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BLACK IMAGES IN FAULKNER'S *AS I LAY DYING*

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Faulkner's shortest novel has perplexed the critics. *As I Lay Dying* is difficult, at once intriguing and confusing. The stream-of-consciousness technique begun in *The Sound and The Fury* achieves full potential in this novel, adding both to its charm and its complexity.[1] Melvin Backman refers to *As I Lay Dying* as "Faulkner's novel of liberation."[2] Cleanth Brooks says simply that it is "as good as Faulkner has ever done" and calls it "a triumph in the management of tone."[3] It has been variously described as metaphysical, insightful, profound, boisterously humorous, formless, and Faulkner's "most perfect and finished piece of fiction."[4] Little wonder, therefore, that such a diverse novel would present problems for critics who attempt to interpret it.

Perhaps the most difficult critical problem involves the interpretation of several rather disturbing images. The woman's face horribly abused in death, a child's fear of smothering in the corn crib, a minister perceived as two men, and, most astonishing of all, a mother confused in identity with a fish — all of these and others create monumental difficulties for the critic. Most critics attempt to explain these and other images within the novel in the context of individual thematic interpretations. Although this method is effective to a degree, it imposes a limitation on the novel that is often too restricting.

One explanation of the various images lies within the context of the Black experience in the South. André Bleikasten observes that *As I Lay Dying* "incorporates mythical reminiscences from various sources" including "local folklore" and "biblical and Christian tradition."[5] I propose that the "local folklore" is from the Black culture and that the "biblical and Christian traditions" are those of the Southern Black community.

To suppose that Faulkner would have had access to those traditions is not difficult. One has to look no further than to his beloved Mammy Callie, Caroline Barr. Much conjecture exists concerning the degree to which she might have influenced his writing.[6] John Faulkner noted that Mammy Callie was a "tremendous influence" on his brother's "life and outlook and writings."[7] Furthermore, Joseph Blotner observed that

much of the entertainment the Faulkner children enjoyed came from stories, especially stories told by older members of the community.

Among those storytellers who especially captured William Faulkner's attention, the Blacks were most prominent.[8] Mammy Callie, of course, would have to be considered the most available and the most beloved [see photograph 1, at the end of this article].* She had an unlimited supply of stories—memories, mostly—that captured the young man's attention. She told him stories based on her "memories of her girlhood on the Barr plantation under 'Old Mistis' before the war, and eerie experiences involving wolves" and other creatures.[9] Mammy Callie gave Faulkner a place beside her fireplace in her cabin where, although "unable to read or write, she remembered scores of stories about the old days and the old people: about slavery, the War, the Klan, and the Falkners."[10] Conceivably, from these stories and others like them, William Faulkner learned many of the traditions of the Blacks.[11]

One of the most disturbing images, and perhaps the most horrifying of all, is the seemingly childish error that results in the dead woman's face having holes drilled through it as she lies in her coffin. Tull describes the horror of Vardaman's action in his monologue.[12] Why Vardaman drills the holes in the coffin lid has remained a critical problem. To dismiss the action, as many critics do, with the observation that it was performed so Addie could breathe or "get air" is premature. It seems to me that Faulkner places entirely too much emphasis on the episode for it to be dismissed as inconsequential or horror for effect.[13]

To understand this image, we must look to burial practices among rural Southern Blacks. It is a custom among Black women to wear their wedding gowns on two occasions, at their wedding and at their funeral. Because most of the coffins during the early part of this century were clock-shaped—wide at the shoulders and narrowing toward the feet—it was traditional for the Black women in their full-skirted wedding gowns to be buried in a reversed position, head to foot, within the coffin.[14] In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner makes two specific references to this custom. First, Tull remarks in general about the hard lot of women and then specifically remembers the occasion of his mother's death:

> I mind my mammy lived to be seventy and more. Worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around

> her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night gown she had had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers up and shut her eyes. "You all will have to look out for pa the best you can," she said. "I'm tired." (29)

Tull's reference to his mother's shroud as a "lace-trimmed night gown" is in keeping with the wedding gown tradition. Black women were married in wedding dresses that had underslips which were used on the wedding night as the night-gown. Thus the wedding dress was traditionally in two parts, an outer-layer and an underskirt that doubled as a sleeping garment. For Tull's mother to dress herself in this particular night-gown in anticipation of her death was perfectly reasonable.[15]

Faulkner's second reference to this tradition involves Addie. Tull again is the voice who describes the scene:

> They had laid her in it reversed. Cash made it clock-shape like this [line drawing of the coffin; see photograph 2, at the end of this article]* with every joint and seam bevelled and scrubbed with the plane, tight as a drum and neat as a sewing basket, and they had laid her in it head to foot so it wouldn't crush her dress. It was her wedding dress and it had a flare-out bottom, and they had laid her head to foot in it so the dress could spread out, and they had made her a veil out of a mosquito bar so the auger holes in her face wouldn't show. (82-83)

The positioning of Addie's body within the coffin sets up the opportunity for Vardaman's horrible mistake. When he thinks that he is drilling at the foot of the coffin to let in air, he unwittingly drills through not at her feet but at her face. The mutilation occurs and he isn't even aware of it.

To understand Vardaman's motivation for drilling the holes in the first place, however, we must look further into the folklore of the Blacks. Vardaman appears to be concerned about what he considers to be his dead mother's need for air. He is horrified when Cash nears completion of the coffin and he realizes that his mother is going to be put in it. She is not a "body" to him; she is Mother. In his panic, Vardaman calls out to his brother and asks, "Are you going to nail it shut, Cash? Nail it? *Nail* it?" (62) In this moment, he recalls an incident when he was accidentally shut in the corn crib. He describes it as "I got shut up in the crib the new door it was too heavy for me it

went shut I couldn't breathe because the rat was breathing up all the air" (62, 63). From this recollection of claustrophobia, we may trace Vardaman's thoughts and actions. His knowledge of the rat, his own experience with claustrophobia, his distress over his mother's death, his concern for her in a shut, dark place—all of these lead him to drill holes in his mother's coffin. For Vardaman this is an act of love born out of his own terror.[16]

Once again, Faulkner appears to be alluding to the Black culture—to the myth of the rat or spirit within the barn that will harm children by smothering them to death. Blacks warn their children about the rat in hopes of keeping them free from harm. The old people still believe that evil spirits haunt old barns and mangers and take on the form of rats to harm trespassers. They believe that the rats will breathe in all of the air and suffocate the victim.[17] Combining the burial custom of the wedding-dress shroud and reversed position in the coffin with the folk myth of the "rat" in the barn, Faulkner has drawn a brilliant image of the horror and love intermingled.

Another image that creates difficulty for critics is that of Whitfield, the minister. Much has been made of the similarity between this minister and the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale of Hawthorne's fiction.[18] The most intriguing image, however, comes to the reader through Tull's description of Addie's wake and funeral:

> In the house the women begin to sing. We hear the first line commence, beginning to swell as they take hold, and we rise and move toward the door, taking off our hats and throwing our chews away. We do not go in. We stop at the steps, clumped, holding our hats between our lax hands in front or behind, standing with one foot advanced and our heads lowered, looking aside, down at our hats in our hands and at the earth or now and then at the sky and at one another's grave, composed face.
>
> The song ends; the voices quaver away with a rich and dying fall. Whitfield begins. His voice is bigger than him. It's like they are not the same. It's like he is one, and his voice is one, swimming on two horses side by side across the ford and coming into the house, the mud-splashed one and the one that never even got wet, triumphant and sad. (85-86)

Cleanth Brooks points out that this comment by Tull alludes to "the discrepancy that he feels between Whitfield as voice and Whitfield

as man."[19] In a vivid image, Faulkner illustrates the dual character of the minister.

Once again there appears to be a relationship between the image within the novel and the Black culture. Among Blacks, the Black minister is perceived as having two distinct characters or personas. The one is divine, a man of God, a spiritual being chosen to lead His/his people; the other is mortal, subject to all temptations and weaknesses that ordinary man must face.[20] Whitfield certainly represents this dualism. He is "the mud-splashed one" because of the adultery he committed with Addie that resulted in the birth of his bastard child, Jewel. He has been corrupted. However, he is also the "one that never even got wet" because he is still the spiritual leader of the people. With magnificent understatement, Faulkner describes him as being "triumphant and sad." His triumph is tinged with the sadness that his knowledge of sin has brought. In a very real sense, Whitfield and Addie are both triumphant and sad.[21]

Most critics would agree that most astonishing and agonizingly complex image in *As I Lay Dying* is the fish. It is so critical to the novel that Faulkner devotes his shortest monologue within the novel to it. In a mere five words, Vardaman declares "My mother is a fish" (79) and the monologue is over. The reader's confusion has just begun, however.

On the day of Addie's death, Vardaman goes fishing. He has the great fortune of catching "a fish nigh long as he is" (29) and comes dragging it home. He intends to show it to Addie, but Anse sends him off to clean it instead. When Vardaman returns, Anse describes him as being "bloody as a hog to his knees" (37). Soon after, Addie dies. Vardaman is understandably distressed, and begins immediately identifying his mother with the fish. The child goes through a series of thoughts that culminate with his conclusion that his mother and the fish are one.

Vardaman's belief is so strong that it affects his actions for the remainder of the novel. Tull tells the reader about Vardaman's rage upon finding Cora cooking the fish for the people who have come for the wake: "That boy is not there. Peabody told about how he come into the kitchen, hollering, swarming and clawing at Cora when he found her cooking that fish..." (81). Later, when the coffin is lost from the wagon during the crossing of the swollen river, Vardaman calls out to his brother Darl in phrases that leave no doubt that the child still perceives his mother to be a fish:

> He came up to see and I hollering catch her Darl catch her and he didn't come back because she was too heavy he had to go on catching at her and I hollering catch her darl catch her darl because in the water she could go faster than a man and Darl had to grabble for her...and Darl had to again because in the water she could go faster than a man or woman...and I hollering catch her darl catch her head her into the bank darl and Vernon wouldn't help and then Darl dodged past the mules where he could he had her under the water coming in to the bank coming in slow because in the water she fought to stay under the water but Darl is strong and he was coming in slow and so I knew he had her because he came slow and I ran down into the water to help and I couldn't stop hollering because Darl was strong and steady holding her under the water even if she did fight he would not let her go he was seeing me and he would hold her and it was all right now it was all right now it was all right....'Where is ma, Darl?' I said. 'You never got her. You knew she is a fish but you let her get away.' (143-144)

A review of several of the critical comments regarding Vardaman's confusion of his mother with the fish indicates the difficulty critics have had with interpreting this image. The fish has been called an example of "primitive pictorialism" that is the direct result of Vardaman's "visual thinking."[22] One critic has suggested that Vardaman is performing a "series of magical substitutions" as he moves toward an acceptance of Addie's death.[23] In other words, in his childish mind, all analogies are possible—even one as bizarre as this. Yet another critic prefers a far simpler interpretation: All that Vardaman has experienced of death has been the death of the fish. This death taught him that a fish removed from water dies. Because his mother is now dead, it is perfectly reasonable for him to assume that she must be a fish.[24]

Among the more intriguing interpretations is one by Walter Brylowski. He suggests that Vardaman's confusion may be a reference by Faulkner to a ceremony for bringing back the soul cited in *The Golden Bough.* This particular ceremony involves the catching of a fish from a river and bringing it back to the house of the dead person. It is supposed that by this act the soul of the dead person has returned to the house. Occasionally the fish is eaten in the hopes that the departed soul will transfer to an unborn child. This concept is particularly interesting since Dewey Dell, Vardaman's sister, is pregnant.[25]

Indeed, Vardaman suggests that the eating of the fish will somehow restore his mother:

> It was not her because it was laying right yonder in the dirt. And now it's all chopped up. I chopped it up. It's laying in the kitchen in the bleeding pan, waiting to be cooked and et. Then it wasn't and she was, and now it is and she wasn't. And tomorrow it will be cooked and et and she will be him and pa and Cash and Dewey Dell and there won't be anything in the box and so she can breathe. (63-64)

Vardaman seems to be saying that once eaten, the fish—i.e. his mother—will have new life. The parallel to the Christian tradition of communion is obvious and has been observed by several critics.[26]

Once again, it appears that Faulkner has chosen an image out of Black culture for his novel. In the rural South, the fish is perhaps the most significant symbol within the Black church. The fish replaced the cross as a symbol of Christianity for the Blacks after Klan activity began in the South. The Blacks felt that the Klan had defamed the cross rendering it inappropriate as a symbol of God's love.[27] Within their homes and churches, fish symbols began replacing crucifixes. It was the custom among the old people to fashion the fish out of natural materials, with the palmetto leaf being a particular favorite. On Palm Sunday, the palms would often be woven into the shape of a fish.[28]

An obvious explanation for the selection of the fish by the Blacks would be because of its history as a symbol within Christianity. The Greek word for "fish" is *ichthys*. It is an anagram for the Greek phrase that means "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." Early Christians used the fish symbol as a secret sign. This is not the reason that the Blacks chose the fish, however. They chose it as a reminder of the parable of the little boy with the loaves and fishes who fed the multitudes. It was a reminder of God's providential care over them. The fish, then, was a symbol of hope that God would provide for them through hard times.[29]

Besides serving as an ornament for their homes and churches, the fish also came to represent the sacrament to the Blacks. The old Black customs for baptism are fascinating and provide a unique insight into Vardaman's suggestion that eating the fish will somehow restore Addie. Baptisms were held once a year, on a Sunday in June, outdoors in a bayou, river, lake, or pond. The day before the baptism, the elders and the minister would go to the appointed place and set out stakes tied with white ribbons to designate the baptismal area. During the night

and early morning hours, the elders would fish in this pool. The fish would be cleaned and saved. At mid-morning the Blacks would gather at the site and those who had "found religion" would come, together with their "sister handlers," to the place. The candidates would be dressed entirely in white. The minister, also entirely in white, would go out into the water and then call each candidate to him. The actual immersion was timed to begin at noon. After the baptism, there was singing, praying, and communion. White families in the area would often come to observe the baptism from a distance, but would leave after the service when the Blacks began their fellowship. The fish that had been caught earlier would be fried and, during communion, would be passed among the believers as the Bread of Life. The Blacks believed that this fish brought a special blessing of life everlasting to those who ate it.[30]

The significance of the fish to Black religious life is evident among the works of many Black folk artists.[31] One such painter, Clementine Hunter, has lived her entire life—nearly one hundred years—on a plantation in Natchitoches, Louisiana. Her works are primitive drawings of the plantation world that she has observed firsthand.[32]

Two of Hunter's works are particularly significant within the context of this study. They make up two sections of a remarkable wall mural that Hunter was commissioned to paint for Africa House, a small outbuilding on the plantation that many believe was built by a slave from her memory of African dwellings. One is a panel depicting a map of the Cane River area, dominated by a huge blue swath intersecting the canvas vertically. On the land masses to either side are buildings and fields. Prominent among the buildings are several churches. The importance Hunter places on the Black church is clear. The second work is a panel depicting a Black baptism. Within the painting, one can see the minister baptizing the candidate, a sister swooning on the bank while another sister fans her, and various members of the congregation sing together. Particularly notable in the painting, however, is a boat in the river in which a Black man is fishing. When asked why she had included a man fishing on Sunday in her picture of the baptism, Ms. Hunter replied, "Because that's part of it." When questioned further about the specific tradition, she refused to answer, indicating that it was a private matter not to be discussed with those who were not members of the church.[33] [See photographs 3 and 4, at the end of this article.]

Perhaps the single best example of the fish symbol within the Black church can be viewed in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, at the Rural

Life Museum. There a number of old buildings from working plantations around the area have been gathered and restored. These include a Black church which is open for public view. The church is a wooden structure and has three glass windows on each side. When one enters the church, there is a center aisle down which he may walk to get to a pew. Directly in front of the church, in the center at the end of the aisle, stands the minister's pulpit. To the observer's left is a pitchfork attached to the ceiling and to the right, is a harp similarly placed. All six windows are ordinary glass that a folk artist at some point has decorated so that they have the appearance of stained glass. Each window has a border in dark green painted around the glass except for an opening approximately eighteen inches square that has been left clear. In this clear area, a folk artist has hand-painted a different picture for each window. Interestingly enough, the pictures on the left side all correspond to the pitchfork because they all reflect scenes of Hell or warnings of the wages of sin. In the same way, all of the pictures on the right side correspond to the harp because they reflect scenes of Heaven or God's promise. In the front right window, faint but still visible, is a folk painting of a bream—one of the most common fresh water fish in the South. Its golden belly is still apparent.[34] [See photographs 5 and 6, at the end of this article.]

Here, then, from within the traditions of the Black church Faulkner draws his most striking image, the fish—one central to the concepts of providence, salvation, and life after death. Vardaman is also looking for a caretaker, someone who will provide for him. Significantly, Faulkner allows the child to make a connection between the eating of the fish and his mother's continued existence.

In at least one other novel, *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner uses the fish image. In this one, the fish is associated with a shadow in the water. To understand the fish, we must first examine the shadow. Faulkner uses the shadow image throughout Quentin's monologue to emphasize Quentin's fascination with death. John Hunt observes that Quentin seems to identify his approaching death with the shadow image. Hunt points out that Quentin is "attracted to the Negro lore" that Faulkner describes in the text. In Quentin's monologue, Faulkner writes:

> When it closed I crossed to the other side and leaned on the rail above the boathouses. The float was empty and the doors were closed. The crew just pulled in the late afternoon now, resting up before. The shadow of the bridge, the tiers of railing, my shadow leaning flat upon

> the water, so easily had I tricked it that would not quit me. At least fifty feet it was, and if I only had something to blot it into the water, holding it until it was drowned, the shadow of the package like two shoes wrapped up lying on the water. Niggers say a drowned man's shadow was watching for him in the water all the time. (110-111)

The critic goes on to enumerate instances within the novel when Faulkner uses the shadow motif.[35] What is striking in the passage is the direct reference by Faulkner to what "Niggers say" with regard to the shadow in the water. He is speaking here of an old Black superstition. The Blacks believe that if a person sees his shadow from a bridge, he will die before the moon is full again. The belief is sufficiently strong to make the old ones change course to avoid the shadow.[36]

When Quentin leans over the bridge rail and looks deep into and through his shadow, he sees a fish. The fish appears at first as a shadow within his shadow. When the fish rises to catch a luckless fly, Quentin recognizes it to be a trout. Three boys coming to fish join Quentin on the bridge to watch the trout. They confirm that the monster fish has a reputation (135-136). Particularly significant in this scene is Quentin's contemplating death and the Resurrection when the fish appears. Louise Dauner, in an excellent discussion of the shadow imagery in *The Sound and the Fury*, suggests that this might be connected to the religious symbolism of the fish in Christianity[37]: "The fish-shadow suggests itself then as a redemptive antidote or balance to the weight of Quentin's tragic experience." She cites the Easter timing of the novel as further evidence to support her theory.[38]

On at least two occasions then, in *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner uses the image of a fish to convey a religious concept. It is interesting that he openly credits Black folklore at the outset of this image in *The Sound and the Fury*. Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* has a number of opportunities in her monologue to illustrate Black culture and its effect. Indeed, the opening of her monologue finds her dressed in purple going to church on Easter Sunday. She is Faulkner's Black voice.

In *As I Lay Dying*, there is also a Black voice—one character who, though not Black himself, consistently presents the clearest description of the Black images discussed here: Vernon Tull. Ironically, it is his wife, Cora, whom Faulkner portrays as the upright Christian. Tull himself wonders if even God will be ready for Cora's righteousness. Tull appears to function as a choral character, consistently speaking about the images from the Black culture. In a very real way, his

sincerity serves as a foil for Cora's hypocrisy. Although other monologues offer some information, close examination reveals that Tull's are the ones that offer the clearest images.

Other references to the Black culture are to be found in *As I Lay Dying*. Darl's vision of the sun when Addie dies is an example:

> The sun, an hour above the horizon, is poised like a bloody egg upon a crest of thunderheads; the light has turned copper: in the eye portentous, in the nose sulphurous, smelling of lightning. (39)

Many critics see this as an image of the apocalypse.[39] Once again, however, it has a meaning in the Black culture. The "bloody egg" symbol has significance in the practice of Voodoo. The bloody egg is a sign of death. Blacks also believe that when a person dies, there is suddenly an odor of sulphur detectable to those who loved that person.[40]

Yet another example has to do with Anse and his hatred for the road that comes to his door. He says:

> "Durn that road...A-laying there, right up to my door, where every bad luck that comes and goes is bound to find it. Putting it where every bad luck prowling can find it and come straight to my door, charging me taxes on top of it." (34-35)

The old Blacks were suspicious of roads leading to their doors. They often kept their yards bare of grass and clean-swept so that a definable path was obliterated. They believed that evil spirits used roads to find homes wherein to do mischief. One preventive was the "bottle tree," a tree with empty bottles slipped over the branches. The Blacks believed that the evil spirits would be attracted to the sun or moon light shining on the bottles and be lured inside. Once the demonic beings were in, they believed, only breaking the bottles would release the evil.[41]

As I Lay Dying is a marvelous collection of Black folk imagery, most of which relates directly to Black religious beliefs. One can only with difficulty gather research on Black folk imagery, especially as it relates to the church, because the subject is so important and private. The Blacks do not often share information about their beliefs because, quite frankly, they are suspicious of what might become of it. Often they hesitate to discuss it because they aren't convinced that the person

posing the questions is capable of understanding what they have to say or of treating that information with respect. Further, the younger generation of Blacks is not getting very much of this tradition passed down to them. The Modern Age is upon them, and they haven't the time to explore a past that is often an unpleasant reminder of the hard times of their race.

One obvious question remains: Why did Faulkner set these images from Black culture into a novel that has not even one Black character? There are many possible answers. Perhaps Faulkner was unconsciously drawing from Caroline Barr's stories. Or, perhaps he was consciously incorporating some aspects of the Black myth into his novel while intentionally obscuring the identity of the source. In effect, only one familiar with the practices would recognize them within the work. Perhaps he was reluctant to expose these very personal aspects of Black life in the pre-integration era. The question of *why* Faulkner used Black myth within *As I Lay Dying* does not diminish the fact that he *did* use it.

The old ones will not be with us much longer, and with their passing will go the keys for understanding at least one level of this very complex American author. I am indebted to those who spoke with me and trusted me with their stories.

NOTES

* The photograph of Mammy Callie (p. 21) is reproduced here through the courtesy of Dean F. Wells. Faulkner's line drawing of the coffin (p. 22) from *As I Lay Dying* (1930; rpt. New York, 1957), is reproduced here through the courtesy of Random House, Inc.

[1]The similarities between *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury* have been the subject of numerous critical comments. See Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years* (Bloomington, 1966), pp. 50-53; Carvel Collins, "The Pairing of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*," *PULC*, 18 (1957), 114-123; Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread: The Meaning of Form in Faulkner's Novels* (Amherst, 1979), pp. 3-6; Michael Millgate, "*As I Lay Dying*," in Dean Morgan Schmitter, ed., *William Faulkner* (New York, 1973), pp. 91-101; Peter Swiggart, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels* (Austin, 1962), pp. 61-74 plus 108-130.

[2]Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years*, p. 66.

[3]Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven 1963), p. 141.

[4]Eric J. Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore, 1983), p. 28. The amount of critical commentary concerning *As I Lay Dying* is considerable. The following sources, though by no means a complete listing of criticism, have contributed greatly to this discussion of the novel. See Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years*; Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*; André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying"* (Bloomington, 1973); Frederick J. Hoffman, *William Faulkner* (Boston, 1966); Lewis Leary, *William Faulkner of Yoknapatawpha County* (New York, 1973); John Pilkington, *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* (Jackson, 1981); Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge, 1964).

[5]Bleikasten, *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying,"* p. 18. A number of critics have made observations about Faulkner's treatment of Blacks and the Black religion in his novels. Several critics have suggested that Faulkner's treatment of the religion of the Blacks in his fiction has been a good bit more sympathetic than his treatment of the religion of the whites. Elizabeth Kerr has done much in this area. See Chapter III, "Organized Religion," in *Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's "Little Postage Stamp of Native Soil"* (New York, 1969), pp. 173-185.

[6]Numerous critical comments exist concerning Faulkner's devotion to Caroline Barr and her influence on his life. Among these, see Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York, 1984), p. 31; John B. Cullen, *Old Times in the Faulkner Country* (Chapel Hill, 1961), pp. 78-79; John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence* (New York, 1963), pp. 47-52; David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 12-13; Walter Fuller Taylor, Jr., *Faulkner's Search for a South* (Urbana, 1983), p. 21.

[7]John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence*, p. 51.

[8]Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography*, p. 31. Blotner also cites the Black blacksmith on Faulkner's grandfather's farm whom the young Faulkner would seek out and listen to while the old gentleman worked and talked about the old times (31).

[9]*Ibid.*

[10]David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work*, p. 13.

[11]During my childhood, I experienced a similar relationship with an elderly Black woman who took me into her cabin and at her fireplace told me stories of the old days and old people. I listened as she told me of secret religious rituals and customs from among her people that went back to slave times. "Miss Emily"

loved her people, and loved me, and gave me through her words an insight into the life of the rural Blacks that I probably could have gotten no other way. Years later, when I began reading *As I Lay Dying,* I was impressed by the similarity between certain images and events within the novel and the stories that I had heard before Miss Emily's fire.

Emily Scott was known to my family as "Miss Emily" all of the years that I knew her. Between 1959 and 1964 I spent many delightful hours before the fireplace in her cabin in the "Quarters" on my grandfather's plantation where she had lived and worked for years. By the time that I was old enough to spend time with her and to remember her stories, she was in her late eighties and was no longer working.

The plantation was known as "Kenilworth" and was located one mile south of Newellton, Louisiana, in Tensas Parish bordering the Mississippi River. I lived there with my family and my grandfather from 1958 until 1965. There were many old Blacks still living on the place during that time who had lived in the Delta even before my grandfather moved from Illinois in 1912. Their devotion to my family was a centerpoint of my security growing up.

[12]William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York, 1964), pp. 69-70. All future page references to this edition will appear in the text within parentheses.

[13]See Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country,* p. 147; Walter Brylowski, *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels* (Detroit, 1968), p. 90; Leary, *William Faulkner of Yoknapatawpha County,* p. 67; Lynn Gartrell Levins, *Faulkner's Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novels* (Athens, Ga., 1976), p. 102; Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided,* p. 42. Certainly it should be added that any suggestion that the reversal of the body in the coffin might have been the result of an error in calculations on Cash's part is negated when one recalls that this is the man, when describing a fall from a church roof, estimates that he fell a total of "twenty-eight foot, four and a half inches, about" (85).

[14]This custom is still practiced in certain rural areas of the South. Numerous Blacks have confirmed such practices for me. From my personal experience, "Miss Emily" took great pride in taking out her wedding garment and cleaning it once a year in anticipation of the event. I saw it on at least two different occasions and heard about it much more often.

The necessity of reversing the body in the coffin has created some problems other than Vardaman's drilling. The custom of burying the coffin so that the body inside is facing East and will be able to arise conveniently facing Christ at the Second Coming is one that is followed among the Blacks. One of my Black university students recounted an event during his childhood when

the funeral director erred and placed the coffin of a woman into the grave without taking into account the actual body position within that coffin. As soon as the family realized what had happened, they insisted that the body be exhumed and the coffin position be reversed.

[15]Among the destitute, the wedding gown was simply one garment to which were attached various ornaments (fresh flowers were commonly used) which were removed for the wedding night.

[16]For an interesting discussion of this point, see Richard P. Adams, *Faulkner: Myth and Motion* (Princeton, 1968), p. 81.

[17]During my childhood, numbers of the Blacks on the plantation would warn me about playing in the old barn, stables, and commissary buildings because of the "rat." Interestingly enough, a generation before me my mother had suffered the same warnings and had had the same fears projected upon her. (Doris Moore Lawley, Interview. January 1986. Monroe, Louisiana.)

[18]Although a number of critics have observed similarities between Hawthorne and Faulkner, for the most detailed comparison of *As I Lay Dying* and *The Scarlet Letter,* see Harold J. Douglas and Robert Daniel, "Faulkner and the Puritanism of the South," *TSL*, 2(1957), 1-13.

For additional criticism involving the two authors and a number of their works, see Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*," in *Three Decades of Criticism,* pp. 95-96, 102, 108-109; William Van O'Connor, "Hawthorne and Faulkner: Some Common Ground," *VQR,* 33 (1957), 105-123; Lyall H. Powers, *Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Comedy* (Ann Arbor, 1980), p. 216; Randall Stewart, "The Vision of Evil in Hawthorne and Faulkner," in *The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith,* Nathan A. Scott, Jr., (ed.), (New York, 1957), pp. 238-262; Peter Swiggart, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels,* pp. 25-26.

Faulkner, when asked directly if he had used *The Scarlet Letter* as a parallel for *As I Lay Dying*, denied doing so. See Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (Charlottesville, 1959), p. 115.

[19]Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country,* p. 151.

[20]The Black community traditionally elevates its ministers to a higher political and social level than do the other races. It is no coincidence that the majority of the successful Black leaders of this century have been ministers. In 1978, Earnest Gaines, a successful Black author from Louisiana, used the theme of the Black minister with a shameful past for his novel, *In My Father's*

House. The central character, the Reverend Phillip Martin, is confronted with his bastard son just at the point in the minister's career when he is most successful both politically and socially. His congregation accepts his actions as being those of the flesh and urges him to continue in their pulpit. He is neither judged nor ostracized.

[21]Richard P. Adams makes an interesting observation concerning Faulkner's use of the Black church in his fiction. Adams writes, "In the ending of *Soldiers' Pay*, as in *The Sound and the Fury*, a [Black] church service is used as part of Faulkner's effort to resolve the feeling of the book. Gilligan and the rector, standing in darkness outside, receive intimations of life, 'the imminence of sex after harsh labor along the mooned land,' and they hear 'the crooning submerged passion of the dark race. It was nothing, it was everything; then it swelled to an ecstasy....All the longing of mankind for a Oneness with Something, somewhere.' This is balanced by an opposing intimation: 'Then the singing died, fading away along the mooned land inevitable with to-morrow and sweat, with sex and death and damnation; and they turned townward under the moon, feeling dust in their shoes.'" See Richard P. Adams, *Faulkner: Myth and Motion*, pp. 39-40. It is not difficult to identify both Addie Bundren and Whitfield with this desire for a "Oneness with Something, somewhere." Perhaps Faulkner is using Black myth in *As I Lay Dying* as well in an "effort to resolve the feeling of the book."

[22]Arthur F. Kinney, *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (Amherst, 1978), pp. 172-173. For additional comments on a similar theme, see Walter Brylowski, *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh*, p. 91; Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944), pp. 81, 83; Donald M. Kartiganer, *The Fragile Thread*, p. 26.

[23]André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying,"* p. 96. Two additional critical comments regarding the fish should be noted. Both concern psychoanalytic interpretations. One is a particularly intriguing Jungian explanation of the fish (and other images and characters within the novel) given by Dixie M. Turner. Ms. Turner suggests that "in Christian terms the fish represents Christ or serves as a parallel" while in psychology, "the fish leads directly to the Jungian postulate of Self." Therefore, Ms. Turner surmises, "as Addie is Jung's archetype of Self; and the Self denotes the Christ image in man; then the fish is a vital indirect form of Vardaman's mother." See *A Jungian Psychoanalytic Interpretation of William Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying"* (Washington, D.C., 1981). The second is Sandor Ferenczi's observation that the fish is actually a fetal symbol. See André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's As I Lay Dying*, pp. 157-158, n33, with reference to Sandor Ferenczi, "Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality."

[24]Leary, *William Faulkner of Yoknapatawpha County*, pp. 69-70.

[25]Walter Brylowski, *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh*, p. 89. For the specific myth referred to in the text, see Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1935), 5: 95-96.

[26]Hyatt Waggoner, *William Faulkner, From Jefferson to the World* (Lexington, 1959), p. 66. See also the "Commentary" by Robert J. Barth, immediately following Phillip Rule's essay, "Old Testament Vision in *As I Lay Dying*," in Robert J. Barth, ed., *Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (Notre Dame, 1972), pp. 117-118. Many critics have interpreted the metaphor of the fish as a reference to mythology. Many have viewed it as a Christian symbol while others have viewed it in terms of the Holy Grail. Still others see a connection between the fish image and Demeter's dolphin of Greek legend. See André Bleikasten's excellent discussion in *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying,"* pp. 96-97. Richard P. Adams writes that the fish suggests at least three ideas: the Grail legend, the story of Christ, and an old fertility ritual "reflected in the Grail legend...and refined in the Christian sacrament of communion, of transmuting the life of a dead totem animal or person into the lives of those who eat the flesh or drink the blood": *Faulkner: Myth and Motion*, pp. 81-82.

[27]I first learned of this in Miss Emily's home in 1961 when I remarked about a palmetto leaf that she had woven into the shape of a fish and had placed above her fireplace. She told me then about the fish, what it represented to her people, and why they believed that the Klan had ruined the cross as a symbol for their faith. During the last three years in interviews with Blacks, this has been confirmed.

[28]On two occasions in interviews with Blacks, this custom has been confirmed.

[29]Miss Emily first told me about this idea, and subsequent interviews with Black ministers and various older members of the Black community have confirmed the belief.

[30]Research has uncovered several variations to the baptismal ritual in the rural areas. Some of the older people interviewed remembered that the baptism took place on the last Sunday in May, for example, instead of some Sunday in June. Some thought that the elders fished only from sunrise until mid-morning on the day of the baptism while others remembered it to be all night and into the morning. Another variation involved what the minister wore. All interviewed agreed that the candidate for baptism wore white; two remembered that the minister wore black, however. The

majority of those interviewed believed that the fish used as the communion food was based on the parable of the boy with the loaves and the fishes.

The process by which a person became a candidate for baptism within the Black church was also interesting. In early spring, various members of the congregation who had not yet been baptized would begin the first phase of "seeking religion" by moving up to a designated pew set alone in the front and to the side of the auditorium. Every Sunday during spring, they would sit together on the "seeker's bench" and pray during service. The Sunday immediately before the baptism Sunday, these seekers would enter the second phase of their preparation. Each candidate was forbidden to speak to anyone until he "got" religion. During the same week, members of the Black congregation were selected to pray for the candidate. They, too, were forbidden to speak. According to one source, this was quite disruptive to the work on the plantation because the men and women refused to break the silence. When the candidate "got religion," he would run screaming away to the church to pray. After that, nothing stood in the way of the baptism. On the day of the baptism, the female candidates would have two "sister-handlers" designated to walk with them to the edge of the water and wait to receive them following the immersion. This was quite an honor. The male candidates would have "brother-handlers" designated for them.

[31]Among the Southern folk artists, see especially the works of Leslie Payne of Kilmarnock, Virginia (1907-1981); Nellie May Rowe of Vinings, Georgia (1900—); and Luster Willis of Crystal Springs, Mississippi (1913—). An excellent collection that includes representative works by these and other Black folk artists is the exhibition catalogue prepared by the Center for Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. See *Black Folk Art In America: 1930-1980* (Jackson, 1982).

[32]For an excellent biographical review of Ms. Hunter's life and work, see Bob and Yvonne Ryan, "Clementine Hunter: A Personal Story" in *Louisiana Life: Magazine of the Bayou State* (September-October 1981), pp. 28-42.

[33]Unfortunately, Ms. Hunter's reluctance to speak openly about the customs and traditions of her faith is a common reaction among the Blacks. In the interviewing process, I found that those things that I already knew were fairly easy to confirm; however, any new information was nearly always given with the stipulation that names not be given. The traditions are oral traditions, and apparently are not being handed down to the newest generation of Blacks. Therefore, it is from the older members of the community that the information must come, and it is there that the most suspicion and need for privacy still remain.

[34]Research in this area uncovered another custom that was still being practiced in some of the rural churches as late as 1982. From the time that a young person reaches puberty until he marries, he is not allowed to enter the church and be seated on Sunday morning. Instead, he must wait at the entrance of the church until after the minister has entered the pulpit. At that time, the elders of the church escort the young people in and designate a place for them to sit. If the elders are aware of some behavior that is displeasing, the young person is seated on the left or "Hell" side of the church. As one young man put it, "You have no idea how awful it is to have to sit there feeling your mama's eyes drilling holes in your back just waiting for service to be over so she can tan your hide." A variation of this custom involves "meetings" or revivals. During collections at these special times, if the minister or the elders feel that a member of the congregation is not giving as much as he could, they escort him over to a designated pew on the "Hell" side of the church.

[35]John W. Hunt, *William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension* (Syracuse, 1965), pp. 63-64. For the selection from *The Sound and the Fury,* see William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York, 1946), pp. 110-111.

[36]This superstition was so strong among the Blacks in Tensas Parish that they would defy the law concerning walking on the correct side of the highway. There was a bridge spanning a bayou to the south of our property near our home which the Blacks had to cross in order to get to the South fields. The location of the bridge in relation to the rising and setting sun was such that for the Blacks to obey the highway regulation, they would have had to cast their shadows into the water both coming and going! As a result, they would walk correctly to the bridge, change sides to cross over the bridge, and then change back again and walk correctly on their way—much to the amusement of some and consternation of many.

[37]Louise Dauner, "Quentin and the Walking Shadow: The Dilemma of Nature and Culture," in Michael H. Cowan, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Sound and the Fury"* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), pp. 75-80.

[38]*Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

[39]André Bleikasten, *Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying,"* p. 120. Bleikasten also observes that the bloody egg image is found in the earlier novel *Sartoris*. See p. 160 n11.

[40]According to the old Blacks, if one wished to frighten someone, a hen's egg covered in blood on the front step would do the trick. Some said that the Voodoo rites for death included using

blood-covered eggs. Several of the Blacks interviewed talked about the sulphurous odor that they associated with death. Finally, it is interesting to note that a contemporary Black artist of Franco-African descent, Mr. Joe Moran of the Cane River area in Natchitoches, Louisiana, frequently uses an egg suspended in the sky in his paintings.

[41]In the rural areas today, it is not uncommon to see a "bottle tree." A variation is the "bottle fence," an ordinary fence with an empty bottle standing on top of each fence post. Some persons interviewed told of frightening their enemies by going in at night and smashing all of the bottles. Upon awakening, their enemies would realize that the accumulated evil spirits had all escaped into their houses.

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like bees murmuring in a water bucket. The men stop on the porch, talking some, not looking at one another.

"Howdy, Vernon," they say. "Howdy, Tull."

"Looks like more rain."

"It does for a fact."

"Yes, sir. It will rain some more."

"It come up quick."

"And going away slow. It dont fail."

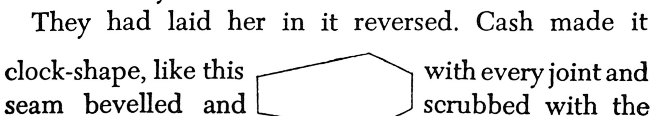
I go around to the back. Cash is filling up the holes he bored in the top of it. He is trimming out plugs for them, one at a time, the wood wet and hard to work. He could cut up a tin can and hide the holes and nobody wouldn't know the difference. Wouldn't mind, anyway. I have seen him spend a hour trimming out a wedge like it was glass he was working, when he could have reached around and picked up a dozen sticks and drove them into the joint and made it do.

When we finished I go back to the front. The men have gone a little piece from the house, sitting on the ends of the boards and on the sawhorses where we made it last night, some sitting and some squatting. Whitfield aint come yet.

They look up at me, their eyes asking.

"It's about," I say. "He's ready to nail."

While they are getting up Anse comes to the door and looks at us and we return to the porch. We scrape our shoes again, careful, waiting for one another to go in first, milling a little at the door. Anse stands inside the door, dignified, composed. He waves us in and leads the way into the room.

They had laid her in it reversed. Cash made it clock-shape, like this  with every joint and seam bevelled and scrubbed with the

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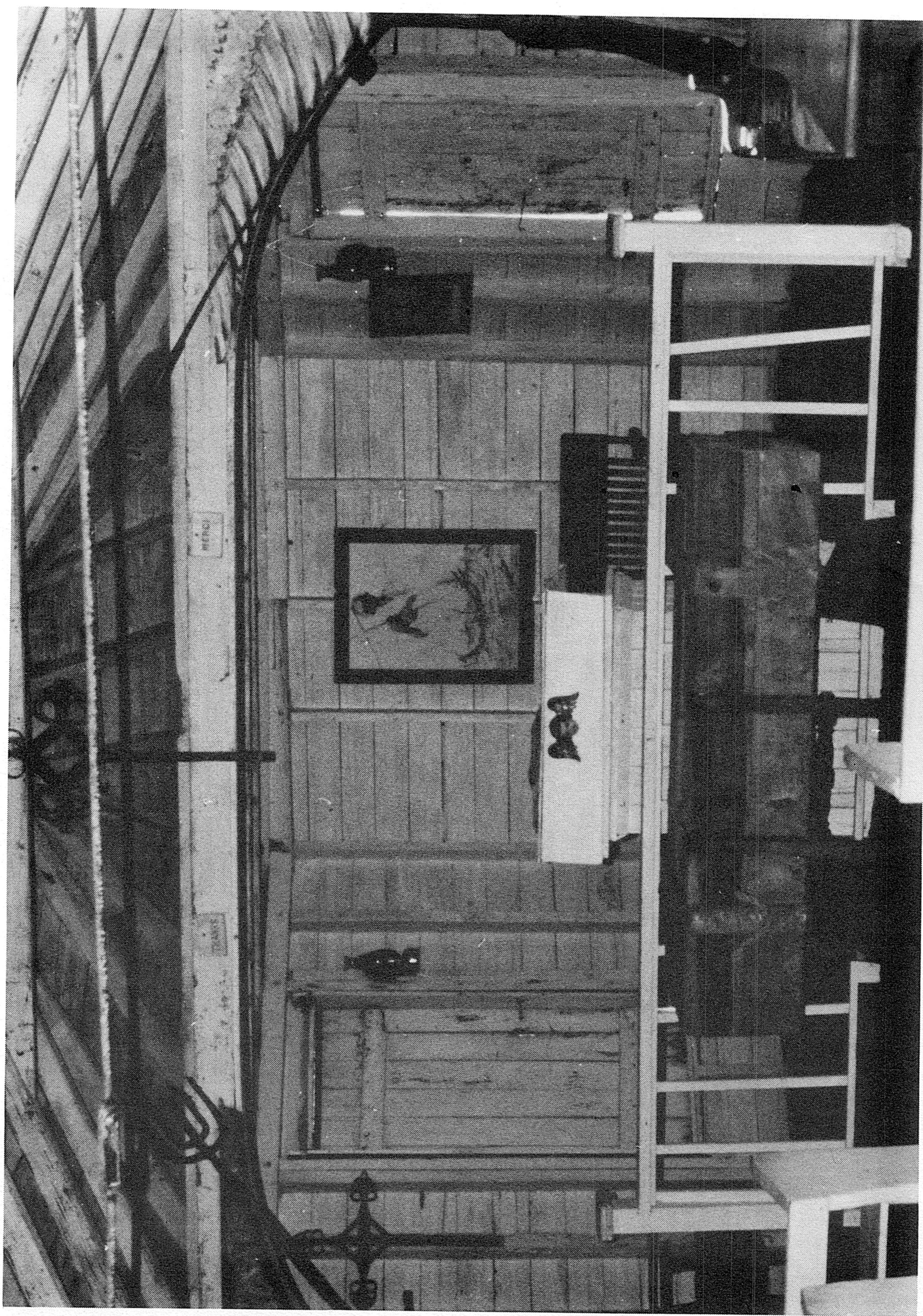

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Page 26 Photograph 6