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Faulkner's Depiction of the Negro

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by Blyden Jackson

Faulkner's lifelong sincere and close attachment to Oxford and its environs cannot be denied. This special vicinity was the "little postage stamp of native soil," his fictive version of which he once announced himself the "sole proprietor." But Faulkner read voluminously and without taboos. He congratulated Richard Wright, for example, on both *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. He lived, at one time or another, in New Haven, Toronto, New Orleans, New York, Pascagoula, Hollywood, at various places in Europe, and in Virginia. He was familiar with Memphis. He consorted with all sorts of people in America and abroad. He received his Nobel Prize in Stockholm. Ralph Bunche was one of the four Americans so honored at the same time. Faulkner, on one occasion, for more than three weeks represented the United States at Nagano and other cities in Japan. On a succession of occasions in his later life he was offically his country's cultural emissary, or felt he was, in Peru, Brazil, Greece, Venezuela, Rome, the Philippines, Scandinavia, and Iceland. He may have been, he was, the country boy he often claimed to be. But he was a country boy who had acquired a very cosmopolitan mind. The Negro in his fiction reflects the country boy, the Mississippi native who knew and treasured Mississippi. But the Negro in his fiction reflects also the very cosmopolitan mind: The American who said openly that color in America would eventually disappear; the man of the world who, without bigotry but with sympathetic acknowledgement of local customs, visited, or lived on, every continent except Australia; the critic of Western culture allegorizing in *A Fable*, with acid tongue but a contrite heart, of Western man crucifying Jesus Christ a second time; the Nobel laureate who made it clear that his view of his fellow man was such that to him all people everywhere were essentially the same, no matter how they accidentally differed in color, creed, or national origin.

And so Faulkner was not naive about people, white or black. Incidentally, he said once that he preferred the Old Testament to the New because, whereas in the New Testament the ideas seem to

be foremost in importance, in the Old Testament the people are at stage center. The people are what counts.[1] And he was intensely interested in people. He knew, of course, that most of his literary reputation was derived from his image of the South. What redounds to his credit is how sensibly he knew it. The people of Yoknapatawpha County, whether white, Indian, or Negro, were affected by a tragic past. They had been outraged by the curse—his epithet—of slavery. Separated from that past they were only more of his people everywhere who were essentially the same. With obvious justifications, he believed that he possessed an intimate awareness of the habits of thought and patterns of behavior of the whites in the community where he had grown up. He also believed that he possessed an equally intimate awareness of the baleful effects of a vicious social system upon the lives and personalities of the Negroes in that same community. The strategies, hence, which he publicly advocated, not to the delight of everyone, during the days of *Sturm und Drang* along the interracial front after May, 1954, were based, he thought, upon direct access to pertinent clinical information, as well as upon his fundamental abhorrence, if only as an apostle of individualism, of discrimination and segregation. And if he accepted with equanimity the presence in the Faulkner family household of an old–fashioned black servitor like Mammy Callie Barr, he likewise accepted, apparently with no less equanimity, the presence as Public Affairs Officer in the United States embassy in Rome of a Negro with a Harvard Ph.D. who spoke seven or eight European languages.

The Negro is of little, if any, consequence in Faulkner's earliest fiction. Neither, for that matter, is Yoknapatawpha. A Pullman porter plays an incidental role in the beginning of Faulkner's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, and Negro characters, none important, supply some of the background in the Georgia setting where the main action of the novel occurs. In *Mosquitoes*, Faulkner's second novel, a Negro chauffeur fleetingly appears. The Negroes in *Soldiers' Pay* may be dismissed as, substantially, only stock figures, albeit for their day, the day of *The Birth of a Nation*, rather benignly so. The Negro in *Mosquitoes* is virtually nonexistent.

It is with *Sartoris* and the delineation of Yoknapatawpha that Negro characters do become of consequence in Faulkner's fiction.

[1] Gwynn and Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University*, Vintage Edition (New York, 1965), pp. 167–8.

Much has been said of these Negro characters, of whom there are many, and I am no Faulkner specialist. I do recommend, however, that, in thinking of Faulkner's Negro characters, at least three probably helpful generalizations should be constantly borne in mind. The first of these is that all of us are inescapably, to a significant degree, creatures of fortuitous circumstance. The second is that Faulkner made a brave and earnest attempt to say what he thought his Negro characters were, not what anyone else pontificated they should be. The third is that, for anyone and everyone, vicarious experience, however veracious it may seem, is severely constrained by its inherent nature. I, for example, am a Negro born and brought up in a border town within the Negro middle class. The prejudices, the nuances of thought, of which I am most unconscious, are the prejudices and nuances of thought of that class. My life has overlapped much of Faulkner's. It pays me to remember the virtually total extent to which a life like mine was almost of necessity an abstraction to Faulkner, just as, until recently, a life like Faulkner's was, in equal measure, an abstraction to me.

Nevertheless, it does seem to me that the Negroes in Faulkner after *Soldiers' Pay* and *Mosquitoes* both result from, as they contribute to, a great sea–change in Faulkner. In that sea–change Faulkner the independent, the self–reliant mature individual prepared to express himself, inundates Faulkner the apprentice and mime, the copier of styles and notions borrowed from other voices and the beginner not yet sure of where he wants to go. I am, of course, here saying nothing new. It is an old story that, once Faulkner created Yoknapatawpha, as he did after his first two novels, he came, as it were, into his kingdom. I need only emphasize here that his coming was complete. It embraces his treatment of Negroes as well as his treatment of whites. There is a moment at the beginning of Faulkner's involvement with Yoknapatawpha, in *Sartoris*, and even in its later companion piece, *The Unvanquished*, as Faulkner is still assembling Yoknapatawpha and still exploring it to achieve rapport with it, when his Yoknapatawpha Negroes, much in the manner of his Negroes in *Soldiers' Pay* and *Mosquitoes*, continue to be relatively perfunctory, when they are still more an importation than an emanation from himself. But that moment is only a passing phase. It is only the moment before the cataclysmic action of a new biochemistry in his creative imagination transforms him to his bone and marrow.

As Yoknapatawpha becomes increasingly a genuine reality to him, as it increasingly exercises its total sovereignty over him, so that less and less can he content himself with repetitions of already existing models in literature and popular lore, and more and more must he respond to the exclusive perceptions of his own artistic vision, his Yoknapatawpha Negroes alter their essential natures. They become, in a very profound sense, his private creations, born almost without alloy, of his recollections and his ruminations about the South and the people in it. It is after this alteration, and under its spell, that he produces the Negroes of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sanctuary*, *Light in August* (if Joe Christmas is a Negro), *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Go Down, Moses*, *Intruder in the Dust*, where he is most resolutely the civil–libertarian, and *Requiem for a Nun*. The alteration is never reversed, and never materially diminished. The Negro does not figure prominently in the Snopes trilogy because Snopesism is the subject of the novels in that trilogy. It is a subject, presented as Faulkner presents it, to which, after all, as in *As I Lay Dying*, Negroes are, and should be, peripheral. Even so, in *The Reivers* Ned does not differ from the true Yoknapatawpha Negro. It is only that *The Reivers*, initiation story that it is, is also a tall tale. Its controlling mood casts upon Ned a light less of high seriousness than of low–comedy burlesque. Thus, Ned conforms to his environment. He does not depart from Faulkner's general conception of the Negro in Yoknapatawpha.

In *Sartoris*, then, old Simon, vain about his white folks, is the legendary house Negro *par excellence*. Putterer and grumbler, and something of a rascal on a petty scale, he can, and does, rely upon his white Sartoris boss and patron to replace the money he has stolen from his church to further an amour of his with a woman much younger than himself. Old Simon's daughter is given to singing Negro songs. His son returns from World War I corrupted by the atmosphere of France until his "insolence," literally, with a piece of stovewood, is knocked out of him. And old Simon's grandson, Isom, bids fair to become another Simon. *The Unvanquished* depends upon, as it expands, *Sartoris*. So it is, consequently, that adolescent black Ringo, in *The Unvanquished*, joins an adolescent Sartoris, years before the era of the novel, *Sartoris*, in shooting from ambush at a mounted Yankee officer. So it is that the Negroes in *The Unvanquished* are cut from the same cloth as the Negroes in *Sartoris*. Faulk-

ner need never to have seen a real, "live" Negro and certainly could not eventually have insisted upon being guided by his own self–gathered impressions concerning Negroes and their involvement with the South to have produced the Negro characters in *Sartoris* and *The Unvanquished*. These he could have gotten—at least in major detail—from a tradition, the tradition which Sterling Brown anatomized, and damned, years ago in his well–known definitive essay, "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors."

But Dilsey Gibson of *The Sound and the Fury* is of a new, and a Faulknerian, tradition. Like Simon Strother she wears what is clearly a badge of servitude. The Compsons are her white folks and have been through three generations. Faulkner, however, has invested her with personal qualities and a relation toward a white family which separate her from Simon by a whole spectrum of attitudes and values. The Sartorises take care of Simon. With a wealth of Christian charity and the strength of one who endures, Dilsey does all that is within her power to take care of the Compsons. The image of the traditional mammy tended once to blandish many whites and still tends to infuriate almost all Negroes. Dilsey's appointed role is that of the traditional mammy. So is her appearance, much of her etiquette and speech, and some of her ideas. Yet she tries physically to restrain Jason Compson when he removes his belt in order to flog his niece, Quentin. And she—significantly not as a part of the same episode—tells Jason to his face, neither cringingly nor with any hint of a menial's tolerated levity, "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."[2]

For, of course, *The Sound and the Fury* makes an issue of the proclamation that, not only compared to Jason, but to any Compson of her time, Dilsey does have the greater aptitude and resources for sympathetic coexistence with her human associates. She does have "mo heart." At a question–and–answer session during his lectureship at the University of Virginia Faulkner dramatized, in effect, although without singling her out, Dilsey's aptitudes and resources. He spoke of what he called the "verities of the human heart." Courage he named first, whether the order signified anything or not. And then he added honor, pride, compassion, and pity.[3] Dilsey has all of these within a character strengthened by fortitude amidst

[2] Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, Modern Library College Edition, p. 258.
[3] *Faulkner in the University*, p. 133.

adversities; in addition, she has magnanimity. Yet from the viewpoint of the black reader Dilsey is flawed with, if nothing else, a disquieting at least apparent stereotypical self–abasement. She is, it can be argued, a black matriarch more dedicated to a white family than to her own, and blacks have long harbored a particular aversion to other blacks who exist only as the renegade tools of whites. In one of the classic constructions of this black as the renegade tool of whites, a white girl, always adorable, and sometimes ravishing, passes through her youth into early maturity attended hand and foot by a black female who would be, in any event, according to an Aryan cult of beauty, neither adorable nor ravishing, nor ever a likely candidate for romantic love. The white mistress marries. Her own wedding occupies the black female more than the black female's own. The white mistress has children. These children take precedence over the black female's offspring in the black female's hierarchy of responsibilities. And when the white mistress, or any of her family, dies, the grief which devastates the black female is greater than the grief she exhibits at the passing of any black, kin of hers or not. All such perversions of the clan loyalties people are normally supposed to feel tend to set Negroes' teeth on edge. Beyond dispute, a shadow, if not more, of them may be descried in Dilsey. On the other hand, it should be said in her behalf, Dilsey has far from neglected the blacks who form her black family. We do overhear her lamenting the flight from home of her son, Versh. She has a husband, Roskus, to whom she seems comfortably attached. She and her daughter, Frony, also seem to be mutually respectful of, and compatible with, each other. So true is this, apparently, that Dilsey lives, after the old Compson menage finally collapses, in Memphis with this daughter Frony, who may have become a cipher in the world of the urban proletariat, but who has, it is evident, never been only a cipher in the world of her mother's concerns. Indeed, Dilsey gives of herself, in *The Sound and the Fury*, both to her white family and to her own blood kin. Still, of the two, admittedly the Compsons, the adopted kin, are the kin to whom she devotes most of her time and tears. Possibly, even probably, that is so because, given her situation, it could hardly have been realistic otherwise. But we have already alluded to Faulkner's "verities of the human heart" and to Dilsey's possession of them. It is likewise so because Dilsey does, as our allusion noted, abundantly possess the "verities," as well as

fortitude and magnanimity. Color caste has doomed her to act as an inferior to people who lack her stature as a human being. It has not doomed her to be their inferior. A servant in name only, against her array of virtues the tragic errors of the Compsons stand forth in stark relief. And it may well be, surely through Faulkner's intentional innuendo, that, against a similar array of virtues seen in a wider range, the tragic errors of an entire social order stand forth in a configuration no less stark.

What Faulkner thought about American color caste he was, when he was called upon to express himself, at no great pains ever to conceal. He recognized its function, the manner in which it conveniently preserved a chasm between whites and Negroes. He recognized also its tenaciousness. It had all the sanctions of an institution which extended for many years into the past. God, some could say, in spite of the numerous healthy mulattoes around them, meant for whites and Negroes to live apart—the whites as masters, the Negroes as willing subordinates. Mere men, therefore, were not to question a divine fiat, a law of nature. But Faulkner was not so easily deterred from relying upon his own perceptions. Nothing, possibly, more confirms his resolve to see Yoknapatawpha as it was, and not in compliance with a creed imposed upon him, than his refusal to accept as holy writ any prohibition as to how he should speak about color caste.

Light in August, for example, presents Joe Christmas, who knows his mother is white. About his father's color Joe has only reports, the apocryphal elements of which impale him upon a perpetual wheel of fire. Sometimes Joe lives white. Sometimes he lives black. Recurrently, he indulges in a sadomasochism which could be a consequence of his morbid uncertainty about his racial identity. He dies, shot and castrated, as a Negro who has murdered his white paramour. Obviously, more than one aspect of the dementia of racism, as of other possible pathologies of the human psyche, is examined in *Light in August*. The title of the novel, as Faulkner testified, does refer to light. Faulkner had noticed that there did seem to be, in August, a strange luminosity upon the landscape in northern Mississippi.[4] His art imparts what may well be received as a similar strange luminosity to his novel, a light which adds its own strangeness of visual effect to the strangeness of the story of Joe

[4] *Faulkner in the University*, p. 74.

Christmas. Here is a man who has enough troubles without his troubles over race. If nothing else, he has his troubles over sex. And yet he must acquiesce, it would seem unnecessarily, and even, usually on the most provocative occasions, become an aggressor, in letting race complicate his life. There is no way, in the light of *Light in August*, not to mark his lack of a healthy negative capability. Excessivism maddens him, as it maddens all racists, perhaps none more than racists who make a fetish of that nonexistent thing, racial purity. Joe Christmas' excessivism, with the refractions of insight it returns on color caste, is more visible in *Light in August* because excessivism, comic as well as tragic, lending even more strange light to an all–pervasive strangeness of the light, is ubiquitous in *Light in August*. It may be found not solely in Joe Christmas himself. It is in the Fundamentalist religiosity of Simon McEachern, in Joanna Burden's conduct in her ostracism before she meets Joe Christmas, and in her starved nymphomania after she begins her affair with him, in the Reverend Gail Hightower's entranced visions and his persistence in attempting to retain his pulpit, in "Doc" Hines' venom and paranoia, in Percy Grimm's fascism, and even in Lena Grove's placid pursuit of the indefatigable weasel and ne'er–do–well, Lucas Burch.

Faulkner considered Joe Christmas one of his three most tragic characters. The other two, he thought, were Dilsey and Thomas Sutpen of Sutpen's Hundred in Yoknapatawpha and of the novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*[5] Sutpen is white. He appears one day in Yoknapatawpha with a score of wild Negroes and a French architect. He takes over Sutpen's Hundred, builds a house upon it, marries Ellen Coldfield of Jefferson, and has a white son and daughter by her. His past intervenes when the mulatto, Charles Bon, acting as a white, arrives upon the Mississippi scene. Bon is also Sutpen's son. He is destined to be killed at the gate of the Sutpen mansion by his half–brother in order to prevent his marriage with his half–sister; for his half–brother, who had reconciled himself to incest, once he knows of Bon's Negro blood, cannot, and will not, reconcile himself to intermarriage. Sutpen, we are told, had a grand design. Bon dies in 1865. Sutpen is killed in 1869. His last son, the one who killed Bon, and his last daughter, Negro Clytie, perish in a fire which destroys his delapidated mansion in 1910. All that is left of his grand

[5] *Faulkner in the University*, p. 119.

design is his Negro great–grandson, a dark–skinned hulking idiot, Jim Bond.

I like to think that I am here, hopefully among other reasons, to provide a candid account of some of the reactions from blacks to Faulknerian Negroes. I must pause, therefore, over Jim Bond. I have heard it said by friends of my own color whom I respect that Jim Bond proves how repugnant to Faulkner was any thought of intermarriage. Faulkner, say these friends of mine, preferred even incest to a mixing of the races. Perhaps he did. Yet I think Jim Bond proves nothing so conclusive. Lucas Beauchamp, to whom we shall shortly come, was even more miscegenated than Jim Bond. And Lucas Beauchamp is anything but a hulking idiot. Indeed, I think, Jim Bond only proves that Faulkner, like any truly great literary artist, was eternally bemused by the wondrous nature, the tangled webs as well as the logical convergences, of human life. A long trail, full of the unforeseen, of incidents which turn back upon themselves, and of illustrations of the many ways in which human beings may defeat their own ends, leads from Thomas Sutpen, fourteen years of age, at the threshold of the front door of a big house in Virginia being told by a Negro servant in livery that he can enter only from the rear to Jim Bond, in the next century, wandering away from the flames which have consumed a house, a white man and a black woman and, as we have seen, a dream. This trail, indeed, includes a visit by Thomas Sutpen during the final days of the Civil War to a bivouac in Carolina where his white and mulatto sons were retreating with a Confederate unit before Sherman's men. It was the visit used by Sutpen to tell his white son that Charles Bon had Negro blood. Bon saw his father then. But he only saw him. The father avoided Bon, a Bon who was now on a protracted alert from long waiting, and hoping, for his father to acknowledge him. When, therefore, Bon rode back to Sutpen's Hundred with his half–brother he may have been courting death. That is not to say that Bon wanted to be white. He may, or may not, have. His mother had lavished a sumptuous existence on him in New Orleans, an existence far more sybaritic than any existence in, or around, Sutpen's Hundred. He knew, too, that his mother had never ceased to seethe inwardly from her sense of injury over Sutpen's discard of her. There were ample grounds for him to seek from his father not only recognition, but also revenge. There are indications in *Absalom*,

Absalom! that Bon thought of revenge. But there are also indications that he thought of many things, that he was swept by many passions, that he was good and bad. As a matter of fact, he probably did, and did not, want to be white. He probably did, and did not, want revenge. For Bon was human. He could want more than one thing, even more than one conflicting thing, at one and the same time. But a sheriff's deputy in "Pantaloon in Black," one of the stories in *Go Down, Moses*, says to his wife that Negroes are not human. "They look," this sheriff deputy deposes, "like a man and they walk on their hind legs." He adds more, but he concludes, speaking in language too fine for him, "When it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might as well be a herd of buffaloes."[6] Faulkner strives throughout Yoknapatawpha to prove this deputy wrong. And he strives because he must. He had become committed in Yoknapatawpha to his own version of truth, a version in which he was determined to distinguish between theory and fact. He may not always have succeeded. Probably no person can. We are all raised so that some theory becomes, for all of us, inseparable from fact. We are taught things we believe hardly without knowing that we only believe them. Some of that kind of teaching, that kind of theory as fact, does seem discernible in Faulkner.

I return, for example, to Sutpen. When he adopts his grand design, when he decides that some day he will match, or more than match, the Virginia planter whose Negro insulted him, he goes to Haiti. Apparently he arrived in Haiti after Christophe's death. But Boyer's Haiti was hardly more avilable for plunder to a casual white than Christophe's. Moreover, one must have a theory about Haiti different from the one on which I was brought up to believe that twenty black Haitians would, in the 1820s, wittingly or unwittingly have accompanied anyone, white or black, from their free land, where they already were not happy with mulattoes, into a land where people even whiter than mulattoes were enslaving blacks. The Haitian black today has closer ties with Africa than his American counterpart. The Haitian black of the 1820s was more African than the Haitian black today. In Haiti he was already too far from his ancestors. You and I, I concede, inhabit a world in which people are capable of doing curious things. But Sutpen's black exotics from Haiti, who reverence Sutpen so that they surrender their freedom to

[6] *Go Down, Moses,* Modern Library, p. 154.

him and with whom he can fight tooth–and–claw in sport, always as the victor and always as the God–like master assured of their continued servility, do not fit with my concept of Haitians.

To me they fit with Faulkner's theory of Reconstruction. I was taught that Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, the two Negroes who represented Mississippi in the national Senate, one for a year, the other for a term, during Reconstruction, were able men. Both had some experience of higher education. Revels attended Knox College in Illinois; Bruce, Oberlin in Ohio. Both owned records of solid achievement in various capacities before they were elevated to the Senate. John R. Lynch, the only Negro from Mississippi sent to the House of Representatives during Reconstruction, was at least the peer in ability of both. Lynch, who died in Chicago in 1939 at the age of ninety–two, served in Congress for three terms after having been a distinguished member, and a presiding officer, of the Mississippi legislature. He bought and owned plantations outside Natchez which he apparently sold for handsome profits. He was a paymaster in the Army. Self–taught, he wrote two books, *Facts of Reconstruction*, and an autobiography into which he incorporated much of *Facts of Reconstruction*. To such books as Claude Bowers' *The Tragic Era* and George Fort Milton's *The Age of Hate*, *Facts of Reconstruction* is a spirited rejoinder. Lynch objects to any picture of Reconstruction which holds that Southern legislatures then were dominated by Negroes; describes all Negro politicians and elected officials as disastrously ignorant, childish, and venal, even for that time; explains Negro voters solely as pawns for carpetbaggers and scalawags; vilifies such attempts to help the freedmen as the Freedmen's Bureau; and leaves the general impression that, during Reconstruction, Negroes had no worthy leaders of their own color nor any respectable aspirations for American citizenship. Faulkner understandably was taught a theory of Reconstruction in agreement with versions like those in *The Tragic Era* and *The Age of Hate*. It is not necessary to assume that Faulkner believed about Reconstruction for all of his life all that he was taught or to postulate that everything which he was taught was false and scurrilous to note how largely the Negroes in Yoknapatawpha accord with the picture of Reconstruction to which Lynch strenuously objected. One may note the Negroes seeking freedom, without leaders in their own ranks who can cope with a group problem, swarming as fecklessly as lemmings at a river cross-

ing, in *The Unvanquished.* Or one may remark the absence in Yoknapatawpha of any Negro like John R. Lynch, unless it be Peebles, the Memphis Negro lawyer in *Light in August,* whom the reader never sees. Or one may turn, outside of Faulkner's fiction, to Faulkner's stress upon the desirability of white teachers in Negro schools.

On such subjects as the Negro we all have much, perhaps too much, to remember and we are all in a position to be affected by large, connected bodies of intelligence which may, or may not, be true. After *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner was not finished with his intense contemplation of the Negro. From Dilsey to Joe Christmas and Charles Bon and, certainly, to Lucas Beauchamp, he progressed, whether he so intended it or not, through increasingly less veiled attacks on color caste. In Dilsey he is almost neutral on the subject of color caste itself. With Joe Christmas and Charles Bon, he at least deals directly with it and defines it in terms which emphasize its sordid aspects. Eventually, he lets Negro Lucas, in *Go Down, Moses,* retrieve his Negro wife from a white man after a clear show, on Lucas' part, of force. True, Molly, Lucas' wife, assures Lucas that she has lived in the house of the white man, a kinsman of Lucas, only as the nurse for the white man's motherless infant. But her assurance does not detract from the picture Faulkner gives of Lucas, the picture of a Negro who will go to any length to maintain his human dignity, whatever the dictates of color caste. And, of course, in *Intruder in the Dust,* Lucas has not changed. He treats white Charles Mallison, on his first encounter with him, as he would any other boy, white or black. Even in jail, held for the murder of a white man which Charles Mallison will take the lead in proving he did not commit, Lucas does not act the nigger.

We have Faulkner's specific statements as to the genesis of *Intruder.* It started, he said, from his interest in writing a detective story, one which would profit from the curious difficulty of a man, accused and in jail, who could not get anyone to help him. But Faulkner admitted that, once he thought of Lucas, Lucas took charge of the story, and the story became, as Faulkner put it, a great deal different from the story he started with.[7] *Intruder* shows, I think, a very admirable thing about Faulkner and his treatment of Negroes once he had become his own man as a writer. There is a passage in *Light in August* in which Gavin Stevens, the kindly intellectual, a

[7] *Faulkner in the University,* pp. 141–2.

native of Yoknapatawpha with degrees from Harvard and Heidelberg, is explaining Joe Christmas. He chortles of how Christmas' white blood made him do this, his black blood made him do that.[8] To gibberish about blood, and racist gibberish of any kind, that is, to connected bodies of intelligence about Negroes preposterously untrue, Faulkner opposes portraits like those of Lucas. And when he frames such portraits, when he puts them in perspective, he tends to do it as he does with his portrait of white Ike McCaslin, browsing over ledgers kept, none too literately, by his dead father and his dead father's dead twin brother, and piecing together thus the story of his white grandfather's begetting of a son upon the body of his own daughter by his Negro concubine, one Eunice, who, horrified, drowns herself. The story speaks for itself. It is not about some mystique which makes Negroes into Negroes and whites into whites. It is about the evil of arbitrary power. And slavery conferred upon whites the prerogative to exercise, with impunity, arbitrary power. It guaranteed the whites, and Negroes, of Yoknapatawpha an evil legacy to overcome. Faulkner apprehended that legacy and its aftermath through organs of perception strongly parochial, yet also strongly transcendent of parochial restraints.

That, of course, is again a reference to the country boy with a cosmopolitan mind. For to Faulkner, being a country boy did not interfere with his participation in a world which carried to a far horizon's rim. He combined both of these aspects of his existence to make a philosophic and aesthetic whole, his conception of reality out of which he wrote. Like Ike McCaslin he had hunted in the big woods. Like Ike McCaslin he had pondered over the Southern past. His experiences outside the woods and away from his home town only sharpened his appreciation for what he considered elementary truths and the manner in which he believed men should live both for their own good and for the good of the big woods. He passed judgment on his South. It had broken what should have been a holy covenant with itself when it engaged in the exploitative ownership of land. Ike McCaslin understood that when he would not accept title to the property others referred to as his patrimony. It had also broken what should have been a holy covenant with itself in its exploitative ownership of Negroes. Of those Negroes, Ike McCaslin, at twenty–one, said to his cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, who had been

[8] Faulkner, *Light in August*, Modern Library, pp. 393–4.

a father surrogate to him, "They are better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices," he said, "are vices aped from white men or what white men and bondage have taught them."[9] There Faulkner does speak through a mouthpiece character. There, teacher and preacher, he does speak in his own person to the South he wished to recall to what he thought it should be, the South he loved, the South he had put into Yoknapatawpha, but also into his dreams of a better world.

His Negro characters in Yoknapatawpha are part of that South, not only Dilsey and white-or-black Joe Christmas and Charles Bon and Lucas Beauchamp's Ned, but also Nancy Mannigoe of *Requiem for a Nun* and the Negro principal and his scholars in *The Mansion,* and half-Indian Sam Fathers of *Go Down, Moses*, and others, including, beyond Yoknapatawpha, Tobe Sutterfield of *A Fable*. It is a South which Faulkner believed must save itself, without external aid. The Negroes in it are better than the whites because they have less to save, less from which they must be redeemed, and because they, despite acquired vices, have lost fewer of the virtues symbolized by the big woods. They differ from the kind of Negroes found in Thomas Dixon or Thomas Nelson Page, or even in Mississippian Stark Young's *So Red the Rose.* They are not odious brutes, nor must they fulfill the fate assigned to them by God and nature only in abject submission to some white authority. Faulkner went through a period in his life when he quietly supported the NAACP. Yet in 1960, when Paul Pollard, a Negro who had once worked for him, wrote to him from Connecticut, then Pollard's home, and asked him to take out a life membership in the organization, Faulkner refused. Even though he had, at the time, his special reasons,[10] Negroes like the Negroes in the NAACP—like Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston, Marshall's mentor, or Sidney Redmond of Jackson, Mississippi, like Houston, a Harvard lawyer—were abstractions to him. And so, just as there are no John R. Lynches in Yoknapatawpha, there are no Marshalls, no Houstons, and no Sidney Redmonds.

I wish there were some. But then, I did not grow up white in Mississippi over fifty years ago. Faulkner did. And when I think of that I must not only pay tribute to his art, which needs no tribute

[9] Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 294.
[10] Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York, 1974), p. 1758.

from me, but also to his integrity, both as a writer and a man. His Negroes do have a Negro smell, although he readily points out that the Negro smell is almost surely a result of the way Negroes have had to live rather than of any innate biological effluvia. His Negroes kill with razors. I have never seen a razor-wielding Negro. He may too—albeit here, some might say like many Negroes—favor mulattoes over their darker racial compatriots. However, Faulkner never did pretend to be anything but a white Mississippian. He never, that is, in his fiction, asserted a knowledge of Negroes whom some white Mississippian might not well have known. The people of the real Yoknapatawpha were his people. He bore them in his heart, both for what they were and what he wanted them to be. Upon that he founded all his mature fiction, whether of whites or Negroes. Upon that, in the final reckoning, he created Negro characters who, whatever else can be said, or occasionally not said, of them, are at least a testament of his desire to speak honestly of a dark page in the American past and of his willingness to have that page revised in order to improve for all of us, black, white, or whatever color, the America that is yet to be.