

# Faulkner and race



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Regarded as the most prominent writer from the South, William Faulkner spent his entire writing career building stories that both speak of human nature and of the nature of his homeland. In Faulkner's large volume of work, he goes about exploring various themes and ideas, from how to "say" the psyche to the fallacy of language and history. One of the enduring legacies of his writing is his discussion of race and race relations in the South. As slavery is forever entwined with the South's history it only makes sense that race would be one the main themes Faulkner would tackle. However, Faulkner's writing and treatment of race relations drastically evolved from the beginning to the end of his career. Race starts at the edge of his first novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, before moving front and center in *Light in August*, where Faulkner toys with race labels, expectations, and communal relations using a white character with black blood. From there race continues to stay at the forefront and in *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner reaches full maturity in the theme by creating black characters and delving into their inner psyche. By doing so he builds empathy for the black characters and directs his writer's beam of light on the stark racism of the Old South, while trying to envision the change and bringing together of whites and blacks he deems inevitable.

Faulkner's first novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, does not primarily focus on race relations, instead emphasizing more the stream-of-consciousness technique as a way to speak the psyche. Race relations merely exist on the periphery of the novel, indicating his thematic focus as a writer, which would not turn squarely to race until *Light in August*. However, regardless of being on the outskirts of the novel, race relations are still present in the story and

are indicative of how Faulkner's treatment of them early in his career.

Faulkner's black characters lack the nuanced complexity and individual psyche of the white characters, and though the blacks are integral in the lives of whites, they are treated as separate entities like oil in water.

One of the main places we see Faulkner's treatment of blacks is in comparing the Compson family with their servant Dilsey's family. First, Faulkner fails to delve into the psyche of the black characters, instead only presenting viewpoints of the white Compson characters. When on a trolley in Boston, Quentin Compson remarks, "That was when I realized that 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." (p86) This reductive view compounds black persons into simple mirrors of the white people they serve. Faulkner also neglects to create dynamic black characters. Dilsey, Luster, Versh, T. P., Frony, etc. all appear to be unchanging and timeless, instead serving as counterpoints to the degradation of the white Compson characters. For instance Dilsey says "You's a cold man, Jason, if man you is...I thank de Lawd I got mo heart dan dat, even ef hit is black.'" (p207). Granted, Dilsey, a black character, is painted as the good and compassionate foil to the nasty, cynical Jason; however, she is constantly portrayed as such and lacks the human complexity of character.

And though Dilsey's family is inseparably entwined together with the Compson's daily life, there is a decisive disassociation between them. When asked, "'What you got against white folks,'" Luster responds, "'Aint got nothing against them. I goes my way and lets white folks go theirs.'" (p15) This preference for separation goes the other way to, with Caddy's

statement, “‘Oh...That’s niggers. White folks don’t have funerals,” to which Frony responds, “ I like to know why not... White folks dies too. Your grandmammy dead as any nigger can get, I reckon.” (p33) Faulkner seems to treat whites and blacks as completely different communities with little in common and the characters tend to be satisfied with this separation. And though we get the incredibly intricate psyches of Benjy and Quentin and Jason, Faulkner neglects to provide the same treatment of black characters.

Additionally, he tends to portray the black community as one cohesive whole as opposed to the white community as dysfunctional individuals. Or perhaps he rather allows his white characters to view the black community as one whole. In Quentin’s travels to attend Harvard in the North, he encounters a black man on a mule while the train is stopped. Though Quentin has never met this man before he addresses him as he would any of his servant back home – “ Hey, Uncle...Is this the way?...I’ll let you off this time...Buy yourself some Santy Claus.” (p87) And the black man is portrayed as a grateful inferior with “ that blending of childlike and ready incompetence and paradoxical reliability that tends and them it loves.” (p87) We see this treatment of blacks as being the same in Quentin’s interaction with Deacon, who is written as fitting all the racial stereotypes, which is why the Southern students gravitate towards him like benevolent guardians.

To his credit, Faulkner does not use the stereotyping and lack of individuality in the same manner throughout the novel. In the final chapter he composes a scene in a black church in which the cohesiveness manifests itself as spiritual unity, transcending the individual doom of the Compsons – “ 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 for words". (p294) Faulkner appears to be suggesting that they are onto something – that their transcendence is redeeming.

Overall *The Sound and the Fury* is not Faulkner's lasting legacy of discourse on race. However, it does provide a starting point for where he is at in terms of his treatment of black characters. While his black characters tend to be static and lacking the complexity of his white characters, the congregation scene indicates he is aware of the power of the black community and that it is different from the individualistic white community.

As Faulkner moves through his writer's arc, he gradually starts to address race relations more and more until finally he tackles the issue head on in *Light in August*. He creates the protagonist Joe Christmas, who serves as a vehicle for Faulkner to probe race and race relations in his South, exploring the importance of racial identity and labels – both in the individual and in communal expectations. Faulkner also uses Christmas to look at the relations between white and black communities, specifically at how whites tend to perceive and treat blacks. In *Light in August* we see Faulkner begin to mature in his thematic discourse on race, taking the issue from the ever-present periphery to the core of his writing, perhaps in the hope of finding ways to deal with America's original sin.

Faulkner delves into the psyche of Joe Christmas to look at the potency of racial identity on the individual. Throughout the novel Christmas is

continually wrestling with his racial heritage, which is the main driving force for his wanderings. Christmas is crafted in such a way so that he is an ideal character for Faulkner's first plunge into wrestling with race in literature. Christmas is white in appearance, often being taken as a white man or a foreigner; however, he has "black blood" in him. What's curious about this is that Christmas does not actually know this for a fact – he was an orphan and never knew his parents. Instead, he picks up that he is part black from the children around him in the orphanage, who call him "Nigger" and who were probably told by his grandfather, Doc Hines, who found employment at the orphanage and was one of two people alive who knew for certain. With this ambiguity about his identity, inseminated from childhood, Christmas struggles with coming to terms with his blood and in finding the community to which he belongs. He goes back and forth, fighting his white identity and then his black, all the while toying between black and white communities. Faulkner creates this push and pull in Christmas's psyche while he is in Detroit, "liv[ing] with negroes, shunning white people", describing his drive to make himself one identity: "At night he would lie in bed...beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being." (p225) Here Faulkner shows Christmas trying with all his might to get rid of every ounce of his whiteness and take on full blackness with the core back-and-forth human action of breathing. Christmas rejects his whiteness, even to the extent of living in all-black communities, yet he fails in his attempt. "And all the while his nostrils at the

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odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial.”

(p225) With every effort to breathe in the being of blackness, Christmas's own body rebels against his attempts and preventing him from finding the identity and peace he is so desperately working for.

As he grapples with his black blood, Christmas claws for a sense of belonging in a community – any community. In Detroit he does his best to embrace his blackness and to throw himself into the black community but it does not take – he is rejected from the black community and feels very much out of place.

We see this explicitly when Christmas is walking through Freedman town, a black village outside of Jefferson: “ They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring talking laughing in a language not his. As from the bottom of a thick black pit he saw himself enclosed...as if the black life, the black breathing had compounded the substance of breath so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself must become fluid and accrete slowly from particle to particle, of and with the now ponderable night inseparable and one.” (p114)

The bodiless voices described seem to be like demons, getting in Christmas's head, their communication absolutely foreign to him. Then Faulkner gives the metaphor of “ thick black pit” to describe the blackness that Christmas is so perplexed by, creating an almost hallucinogenic nightmare bouncing around in his head and closing in on him. Here the community he desired to intake in Detroit is hellishly foreign to him and quite frightening, and as Christmas leaves Freeman town and enters back into the white neighborhood he views the whiteness and “ normality” all around him and

says, “That’s all I wanted... That dont seem like a whole lot to ask.” (p115) Instead of wanting to breathe in black, Christmas now wants to belong to that serene white suburb, which is as much out of his reach as is the black community. As he tears back and forth with his desires, it is clear to see that he does not know what he wants his identity to be, a problem further compounded by the fact that neither white nor black community wants him – he is perceived as a white man in black communities and treated as such, and in the white communities – as soon as it is found out he is part black – is also treated as such.

The moments where Christmas’s racial background is revealed to other characters prove telltale in terms of how a community expects someone with a certain label to behave and how violent and radical their reaction can be when that label changes from white to black. Take for instance the scene after Christmas proposes to Bobbie, who rejects him, and her pimps then brutally assault him: “ Is he really a nigger? He dont look like one/That’s what he told Bobbie one night. But I guess she still dont know any more about what he is than he does. These country bastards are liable to be anything/We’ll find out. We’ll see if his blood is black” (p219). This continues the vein of Christmas’s own ambiguous racial identity in that those around him are not really sure what he is. However, once the accusation is made, bloodshed – in their minds – becomes the obvious way to figure it out. We also see labels come into play when Brown uses them to his advantage and reveals that Christmas has black blood in an attempt to clear his own name, “ Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free.” (p97) And instantly Brown taps into the stereotypes of blacks to turn the law enforcement



agents after Christmas. The sheriff's response is revealing of the blatant immunity being a white man bestows upon one in Jefferson – “You better be careful what you are saying, if it is a white man you are talking about...I don't care if he is a murderer or not.” (p98).

A revealing moment of how deeply entrenched and important racial labels are occurs shortly after Christmas is caught for the murder of Joann Burden – “ He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad...It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too.” (p350) It would seem that the town's anger stemmed less from the actual murder itself than the fact that Christmas failed to conform with their preconceived notions of how white men, “ niggers,” and murderers were supposed to act.

The reaction to race labels allows Faulkner to probe the general relations between the white and black communities in his South. The Jefferson response to the murder of Joanna Burden, reviled as she was in her lifetime for being a Yankee and a black sympathizer, is a shocking example: “ By God, if that's him, what are we doing, standing around here? Murdering a white woman the black son of a “(p291). The man in question wasn't even a suspect and yet immediately the white community is ready to grab its pitchforks and torches to avenge the death of someone they despised.

Another noteworthy instance is when young Christmas is likely to be transferred from the white to the black orphanage. “ Of course it's bad for the child to have to go to the nigger home, after this, after growing up with white people. It's not his fault what he is. But it's not our fault, either-“

(p135) The most striking part of this quote is that there is a perceived responsibility for black people being black and that the whites can wash their hands clean of any responsibility for how blacks are treated.

This perception of black-white relations commonly held by the white community in the South seems to stem from a religious origin, or at least is justified in that manner. This is brought up in the text when Joanna Burden is recounting how her father taught her about how blacks were “ a race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins.” Even in carpet-baggers from the North there seems to be a sense of this Biblical-like tie between whites and blacks. And then follows Joanna’s chilling response – “ But after that I seemed to see them for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people.” (p252) This is quite reminiscent of the modern response to affirmative action. Black communities are dehumanized to “ a thick black pit” and “ a shadow” which all other people must live under.

So what is Faulkner trying to accomplish with these accounts of identity struggle and the horrors of deep-seated racism? Is he trying to argue that this is how we should think about white-black relations? Is he defending the racism of his South? Or is he trying to satirize his community’s way of life? It might be argued that he is not really doing any which one of these, but instead trying to give an honest portrayal of his South. In *Light in August* Faulkner is attempting to shine his own light on how race is dealt within these types of communities and how engrained and polarizing these modes

of thinking are. He is starting his own discourse about race relations by building characters and events that get at the crux of the issue.

However, some would argue that Faulkner is limiting his discourse by using Joe Christmas, a character who is mostly “white” and not truly black. In *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner oversteps this limitation by writing from the perspective of black characters and delving into their point of view.

In *The Fire and the Hearth*, Faulkner gives readers the first black character where they can see the inner psyche – Lucas Beauchamp. Lucas’s character allows Faulkner to explore race relations from a black man’s perspective. As opposed to Joe Christmas – who is a wild and ambiguous character – Lucas proves to be a more grounded character and a more solid foundation for Faulkner to use. Lucas is older and wealthy – “He was sixty-seven years old; he already had more money in the bank now than he would ever spend”. (p34) He is clever, with shrewdness almost comparable to Jason Compson from *The Sound and the Fury*. He devises a plan to get rid of George Wilkins, a suitor for his daughter and when this plan backfires he still manages to keep himself from going to jail by allowing George to marry his daughter so neither of them can testify against him.

Part of his cleverness stems from his keen awareness of the divide between black and white men and how to manipulate these labels. When initially reporting the illegal activity of George Wilkins to Roth Edmonds, he “apparently without effort or even design... became not Negro but nigger, not secret so much as impenetrable, not servile and not effacing, but enveloping himself in an aura of timeless and stupid impassivity almost like a smell.”

(p58) Lucas taps into the expected behavior of his race and uses it as a shield for his own purposes. This awareness shows again in Lucas's musings on getting his wife back from Roth Edmonds – “ How to God...can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife? And even if he could ask it, how to God can the white man promise he wont?” (p58).

Lucas is also quite prideful of his McCaslin heritage, though it does prove to be something he struggles with. When in the life-and-death struggle with Roth Edmonds he says, “ And if this is what that McCaslin blood has brought me, I dont want it neither.” (p56) It seems Lucas views his bloodline as both a blessing and a curse. Yet as Lucas ages he makes do with it. As Roth Edmonds notes, “ It was as if he were not only impervious to that blood, he was indifferent to it...He resisted it simply by being the composite of the two races which made him, simply by possessing it.” (p101) In this passage we hear echoes of the label expectations of Joe Christmas. By creating Lucas Beauchamp, Faulkner shows awareness for the expectations of race and gives a voice to characters knowingly navigating these expectations.

Then in *Pantaloon in Black* Faulkner creates another black character, Rider, who we also get to see the inner psyche of. In this story Faulkner builds empathy for Rider by allowing readers to experience events from his point of view and then contrast that with the white man's off-the-mark interpretation of Rider's actions. One of the strong empathy-building moments occurs when Rider is mourning the death of his wife and after her burial he sees her ghost in his house. “ ‘Wait,’ he said, talking as sweet as he had ever heard his voice speak to a woman; ‘ Den lemme go wid you, honey.’” (p136) Here readers get to experience the heartbreak, sadness, and love Rider feels for

his wife – he would rather join her in death than live alone. Can Faulkner write a more moving human desire than this? It is clear we are to identify and empathize – or at the very least sympathize – with Rider’s grief, which drives Rider through every action from burying his wife, to quitting work, to getting drunk and murdering Birdsong.

Faulkner then juxtaposes Rider’s human grief with the Deputy and his wife, who totally dehumanize Rider and miss the point entirely. ““Them damn niggers...it’s a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they ain’t human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, the might just as well be a damn herd of buffalo.” (p149) The Deputy cannot understand that everything Rider did was driven by raw, innate human emotion and Faulkner allows readers to see the Deputy’s ignorance by giving Rider’s perspective first. Though one of the shorter stories in *Go Down, Moses*, *Pantaloon in Black* proves quite able at exposing the fallacy and ignorance of the racist mode of thinking in his South. It also is clear that Faulkner has transitioned from merely presenting the race-relations situation to challenging the negative, dehumanizing perceptions of blacks. But does he envision a reconciliation of the two races? Does he believe the South can find a resolution to this problem?

In *Delta Autumn* we see Faulkner drive at this, using Uncle Isaac McCaslin as his vehicle. McCaslin is in his old age and tagging along with a hunting trip in the Delta region. When a descendant of James Beauchamp, the black

offspring of the original McCaslin, arrives with a new-born child of Roth Edmonds and seeking Roth for marriage, McCaslin responds, “ Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America...But not now! Not now!” (p344) He furthers his response with a command to her to “ Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That’s the only salvation for you – for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait.” (p346) McCaslin appears to be representative of the Old South thinking. He recognizes that there maybe a time when white and black can come together in marriage, however he cannot accept it at the present. He knows that the South’s way of life will change but not in his lifetime. He thinks of the future, “ where white men rent farms and live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals...Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares”. (p347) McCaslin views the diversity modern culture cherishes with dread. So does Faulkner share McCaslin’s negative view of racial integration? The response of the young woman would seem to indicate otherwise. “‘Old man,’ she said, ‘ have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?’” (p346) In writing this, Faulkner shows awareness of the diminishing of the Old South’s way of thinking and the necessity of bringing together the two races. The passage points toward the inevitability of human connection triumphing deep-rooted bigotry, albeit a slow change as the older generation passes.

Race is an ever-present theme in both Faulkner’s South and writing. However, the manner in which he goes about examining race relations change as his writing progressed. In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner

treated as race as more of a side thought. But as his writing evolved, he began to value more and more the importance in which race played in getting at the true essence of the South. With *Light in August* Faulkner brings race to the forefront and begins his discussion of the theme, weaving identity and communal expectations and reactions together. Then in *Go Down, Moses* he creates psyches of black characters and builds empathy for them to look at the disparities in race relations. In examining Faulkner's writing we see that he presents the South for what it is – sometimes defending it, sometimes challenging it – and exposes how polarized and engrained race is in its way of life.