

Old verities and truths of the heart



In his Nobel Prize Address, Faulkner states that an author must leave “ no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart...love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” He accuses his younger contemporaries of ignoring these noble spiritual pillars while pondering the atomic doom of mankind with questions like, “ When will I be blown up?” Such physical fears, far from conflicts of the heart, are what plague his bomb-obsessed contemporaries. Yet Faulkner stands, seemingly alone, in opposition to this weakness; he “ decline[s] to accept the end of man” and in rebelling, fights for the old universal truths and the glories of the past. In classical style, he brushes away passing fears and fads, settling for nothing less than the “ problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.” Nothing else is worth writing about and Faulkner’s work is living proof. The characters in *Light in August* are full of the conflicts and virtues Faulkner describes in his speech. In *Lena*, *Hightower*, and *Christmas*, one can find endurance, sacrifice, and honor. In other characters, such as *Byron Bunch*, the main ingredient is hope. Yet regardless of who he is describing, Faulkner does not forget that only the ancient feelings innate in humanity, those in the soul, are worthwhile. Hope and Love: Hope is one of Faulkner’s favorite spices for cooking his characters. It is perhaps the most human of all emotions in that it is fragile like the body, but at the same time all powerful like the spirit. *Lena Grove* and *Byron Bunch* both have an endless amount of hope for the same thing: love they have never received. Hope brought her from Alabama to Mississippi in search of her runaway *Lucas*. Likewise, hope will carry *Byron* wherever *Lena* goes until he can find her love. *Lena’s* hope is visible in her face, “[she] walked into the door behind him [*Byron*], her face already shaped with serene anticipatory smiling, her mouth already shaped

upon a name" (p. 50). She searches from town to town for her lost love, and in each new place renews her hope with a serene smile. Byron's hope, however, manifests itself quite differently. "There was something funny and kind of strained about him," is how the furniture repairer describes Byron (p. 498). His hope is ashamed and choking; it gnaws at him trying to manifest itself with a feeble attempt in the back of a truck. It is almost as if he doesn't know how to hope or knows his pursuit is hopeless. Yet he endures in pursuit of his love with the same hope that has carried mankind through all its longings. Honor and Pride: Honor and pride, the most knightly kind of human nobilities are present in some of Faulkner's characters. These traits, often discarded as vain or arrogant in today's society, are among the "glories of the past" in Faulkner's speech. They are timeless in importance and allow a man's soul to rise from under his shadow. In this manner Hightower and Christmas, the two most tragic and insane characters in the book, are uplifted. They cling on, however awkwardly, to some pride and honor in their distorted worlds. Hightower in his loft, while waiting for the axis that divides day and night, ponders, "there remains yet something of honor and pride, of life" (p. 60). His grasping on to life is out of instinct, that ancestral jerk that forces a man to surface for air, his final pride and honor. Hightower stays on despite all his suffering. He is proud to be alive even though he walks among ghosts and phantoms. Furthermore, he reminds himself daily of the honor to be in his bloodline, to have a grandfather as noble as his own. Christmas has some of that survival instinct, but Faulkner also decided to give him another type of pride. "I aint hungry. Keep your muck'" (p. 35). His honor is rooted in refusing charity or pity. Unlike Lena, who tries to maintain appearances by eating "like a lady traveling," Christmas refuses pity because he is proud (p.

26). Pity and Compassion: Pity and compassion are the feelings in a generous soul. Pity, however, must be distinguished from compassion. To give alms to the poor or work in a soup kitchen is pity, to forgive someone for a mistake or help your friends in need is compassion. Pity is alien to oneself, a sentiment rooted in guilt for your privilege and other's poverty (financial, moral, etc.). Compassion, on the other hand, is personal because it is a fear that the same could happen to you. Mr. and Mrs. Armstid both help Lena, but the feelings behind the actions are not the same. When Mr. Armstid sees Lena on the road and gives her a ride, it is out of pity because he knows he will never be in such a situation. His ride is like change in a beggar's bowl, he offers it with pity and with southern courtesy. Mrs. Armstid, however, feels compassion for Lena's situation. If the same thing had happened to her, she would have done as Lena did, and therefore gives her the egg money. This ability to empathize with the person she is helping is what transforms her feelings from pity into compassion. It is interesting how Faulkner sometimes uses gender as a controlling factor in human beings' feelings.

Sacrifice and Endurance: Sacrifice and endurance are some of the most painful human experiences. To sacrifice is to forfeit something desired for something that is worth more. It is in a way human wisdom and compassion mixed together, the acknowledgment of something nobler and the generosity to give up your desires. It can, however, mean something else. Sacrifice also means carnal death for life of the soul, like an animal sacrifice for forgiveness. Endurance, much like sacrifice, is a painful experience that requires a man to suffer without yielding, to march on while bleeding. In *Light in August*, Christmas and Hightower endure pain until relief comes from sacrifice. During their lives, both Christmas and Hightower

endure the pain of a hostile society that attacks them endlessly. Christmas endures his never-ending road while searching for identity and his history. He is beaten by society for being black and he suffers for not being black nor white. Hightower, likewise, endures years of suffering in his lunatic search for identity in the town where his grandfather once galloped. Both men are hated by most people for most of their lives, but endure. Much like the honor and pride they both share, it is also their ability to endure that keeps them afloat. Their peace comes in sacrifice. Hightower's is less physical, but equally painful and alleviating. The price he pays is his life with others: he becomes a ghost, forgotten by his enemies, forgotten by society. Christmas, perhaps because of his violent life, must pay in blood for his peace. He is sacrificed with lead and steel: he dies with serenity on his face, always to be remembered by those who witnessed his death. Those who write about fear, "the basest of all things," must rediscover the power that lies unhidden in universal truths. If one aims to write something that will last, that will "endure and prevail," he must write about these truths and about noble feelings. The only way to know for sure is to look back at the literature of the past. What connects all the written words that have lasted through the centuries? What has man deemed worthy to pass on to his children so it reaches us today? And lastly, what has remained from the pillars that supported our father's fathers while they endured? Without a doubt it was the "glory of his past."