait, and drooling mouth (p. 290) fills others with disgust, Dilsey still affords him the patient, loving care she bestowed on him at age three:

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." (p. 332)

When Mrs. Compson realizes at last that Benjy is an idiot and insists weeping that his name must be changed, Maury is "rechristened Benjamin" (pp. 18-19). Quentin, in recalling the incident years later, realized that Dilsey had instinctively discerned the reason why his mother had changed Benjy's name:

O Benjamin. Dilsey said it was because Mother was too proud for him. They come into white people's lives like that in sudden black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in unarguable truth like under a microscope... . (p. 189)

Though uneducated and unsophisticated in worldly wisdom, Dilsey can "isolate white facts" and illuminate "in unarguable truth" the facts of life which are grasped by the compassionate human heart, not the cold, discursive intellect. Olga Vickery has pointed out that "... out of the Compson house, itself a symbol of isolation, one person, Dilsey, emerges to grasp the truth which must be felt as well as stated."<sup>30</sup>

Dilsey embodies the truth of the human heart in her acceptance of the reality of life. She feels, for instance, that people should be accepted and loved for what they are, and she rejects no one because of irregularities in their make-up or character, or because of their past offenses. This is one index of her greatness of spirit and integrity of character. She personifies a greatness and integrity that is reminiscent of the more memorable tragic heroes of the past. "Dilsey is great,"

says Woodruff, "in her power of understanding and acceptance. Even in the nightmare of the Compson household, she rejects no one -- not the whining Mrs. Compson, nor the retarded Benjy, nor the promiscuous young Quentin, nor the sadistic Jason."<sup>31</sup>

When the promiscuous Caddy brings disgrace upon the family, Mrs. Compson complains that she has no regard for her as her mother: "I've suffered for her," she says, "dreamed and planned and sacrificed I went down into the valley..." (p. 121). Dilsey, on the other hand, "sees no sense in the rejection of Caddy as a fallen woman,"<sup>32</sup> nor in banishing her from her home and forbidding her to see her own child, as punishment for her sexual indiscretions. "I like to know whut's de hurt in letting dat po chile see her own baby," Dilsey counters when Jason scolds her for letting Caddy see Quentin, "If Mr. Jason was still here hit ud be different." To Dilsey's humane observation, Jason replies:

"Only Mr. Jason's not here... I know you wont pay me any mind, but I reckon you'll do what Mother says. You keep on worrying her like this until you get her into the graveyard too, then you can fill the whole house full of ragtag and bobtail. But what did you want to let that damn idiot see her for?"

"You's a cold man, Jason, if man you is," she says. "I thank de Lawd I got mo heart dan dat, even ef hit is black." (p. 225)

When Quentin commits suicide Mrs. Compson characteristically thinks only of herself, and considers his death as a personal affront to her dignity as a lady. "I dont know." she says to Dilsey, "What reason did Quentin have? Under God's heaven what reason did he have? It cant be simply to flout and hurt me, Whoever God is, He would not



permit that. I'm a lady. You might not believe that from my offspring, but I am." (p. 315). Dilsey, however, sees Quentin's suicide in another light. Quentin, contemplating what he is going to do, surmises how Dilsey would feel about it: "What a sinful waste Dilsey would say" (p. 109). Once again, Dilsey illuminates the "unarguable truth" of the human heart "which must be felt as well as stated."<sup>33</sup>

The truth by which Mr. Compson lives is a sterile, pessimistic, intellectual concept that "a man is the sum of his misfortunes" (p. 123) and his belief that: "a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design and which matures willynilly to be replaced by whatever issue the gods happen to be floating at the time..." (p. 186). For Dilsey, however, love or sorrow is a bond purchased through the continual giving of "self" in order to assuage the sufferings and sorrows of others--a bond which will ultimately be recalled by God on the Day of Judgement. Mr. Compson's cynical and nihilistic philosophy is fraught with atheistic overtones. "Man", in his opinion, "is conceived by accident," his "every breath is a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him," and his "remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark dice-man" (p. 196). He tells his son Quentin that: "all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heap where all previous dolls had been thrown away the sawdust flowing from that wound in what side that not for me died not" (p. 194). Dilsey has, in contrast, "de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb" (p. 311) -- the blood that flowed from the wound in Christ's side as he died on the cross for the atonement of man's sins. This truth for Dilsey is the basis for her



simple, but meaningful religious faith, and the source of her spiritual and emotional strength.

Mrs. Compson, who lacks Dilsey's strength of character, continually bemoans her lack of physical strength: "I have to depend on them so completely," she says of Dilsey and the Gibsons, "It's not as if I were strong. I wish I were" (p. 295). She also refers intermittently to her suffering as a means of centering attention upon herself: "Look at me," she says, "I suffer too, but I'm not so weak that I must kill myself with whiskey" (p. 217). While Mrs. Compson plays the role of long-suffering wife and mother, Dilsey patiently endures the true suffering which is a requisite of most tragic protagonists.

William R. Mueller, in The Prophetic Vision In Modern Fiction, explores in depth the theme of suffering in The Sound And The Fury. He writes:

The Compson family had more than their share of it, and the novel is in great part the story of how they reacted to its presence. If one can view the Compson's servant Dilsey as Faulkner's representative of a human soul 'capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance,' then Dilsey's reaction to the suffering which is her lot is the reaction of man at his best; she faces with full responsibility the burden which falls upon her. And if this is so, then each member of the Compson family (with the rather ambiguous exception of Benjy) fails to accept his own burden with a fully human responsibility, and each fails in his own way. 34

Mueller feels that Dilsey, of all the characters in the novel comes closest to being a "Suffering Servant figure," or a "Christ figure." He characterizes Dilsey as:

A person of no form or comeliness or beauty, one whose whole race has been despised and rejected, she is beyond this not only one who is grieved but also one who has borne the grief of others. There could be no more apt description of the Dilseys of the world than that 'They endured.' Dilsey endures virtually the entire burden of the Compson family. 35

These same characteristics, outlined by William Mueller, would likewise apply to Dilsey as a tragic figure. Dilsey, as he points out, endures virtually the whole Compson burden. In this Faulkner has reversed the old concept, as presumed for example, by Joanna Burden in Light In August, that the negro is the white man's burden. Dilsey, a negro, assumes the burden of the white man, as exemplified by the Compsons, a white family of declining Southern gentry.

One may sense Dilsey's physical anguish and suffering as he sees her proceed painfully and with terrific slowness in ascending and descending the stairs (p. 284) innumerable times each day waiting on "Miss Cahline," and tending to the needs of the other members of the family. One may sense the extent of the household burden she carries as he listens to her speak: to Quentin: "Dont you come pestering at me, boy... I got to get supper for all them folks soon as you all get done eating" (p. 46), to Mrs. Compson: "All right, all right, Ise puttin hit on fast as I kin" (p. 238), to T. P.: "You go on and keep that boy out of sight... I got all I can tend to" (p. 56), to Frony: "I'm coming just as fast as I can... She ought to know by this time I aint got no wings" (p. 50), to Mrs. Compson: "Ise comin, Miss Cahline... you go on back to bed now... Dont you know you aint feeling well enough to get up yet?"

Go on back, now. I'm gwine to see she gits to school in time" (p. 204), to Mr. Compson: "En you's about sick too... You looks like a hant. You git in bed and I'll fix you a toddy and see kin you sleep. I bet you aint had a full night's sleep since you lef" (p. 217), and to Luster: "I does de bes I kin... Lawd knows dat" (p. 332).

Dilsey also suffers as a person "whose whole race," to quote Mueller, "has been despised and rejected." She is even willing to suffer for those, like Miss Quentin, who despise and reject her as "the Negro servant." When Jason pulls out his belt and threatens to thrash Quentin, Dilsey interposes:

"I aint gwine let him... Dont you worry honey," She held to my [Jason's] arm. Then the belt came out and I jerked loose and flung her away. She stumbled into the table. She was so old she couldn't do any more than move hardly... She came hobbling between us, trying to hold me again. "hit me, den." she says, "if nothin else but hittin somebody wont do you. Hit me," she says.

... "Dilsey," she says, "Dilsey, I want my mother." Dilsey went to her. "now, now," she says, "He aint gwine so much as lay his hand on you while Ise here." Mother came down the stairs.

"Jason," she says, "Dilsey."

"Now, now," Dilsey says, "I aint gwine let him tech you." She put her hand on Quentin. She knocked it down.

"You damn old nigger," she says. She ran toward the door. (p. 203)

Quentin ironically tells Dilsey that she wants her mother, but the woman she rejects as a "damn old nigger" has in reality fulfilled the role of mother in her life since she was deprived of Caddy, her natural mother. Dilsey neither condemns nor reproves Quentin, however, for her

behavior, but promptly resumes the business at hand--getting the Compson family through another day. "You go on and get dat car and wait now," she tells Jason, "so you kin cahy her to school... Go on now... You want to get her [Mrs. Compson] started too? Ise comin, Miss Cahline" (p. 204).

William Mueller has observed that an account of one day in Dilsey's life is sufficient to show that she is the true center of suffering and sacrifice in The Sound And The Fury. "As she painfully and faithfully hobbles through her chores on Easter day of 1928," Mueller says, "we sense the real meaning of endurance."<sup>36</sup> Dilsey appropriately wears purple, on this day, the color which signifies suffering and sorrow in religious symbolism:<sup>37</sup>

...Dilsey opened the door of the cabin and emerged, needled laterally into her flesh, precipitating not so much a moisture as a substance partaking of the quality of thin, not quite congealed oil. She wore a stiff black straw hat perched upon her turban, and a maroon velvet cape with a border of mangy and anonymous fur above a dress of purple silk, and she stood in the door for awhile with her myriad and sunken face lifted to the weather, and one gaunt hand flaccid as the belly of a fish, then she moved the cape aside and examined the bosom of her gown. The gown fell gauntly from her shoulders, across her fallen breasts, then tightened upon her paunch and fell again ballooning a little above the nether garments which she would remove layer by layer as the spring accomplished and the warm days, in colour regal and moribund. (pp. 281-82)

Hyatt H. Waggoner has pointed out that Dilsey wears purple, a liturgical color for Advent and Lent, but he has not, in his analysis exhausted the full symbolic implications of her dress. Faulkner calls attention to the fact that she is clad "in colour regal and moribund." Purple, in



heraldry, symbolizes "high rank and royalty,"<sup>38</sup> and it is the color traditionally associated with royalty, the Cardinalate, and the Roman emperors. Dilsey is attired as an impecunious and superannuated queen in a gown of purple silk and a maroon velvet cape bordered with "mangy and anonymous fur." Her crown is a "stiff black straw perched upon her turban," rather than a stiff gold crown studded with precious stones perched upon a circlet of ermine fur.

In addition to its regal connotations, Faulkner further qualifies the color "purple" as signifying a moribund condition. One may infer from this and other remarks made by Faulkner that Dilsey is the reigning monarch- the matriarch, in authority and function, of the moribund House of Compson. Like a dedicated monarch who strives to hold together a disintegrating state, Dilsey endeavors to hold together the dwindling and disintegrating Compsons. Faulkner commented upon Dilsey's role as sustaining power and unifying force, in an interview at Nagano, Japan in August, 1955:

... I like to think of some of the characters I invented or wrote which to me are some of the best. One was the Negro woman, Dilsey, in The Sound And The Fury, who had taken care of a family who were decaying, going to pieces before her eyes. She held the whole thing together with no hope of reward, except she was doing the best she could because she loved that poor, otherwise helpless, idiot child. 39

One may perceive Dilsey at her best on the "bleak and chill" Easter Day in 1929 as she arrises at dawn and coordinates breakfast, supervises the morning routine, caters to the incessant whims of Mrs. Compson, curbs



Luster's "devilment" and directs him in his chores, placates the bellowing Benjy, copes with the latest family disaster, and takes Benjy, Luster and Frony to church.

After carrying in the stovewood, building a fire in the stove, tending to Mrs. Compson's hot water bottle, and looking for Luster who has overslept, she begins to prepare breakfast:

Dilsey prepared to make biscuit. As she ground the sifter steadily above the bread board, she sang, to herself at first, something without particular tune or words, repetitive, mournful and plaintive, austere, as she ground a faint, steady snowing of flour onto the bread-board. The stove had begun to heat the room and to fill it with murmurous minors of the fire, and presently she was singing louder, as if her voice too had been thawed out by the growing warmth, and then Mrs. Compson called her name again from within the house. Dilsey raised her face as if her eyes could and did penetrate the walls and ceiling and saw the old woman in her quilted dressing gown at the head of the stairs, calling her name with machinelike regularity. (p. 286)

Mrs. Compson calls Dilsey to fill her hot water bottle, which Dilsey has forgotten in the press of activities; she calls her to demand breakfast, because Jason frets when it is late (although Jason is still asleep at the time); and she calls Dilsey and allows her to make yet another painful trip up the stairs to tend to Benjy, before informing her that he is still asleep. Dilsey says nothing but turns slowly and descends the stairs "lowering her body from step to step, as a small child does, her hand against the wall" (p. 288).

Although Dilsey is a tower of strength spiritually and emotionally, her physical strength has been sapped by over thirty years of faithful

and diligent service in the Compson household. She had preserved the family in each succeeding crisis, and on this day, when it is discovered that Miss Quentin has stolen her uncle Jason's "secret hoard of money," and has "run off with a pitchman in a travelling streetshow" (p. 9), Dilsey must again attempt to impose order upon the chaos, disorder, and disharmony in the Compson microcosm. "In the splintered and rotting house of Compson," Melvin Backman concludes she is "the enduring rock." 40 Dilsey lives in the world knowing "who" she is, and what function she performs. "My name been Dilsey," she tells the young, inquisitive Caddy, "since fore I could remember and it be Dilsey when they's long forgot me." Caddy, who cannot understand such logic, asks:

How will they know it's Dilsey, when it's long forgot, Dilsey...  
 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. (p. 77)

The illiterate Dilsey achieves a knowledge of life, and of herself, and others through experience and participation in the tragic and comic human condition of man.

Dilsey is grounded in history and in time. In the disordered Compson world she is able to reconcile past, present and future, for she is not confused by the variance between private time as inwardly experienced and public time as outwardly manifested by the clock. When the one-handed cabinet clock strikes five times, Dilsey makes the necessary mental correction and says "Eight oclock" (p. 290). Olga Vickery ob-

serves that Dilsey is preoccupied with the present, which is, of course, the only possible way of living with time.

This does not imply [she says] that Dilsey is cut off from the past but only that she deals with it as it is caught up in the present without attempting to perpetuate a part of it as Quentin does, or to circumvent it as Jason tries to do. In a sense, she is a living record of all that has happened to the Compsons made significant by her own strength and courage. It is a record of pain and suffering and change but also of endurance and permanence in change. 41

Dilsey's recognition, of the significance of the passage of infinite time and the change it brings in the events of finite existence, is best illustrated in the powerful denouement of the negro church service. While the Compson's celebrate Easter (Jason in feverish pursuit of his runaway niece; Mrs. Compson in bed with a camphor-soaked cloth on her brow and an unread Bible which has fallen face down beneath the edge of the bed), Dilsey takes Benjy to church against the advice of her daughter. Frony says that folks are talking:

"Whut folke?" Dilsey said.

"I hears em," Frony said.

"And I knows whut kind of folks," Dilsey said, "Trash white folks. Dat's who it is. Thinks he aint good enough fer white church, but nigger church aint good enough fer him."

"Dey talks, jes de same," Frony said.

"Den you send um to me," Dilsey said. "Tell um de good Lawd dont keer whether he smart er not. Dont nobody but white trash keer dat." (p. 306)

In the church, the insignificant looking Reverend Shegog from "Saint Lozey" began to speak to the congregation about the Resurrection

in the cold level inflections of a white man, but as he became immersed in his vision of "de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb" (p. 311)! the intonation and pronunciation became negroid (p. 311):

And the congregation seemed to watch with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need of words... Dilsey sat bolt upright, her hand on Ben's knee. Two tears slid down her fallen cheeks, in and out of the myriad coruscations of immolation and abnegation and time. (pp. 310-11)

The text of Reverend Shegog's sermon spans the panorama of history and time from the beginning: "I sees de light en I sees de word..." (p. 311), to Judgement Day: "I sees de doom crack en hears de golden horns shoutin down de glory, en de arisen dead what got de blood en de ricklickshun of de Lamb" (p. 313)! He speaks on the infinitude of time: "de long, cold years rolls away" (p. 311)! and the finitude of human existence: "de generations passed away. Wus a ruch man: whar he now, O breddren? Was a po man: whar he now, O sistuhn" (p. 311)? He talks about human suffering: "de weeping en de lamentation... de wailing of women" (p. 312), and reminds his congregation of the power and importance of selfless sacrificial love: "I... sees de meek Jesus saying Dey kilt Me dat ye shall live again" (p. 312). At the conclusion of the sermon:

In the midst of the voices and the hands Ben sat, rapt in his sweet blue gaze. Dilsey sat bolt upright beside, crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb. (p. 313)



The denouement of the novel occurs as Dilsey, leaving the church still weeping, "unmindful of the talk," tells her daughter Frony:

"I've seed de first en de last..."

"First en last whut?" Frony said.

"Never you mind," Dilsey said, "I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin." (p. 313)

And at home again:

Dilsey went out. She closed the door and returned to the kitchen. The stove was almost cold. While she stood there the clock above the cupboard struck ten times. "One oclock," she said aloud. "Jason aint comin home. Ise seed de first en de last," she said, looking at the cold stove, "I seed de first en de last." (p. 316)

Dilsey had perceived the crucial revelation as she gave herself up to the vision evoked by the sermon on the passage of time, the passing of the generations, the suffering of man, and the love which prevades and informs the tragedy and comedy of the human condition. "Le coeur a ses raisons," says Pascal in Les Pensées, "que la raison ne connaît point." Dilsey has experienced, in the course of the novel, a series of recognitions, of the "unarguable truth" as discerned by the human heart, which culminate in this final tragic recognition-- the ultimate illumination she has achieved through suffering and through selfless, sacrificial love.

Her enigmatic vision of the beginning and the end, and the first and the last may be interpreted in a number of ways. She has experienced, in church, a Christian vision of time and of history embracing

the "Alpha and Omega" of Revelation 1:8. She has seen her place in this flow of time and history, and particularly her place in the life of the Compson family. She has reared all the Compson children and has borne the burden of their individual tragedy and suffering. She has witnessed the first and the last, the beginning and the end of the tragedy of the last generation of Mississippi Compsons.

Dilsey has seen Maury's name changed to Benjamin in 1910, Caddy's wedding on April 25 of the same year, and her banishment and permanent exile from home shortly afterwards; and she has borne the grief of Quentin's suicide in Cambridge by drowning on June 2 -- less than two months after his sister's wedding. In 1911 Dilsey had "divined by simple clairvoyance" that Jason "was somehow using his infant niece's illegitimacy to blackmail its mother," his lost sister Caddy (p. 16), and in 1913 Dilsey has seen the family agree to have Benjy castrated. Now on Easter Sunday in 1928 Caddy's daughter Quentin, "nameless at birth and already doomed to be unwed from the instant the dividing egg determined its sex"; (p. 19) has run away, leaving only the aged Mrs. Compson, Jason (a childless bachelor and the last sane Compson male), and Benjy (a castrated idiot). The Compson blood "which was good and brave once... has thinned and faded all the way out."<sup>42</sup> The Compson family and the Compson name, so important in the history of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi<sup>43</sup> had thus disappeared with this last generation.

Dilsey has witnessed the fall of the decaying House of Compson from beginning to end -- the decline and dispersal of this family whose predecessors included a Governor and a Brigadier. A family originally own-

ing the "Compson Domain," which became known as "Governer's house," and finally as the "Old Compson place" (pp. 7-8). When Mr. Compson sold the last of the property to a golfclub, nothing remained "except that fragment containing the house and the kitchen garden and the collapsing stables and one servant's cabin in which Dilsey's family lived" (p. 8). As the Compsons, themselves, decline in moral stature, social prominence, and material wealth, Dilsey rises in stature. Dilsey, who begins in the very low despised position of negro servant in the South, transcends her social position and the black-white racial barrier, and rises through her greatness, her nobility, dignity and integrity of character; her heroic qualities of courage, strength, endurance, and determinism; and her recognition and illumination achieved through suffering, to attain the stature of a tragic heroine.

When Dilsey is contrasted with Sutpen and Christmas, Faulkner's two other "most nearly perfectly tragic" characters, one may perceive how she qualifies and adds to an interpretation of Faulkner's tragic vision. Sutpen and Christmas, first of all, experience suffering, but neither achieves the recognition -- the tragic vision Dilsey acquires as a result of her experiences and her suffering. Sutpen and Christmas are both entirely devoid of love, whereas Dilsey's whole life is informed by her selfless, sacrificial love. Sutpen, in Faulkner's opinion, "was a-  
44  
moral, he was ruthless, completely self-centered." Christmas was a-moral, self-centered, and a murderer. Neither has Dilsey's nobility, dignity, and integrity of character. Sutpen, says Faulkner is to be pitied:

As anyone who ignores man is to be pitied, who does not believe that he belongs as a member of a human family, is to be pitied. Sutpen didn't believe that. He was Sutpen. He was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later, because one has got to belong to the human family, and to take a responsible part in the human family... 45

Joe Christmas "deliberately evicted himself from the human race,"<sup>46</sup> and, like Sutpen, refused to assume the responsibilities of a member of the family of man. Faulkner points out that Christmas "didn't know what he was and so he deliberately repudiated man. He didn't belong to man any longer, he deliberately repudiated man."<sup>47</sup> Dilsey, in contrast to Sutpen, knows that she belongs as a member of the human family, and she assumes the responsibilities of that membership, and unlike Christmas, she repudiates no one.

It should be evident by now to the perceptive reader that without Dilsey's inclusion as a tragic figure, Faulkner's tragic vision is bleak, nihilistic, and pessimistic. Faulkner views life, itself, as tragic. When he was asked in an interview, at Nagano, Japan, if he considered life as basically a tragedy, he replied: "Actually, yes. But man's immortality is that he is faced with a tragedy which he can't beat and he still tries to do something with it."<sup>48</sup> Dilsey, faced with the tragic decay of the Compson family, tries to impede the progress of their disintegration, and decline, in an heroic effort to hold the doomed family together.

... And yet in that whole family there was Dilsey  
Faulkner says that held the whole thing together and  
would continue to hold the whole thing together for



no reward, that the will of man to prevail will even take the nether channel of the black man, black race, before it will relinquish, succumb, be defeated. 49

In this passage, one may detect an echo from Faulkner's Nobel Prize Speech delivered in Stockholm on December 10, 1950 in which he said:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. 50

Dilsey is the personification of this belief, for she is not merely capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance, she exhibits these qualities in her daily life. Dilsey's endurance, as Robert D. Jacobs, has observed: "is not simply a patient primitive stoicism, but is compounded of faith in providence and those old qualities of love, compassion, and honor which Faulkner has never ceased to write about."<sup>51</sup>

Faulkner's conception of a writer's purpose is that "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself" is the only thing "that is worth the agony and the sweat."<sup>52</sup> His conception of tragedy is that "it's man wishing to be braver than he is, in combat with his heart or with his fellows or with the environment, and how he fails..."<sup>53</sup> Dilsey's bravery and heroic courage is displayed in her combat with the environment- the nihilism, doom, and decay of the Compson microcosm. She ultimately fails, because after Mrs. Compson's death, Benjy is committed by Jason to the State Asylum in Jackson, and the Compson house is sold to

a countryman who operated it as a boarding house for juries and horse -- and muletraders, and still known as the Old Compson place even after the boardinghouse (and presently the golfcourse too) had vanished and the old square mile was even intact again in row after row of small crowded jerrybuilt individuallyowned demiurban bungalows. (p. 9)

In her failure, however, Dilsey is magnificent -- and authentically tragic.

Dilsey is also magnificent in her capacity for embodying "the old verities and truths of the heart... love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice."<sup>54</sup> These verities are characteristics of the Biblical "charity" expressed in I Corinthians 13:1: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbol." Dilsey's "charity" and the significance of her tragic recognition or illumination on Easter Sunday, provides a suggestion of hope that man need not "become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbol." Without the stabilizing presence of the tragic figure of Dilsey, Faulkner's novel would resound with nothing but "sound and fury/<sup>55</sup> Signifying nothing."

## Footnotes

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- 2  
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- 3  
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26

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edition and will be incorporated into the text.

27

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