

Faulkner's Folly  
Views on the Future of Race Relations From a "Liberal" Southerner

by

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## Abstract

Scholars agree that William Faulkner's novels are groundbreaking in their representation of race relations. While Faulkner was indeed ahead of his time, among white writers, in his willingness to confront the atrocities of the past, ultimately his approach to race was limited. Despite Faulkner's efforts to portray race as a social construction, his sympathies consistently fell on the white side of the color line. "Faulkner's Folly; Views on the Future of Race Relations From a 'Liberal' Southerner" attempts to closely examine the mulatto landscape Faulkner presents in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County. Through this examination the central struggle in Faulkner's life and work becomes clear. In trying to make sense of the South's approach to the color line, Faulkner reveals his own inability to fully accept the inevitable solution of integration and full social justice; instead he envisions a future where the problems surrounding race relations will eventually work themselves out organically. Faulkner's solution to race relations in the South, as he expresses in his fiction as well as in his own personal statements, is that eventually the African American population will "bleach out," or cease to exist through interracial relations. This thesis begins with an overview of the history that inspired Faulkner's works. Part 1, "Fertile Soil," begins by looking at American history after reconstruction and traces the mentality of the white population towards the newly freed black population and how that mentality led to the legalization of segregation. It focuses on images formed by the white population, like the mammy and the black beast rapist, and how the propagation of these images led to atrocious acts, such as lynchings. The general history is followed by Faulkner's personal history and examines how his upbringing in the South influenced his writings. This section ends with the comparison of

real-life history to images and scenes found in Faulkner's novels. Part 2, "The Genius of Faulkner," focuses on the more brilliant aspects of Faulkner's novels. This part begins with scholars who were Faulkner's contemporaries and notes how the racial aspects of Faulkner's work alluded them. This leads into the examination of the many critics who do write about race in Faulkner's work in sophisticated and demanding ways, and focuses on the mulatto landscape that Faulkner conceives in *Light In August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. The scholarship leads into theory, focusing on Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract* and this section ends with a close look at some of the more vivid images that Faulkner conjures within his novels. In the third part, "Faulkner's Folly," the focus turns to the inherent problems found in these novels. This part begins examining what scholars have to say about Faulkner's marginalization of his black characters which leads to my primary argument. Faulkner's use of the words "bleach out" in both *Light In August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are closely examined, followed by a look at Isaac McCaslin's refrain of "not now" found in *Go Down, Moses*. These phrases are compared to Faulkner's statements in speeches and interviews where he repeatedly tells the black population to "go slow" in their pursuit of integration and he brazenly claims that, "In the long view, the Negro race will vanish in three hundred years by intermarriage." The conclusion states the importance of not overlooking either Faulkner's accomplishments or his failures of vision, for his genius is undeniable, but, instead, to examine and learn from his shortcomings. This thesis attempts to illustrate that in understanding the missteps of the past we may find a clearer path for the future. In examining the flaws in Faulkner's writing we can better understand the mindset of the present.



## **Faulkner's Folly**

### **Views on the Future of Race Relations From a "Liberal" Southerner**

Toni Morrison titled her master thesis from Cornell "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated." Morrison denies that Faulkner had any great influence on her fiction yet the fact that one of the greatest African American writers in American literary history focused, in her literary education, on the writings of one of the few white writers in American literary history who approached America's history on race purposefully is not surprising. Morrison and Faulkner both won Nobel Prizes for their work and both artists explore race relations in depth. In an article exploring the possibility that, despite what she says, Morrison might have been influenced to a degree by Faulkner's style, Alessandra Vendrame draws her evidence from Morrison herself. She says that in a 1985 lecture, Morrison talks of her reason for being interested in Faulkner stemming from her desire "to find out something about this country and that artistic articulation of its past that was not available in history, which is what art and fiction can do but sometimes history refuses to do" (679). Morrison also said Faulkner's approach intrigued her, classifying his style as "a look, even a sort of staring, a refusal-to-look-away approach" (Vendrame 680). Morrison, a black woman, knows intimately the oppression African Americans experience and the culture and community they painstakingly built and fostered throughout the years. Faulkner approached race from the white Southern man's perspective. His grandfather is rumored, according to

Philip Weinstein in his biography *Becoming Faulkner, The Art and Life of William Faulkner*, to have sired his own mulatto family and possibly had incestuous relations with his own daughter/slave. Weinstein writes, “Faulkner’s profoundest understanding of cascading human trouble over time owes everything to what he was able to discern about racial abuse in the South—perhaps in his own family” (127). These different perspectives produce two sides of the same coin that is race relations.

Morrison’s intrigue was not misplaced; Faulkner delivers in terms of his unfeigned approach to race. He is best known and praised for his focus on race in *Light In August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. Faulkner grew up in a world where the white population controlled the conception of the black population. White America perpetuated white supremacy through literature, black face minstrelsy, and racist caricatures. The images of the black population that the white population desperately wanted to promote were cemented into place through segregation. When the black population dared to step out of the box in which white America placed them, more insidious means of control were wielded, such as lynchings. It is notable, then, that despite the South’s incessant desire to control the images of the black population, Faulkner unabashedly explored the negative impact of slavery, segregation, and race as a social construct on Southern society through the world he created in Yoknapatawpha County.

Morrison noted Faulkner’s “refusal-to-look-away approach,” which is even more striking when compared to his contemporaries. The same year Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936, Margaret Mitchell published *Gone With The Wind*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize. Eric J. Sundquist notes that while Mitchell’s novel was wildly

popular and made into a movie of epic proportions, “Faulkner’s novel was greeted with perplexity, disbelief and outrage. The one made clear to some observers how strange Jim Crow’s career was, while the other measured the length and complexity of that career by exposing the enervating intimacies within the grand design that made it possible” (Sundquist 111). The popularity of Mitchell’s novel compared to the confusion and denial met by Faulkner’s highlights the South’s desire to portray its past and present as a tragic fairytale of a people who were misunderstood and victimized. Grace Elizabeth Hale says, “*Gone With The Wind* encapsulates even as it finishes the plantation romance, cementing finally the genealogy of modern southern whiteness, itself a middle-class production, in the service of the new racial culture of segregation” (261). Hale notes that even as Mitchell acknowledges flaws in the romanticized image of the Old South, she portrays the emerging new south, more specifically the “white southern middle class,” as a people who have learned from and corrected the mistakes of their past. The flaws Mitchell saw had to do less with oversight over the existence of the system of slavery than with reliance on that system. The aristocratic planter had lost his ability to persevere. This perseverance, Mitchell illustrates in her novel, can be found in the white middle class; through them the region will be rebuilt. Hale says, “Mitchell places the drama of the war’s aftermath wholly within the space of southern whiteness” (264).

In stark relief to Mitchell’s portrayal of a practical and progressive southern middle class, Faulkner acknowledges and illustrates the flaws inherent in the class structure built by a white middle class who saw the black population as a threat to their livelihood. He recognizes the violence that occurred to keep the South neatly divided into categories of black and white and reveals that the white population’s desire to do so

stems from the same mindset that romanticizes the “old South” and the “Lost Cause.” The reality, as Faulkner illustrates over and over, is a mulatto country, and the miscegenation that brought about this current state of existence was originally at the hands of the white slave owners. The very thing the white population wants to deny was caused by their own abusive practices and cannot be undone through segregation. To his credit, Faulkner acknowledges the atrocities committed and denied by the white population not only in the past but in his own present-day of segregation.

In comparing Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* to Mitchell’s *Gone With The Wind*, we find little comfort considering the breadth of popular fiction in the early 1900s. Faulkner’s writings are also preferable to Thomas Dixon, Jr. who wrote the influential novel, *The Clansman*, romanticizing the Klu Klux Klan. Praising Faulkner for writing about race in a more conscientious way than his white contemporaries is not enough; he gives us sufficient reason to expect more from him. Faulkner sets the standard for the analysis of race relations through fiction and we must hold him accountable to this standard, not only as a white man writing about race, but also in comparison to the standard set by innumerable African American writers who emerged from the same history. However, despite the critical praise Faulkner receives for his literary work, his vision falls short. Faulkner acknowledges the realities of the society in which he lives and he agonizes over the warped sensibilities of those amongst whom he lives, but the points-of-view from which he examines the consequences of a society built upon slavery always come from the white side of the color line. The characters whose suffering the reader most keenly feels are white. We find poignancy in Faulkner’s white characters’ reactions to his mixed-race characters, but we rarely find ourselves entertaining the perspective of

those on the other side of the color line. The power of Faulkner's novels lies in the perception of the white man who struggles within a broken society of his own making.

Faulkner deserves praise, yet his shortcomings are too important to disregard. He acknowledges race while being unable to embrace the full impact of the construct on both sides of the color line. He sees the problem and the cause yet is unable to face the necessary actions needed to begin moving toward a resolution. What are we to make of this? How are we to understand one of America's greatest writers when it comes to one of America's greatest dilemmas? This thesis attempts to answer that question—not merely by noting that Faulkner falls short in his execution of the subject, but in his very conception of the problem. He writes about race but always as a disturbing presence whether for the characters whose blood contains the contaminant that marks them as “other,” or for the white man who brought the problem of race down upon himself. The farther Faulkner goes down the path of guilt, the more it seems that the problems that arise from race relations are problems he would like to see “just go away” without the white population having to truly face the actual problems they have caused. In fact, as I will argue, that is his approach; his conclusion in his incessant analysis of the issue of race is that, eventually, the issue will go away—the African American population will “bleach out” and the problems will themselves disappear. Regardless of the aptitude Faulkner displays in mining the root of the shock waves threatening his beloved South, he brings little more to the subject of race than does the most insulated white suburbanite, aware of the problem, who just wants it to disappear. Faulkner's present-day importance is found in the limits of his vision, for these limits reveal the root of white America's current struggle with race.

## Fertile Soil

William Faulkner was born September 25, 1897, in the decade dubbed the “nadir of race relations” by Rayford Logan. Reconstruction officially ended twenty years before Faulkner’s birth, in 1877, when the United States federal government pulled the last troops out of the Southern states “and the former Confederates regained control of the South” (Hale 19). Faulkner was born into a defeated South and raised amongst a bitterness that seeped into the very roots of the culture. “The South,” a society who had rationalized and normalized the abhorrent practice of slavery, a society whose identity and wealth depended on slavery, struggled to find a new identity in their rapidly changing world. Faulkner spent his formative years navigating a people whose world had turned upside down and who were still trying to right themselves. Philip Weinstein says in his biography, *Becoming Faulkner*, “Faulkner thus experienced repercussions set loose by ancestors long dead, troubles more broadly regional, if not national, yet for all that troubles he could not disown” (7). These troubles were the subject of Faulkner’s greatest books. In taking a closer look at the history surrounding Faulkner’s life we gain insight into his groundbreaking novels on race.

After Reconstruction, the strides toward education, prosperity and equality began to show in a black middle class made visible by places of consumption where separation of the races was more difficult, as Grace Elizabeth Hale notes in her book *Making Whiteness The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. Hale says, “Possessing the middle-class markers of proper clothing and speech and made mobile by the spread of modern transportation networks, the figure of the mulatto became much more

threatening” (129). The visual signs of the “new negro” led white Southerners to long for their vision of the “old negro.” The white Southerner missed what Ralph Ellison called the “darky act” (Hale 17). Leon F. Litwack says in his book *Trouble In Mind: Black Southerners In The Age Of Jim Crow*:

During slavery, black men and women had acquired considerable experience in the uses of obsequiousness, duplicity, humility, flattery, and evasion. The ability to anticipate the moods, whims, and expectations of the white families for whom they worked, the knowledge of how to massage the egos and feed the self-esteem of whites, and that almost instinctive sense of when to feign stupidity, even to “act the nigger,” had enabled scores of enslaved black men and women to resist without seeming to resist (39).

The problem was, as Hale notes, that this act “became the reality of black existence for most white Americans” (Hale 17). Consequently, when black people dropped the act, they were seen as being “uppity.” Litwack says, “Evidence of success, no matter how it was achieved or displayed, made every black man and woman vulnerable. To convey an air of independence or prosperity was to invite trouble. The simple fact was that many whites equated black success with ‘uppityness,’ ‘impudence,’ ‘getting out of place,’ and pretensions toward racial equality” (154). There were two kinds of blacks to the majority of the white population: the beloved “plantation darky” or the “uppity nigger.” White people could not comprehend that the plantation darky never existed. Litwack writes, “The happy carefree ‘darkies’ had become what they had always been--necessary figments of a vivid white imagination, found now mostly in the images and artifacts of popular culture, in renditions of a history whites wanted so desperately to believe” (115).

The transformation of their beloved negro was not a change the white population was able to accept gracefully; in fact, they were willing to use every means necessary to eradicate this change.

The white population found this “new Negro” unacceptable and the inability to accept the emergence of a black middle class was born out of fear. Litwack says, “What fed white apprehension and talk of race war were not so much perceptions of a race regressing but rather of one that was progressing” (101). The black population’s strides toward education, the exercising of their newly-earned right to vote and the visual signs of the black middle class fed the white population’s fear; this was especially true of the black man’s right to vote. Litwack notes, “any relationship that encourages Negroes to think themselves the equal of whites would elevate the inferior and degrade the superior race. Nowhere was this more dramatically evident than the polling place” (219). The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified on February 3, 1870, prohibited the federal government and states to deny a man the right to vote based on his skin color. The amendment undermined the prevailing notion of white supremacy.

Along with fear of the “new Negro” becoming an equal, Southern whites also saw the “new Negro” as a sign that the old ways were not just dying but already dead. In an effort to salvage some of the world they romanticized and cherished they exerted their own form of control. Litwack writes, “Between 1890 and 1915, state after state wrote the prevailing racial customs and habits into the statute books. Jim Crow came to the South in an expanded and more rigid form, partly in response to fears of a new generation of blacks unschooled in racial etiquette and to growing doubts that this generation could be trusted to stay in its place without legal force” (230). Hale says, “racialized spaces could

counter the confusion of appearances created by the increased visibility of a well-dressed, well-spoken middle class” (130). The South intended to hold onto the old caste system by force of law; this included diminishing the black man’s influence on politics. Litwack notes that political participation by the black man was inextricably linked to social equality. He says, “To bar the black man from the polling place was to bar him from the bedroom. If blacks voted with whites as equals, they would insist on living and sleeping with whites as equals, and no white Southerner could contemplate such degradation” (221). Intimidation, force, and various provisions, such as reading tests, were enacted at polling places to quell the influence of the black man on politics.

As Jim Crow became “the law of the land” in the South, streetcars, railroads and places of commerce became the battlegrounds for resistance to these laws. Litwack writes, “The railroad and streetcar became early arenas of confrontation, precisely because in no other area of public life (except the polling place) did blacks and whites come together on such equal footing” (231). Black men and women could be kept as inferiors in the workplace, but on the train, in the street cars, or when shopping blacks are paying for their goods or their seats the same as whites. Instead of gaining footing in these public spaces, the visual reminder of the threat of social equality made the desire for separation more urgent. Second class cars or smoking cars began to be designated as the “black cars.” When black became too ambiguous of a term it was replaced with colored to encompass the mulatto. Hale says, “And in an increasingly anonymous world where class and race status depended upon appearances, racial disorder endangered the very meaning of white racial identity” (129). How could whites be superior if they could not tell to whom they were supposedly superior; segregation assuaged the fear that they

might be talking to or interacting with a “colored person” without even knowing it.

Segregation returned a sense of order for the white population that had been lacking since slavery had been abolished.

As white southern states doubled down on segregation laws the black population attempted to push back. The most notable instance was in the case of Homer Plessy. In an attempt to challenge Louisiana’s law, enacted in 1890, requiring segregated cars, Plessy, a light skinned man of mixed heritage, purchased a first-class ticket and when he refused to leave the first-class car was removed and placed in jail. Plessy’s lawyer, Albion Tourgee, argued, “the government did not have the right to determine the racial identities of its citizens” (Hale 23). The Supreme Court disagreed. In a vote of 8 to 1 they “rejected Plessy’s appeal and found no problem with accommodations that were ‘equal but separate’” (Litwack 243). In *The Journal of Supreme Court History* William James Hull Hoffer states, “Though largely ignored at the time it was issued, Plessy would become the standard-bearer for a long line of ‘separate, but equal’ decisions upholding what was colloquially called the Jim Crow system of pervasive, invidious racial distinctions” (Hoffer 1). This Supreme Court decision made segregation legal on a national level. Hale says, “As important as the ruling was the Court’s reasoning: its insistence that racial difference lay outside the law, beyond and before any act of human agency” (23). The ruling and reasoning confirmed and supported the belief of white supremacy and in doing so paved the way for southern whites to continue unencumbered in their enforcing of said belief.

Jim Crow Laws made separation of the races the landscape of the South, but the white home remained a place where the races still came together and interacted on a daily

basis. Hale says, “The white home became a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world” (94). Domestic work was some of the only work available to black women and so into the white homes they went as cooks, mammys and servant girls; in this way the past was linked to the present and white superiority remained intact. The figure of the mammy became a crucial holdover that enabled the white population to idolize the past while preserving some of the old roles of plantation life. Hale says, “White southern men and women of the rising middle class, however, insisted on conflating the plantation household and the post-Reconstruction white home in order to ground their own cultural authority within the power—which by the late nineteenth century had grown to mythical proportions—of the plantation-based planter class” (87). In these homes black still equaled servant, white still equaled master and racism was taught to a new generation. As Hale illustrates, it is in the home where children learned that black was inferior to white. Children heard their parents’ speak, and before comprehending the words their parents used, these words were adopted into their own vocabularies. Eventually, as the meanings became clear, the ideas behind the words were adopted into their own ideas. While children might embrace and envelope “mammy”, these feelings were for children alone. Hale says, “With the end of childhood, whites learned the meaning of segregation. African Americans could not really be loved. Integrated feelings, integrated living, then, must be packed up with the baby clothes, pulled out and nostalgically caressed perhaps but never taken seriously, not incorporated into adult white ways of being” (117-118). Through the ever-present example of blacks as servants, and more specifically through the “mammy” as the idolized figure from the

romanticized past, white females derived their power and white superiority was solidified in the home. They wielded that power daily, taught that power to their children, and in so doing insured their own place in a rapidly changing world. Hale says, “women of a rising white southern middle class were key creators of the new racial order, segregation as culture” (93).

While the mammy was a tool for white women in the home, white men invented a much more insidious figure and methodology to help solidify and wield their white superiority. Hale says, “Mammy became the canvas upon which white women painted their new authority in the same way that another white image of blackness, the ‘black beast rapist,’ worked for white men” (115). Ashraf H. A. Rushdy highlights the creation of the black rapist in his exploration of the “lynching for rape” discourse. In his book *American Lynching* Rushdy explores, as the title suggests, the history of the practice of lynching in America. He calls the “lynching for rape” discourse the “ascendant discourse of lynching.” He says:

the “lynching for rape” discourse, defined all the participants in the scenario through the act of rape: white women as vulnerable victims, white men as righteous avengers, and black men as ravenous animals. Whoever wished to challenge the lynching for rape discourse was liable to the charge of being against chivalry, against family, against the rights of self-defense, against morality, against virtually everything decent. The discourse of lynching, then, determined not just the meaning of the event but also the terms of debate over the event. Moreover, it

has always been the lynching advocates who have mobilized the discourse of lynching that delimited the possible responses of antilynching activists (95).

Rushdy points out that the discourse seems to be a “triangular affair” that leaves black women out of the equation but claims that this is a misleading assumption. The discourse of rape not only has a place for the black woman, the discourse heaps the responsibility onto her head. Rushdy asserts that the reasoning behind the unchecked sexual appetites of black men, according to the “lynching for rape” discourse, is that they have never before been exposed to “ladies;” the discourse claims that the lascivious nature of black women has misled the black men into believing that all women have high sexual appetites, therefore they do not understand that white women do not share this nature with their black counterparts. This dark nature is not applied to white southern “ladies.” This sexual energy of which black women are accused of exuding is also used to explain the reason that white men cannot help but have sex with black women and, conveniently enough, it cannot be called rape when black women so obviously have an appetite for such activities. Within this discourse of rape, the southern white population not only provided a noble reason for the torture and lynching of black men (white women’s virtue), they have also explained why the pendulum only swings one way, and their own crimes of rape against black women are not their fault, nor even considered crimes. In fact, men, both black and white, are victims of the wanton nature of the black woman. This discourse sets the stage for violence, murder and “spectacle” lynching to occur unchecked for decades. Rushdy states, “By 1904 it had been made eminently clear that lynching was a response to a variety of alleged crimes and perceived violations of racist mores (of which less than one-quarter were allegations of rape)” (104-105). The actual

reasons behind lynching were no longer of any importance, the die had been cast. Rushdy says, “The charge of rape, the rhetoric of rape, and the language of imperative necessity (usually in the form of the rhetoric of war) were available no matter what the actual or alleged crime or social state might be” (100).

The formation of the black rapist and the discourse of lynching was another form of control as well as a source of power. As “mammy” in the home illustrated a superiority grounded in the color of skin to both black women and to a new generation of whites, the violence wrought on black men and women by white men kept a rising black middle class “in their place.” Whether the crime be an argument over money due or the fact that a black man became “uppity” in his language and demeanor toward a white man or woman, the cause for the lynching was rooted in the noble quest of preserving the virtue of white women. In this way the white population attempted to cement the laws of segregation, but control was not the only issue at play. Much as the mammy was a symbol of a time romanticized and lost, so was lynching a holdover from the atrocious practice of slavery. Rushdy says, “we can note that the rise of the black rapist motif coincided with the creation of the myth of the Lost Cause, that intellectual movement that attempted to defend and apotheosize the Confederacy, a product also of the 1880s and 1890s” (109). The “Lost Cause” mythology claims that slavery was not the reason the South seceded from and fought against the North in the Civil War. Rushdy points out that this myth was adopted as readily as the figure of the black rapist in an attempt to “elevate the justifications for both causes to unassailable (and common) grounds” and concludes this point saying, “The Lost Cause is supplemented by the still not yet lost cause of lynching; both are emblems of Southern chivalry” (110). To illustrate the crucial link

between slavery and lynching and the need for white southerners to elevate the reasoning behind both practices Rushdy quotes Frederick Douglass, who wrote of the fact that lynching is the product of a culture built upon the practice of slavery, “The ‘sentiment left by slavery is still with us and the moral vision of the American people is still darkened by its presence.’” Douglass continues, “They have had among them for centuries a peculiar institution and that peculiar institution has stamped them as a peculiar people” (Rushdy 111).

It is among these “peculiar” people and these abhorrent and “peculiar” actions that William Faulkner was born. Faulkner was a man split between an intellect that worried and wandered over the South’s treatment of the black people and a personality embedded in the white side of the color line. Philip Weinstein says in his biography, “Born in 1897 into a once illustrious Mississippi family now down on its luck, Faulkner grew up as a son of the New South ambivalently enthralled to an Old South, impotent since 1865” (*Becoming*<sup>1</sup> 7). This is not far off the description Quentin uses for the South in general in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin muses of himself in the fictional year of 1909:

He was a barracks filled with stubborn back looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent citations to this text will be listed as *Becoming*.

fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence (7).

Faulkner was well aware that the South was broken and that he, himself, was “weak from the fever” and haunted by “back looking ghosts.” Being born into the newly legalized segregated South, Faulkner’s childhood was neatly organized into black and white.

Weinstein uses four quotes from John Faulkner’s book, *My Brother Bill*, to illustrate the smooth operation and influence of segregation in Faulkner’s life: “Mother said when she came to the door and saw us [covered in dust], she could not tell us from Jessie’s children,’ ‘Mother came out and told us to leave [the lost kite] alone and when the Negroes came in that night she would have one of them get a ladder and haul the kite down for us,’ ‘Dad flung the reins to Mother and jumped to the ground yelling for the Negroes,’ ‘You could get most any Negro to take charge of the butchering [of hogs] for the chitterlings” (*Becoming* 121). The casual way in which Faulkner’s brother speaks of the Negroes in their life strongly indicates the environment in which Faulkner was raised. Weinstein says, “In these passages, John was focusing on the Faulkner boys’ childhood shenanigans. But he also lets us see how extensively a white childhood in the early twentieth-century South assumed the subordinate presence of useful, obedient blacks” (*Becoming* 121). Faulkner grew up with the South’s assumption and teachings of white supremacy as a normal part of day-to-day life, as did most white Southerners of his time. He had a mammy, Mammy Callie, whom he saw as part of the family and was no doubt influenced by her role in his household, as were most white children with mammys. Weinstein quotes Faulkner’s daughter Jill who says, “Mammy Callie was probably the most important person in his life” (*Becoming* 129). While Mammy Callie was no doubt a

person whom Faulkner loved, she also filled the role of black servant, and while she, as a person, molded Faulkner's views, so did the role she played.

Not only was Faulkner's personal life ripe with influence enough to shape a typical white Southern mindset in the early 1900s, the political storm in his home state was fertile soil as well. Mississippi politicians were some of the most virulent against blacks and used white anxieties to further their own political gains. Weinstein notes that James Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo "channeled and rode a wave of racial anger often referred to as 'the rise of the Rednecks'" (*Becoming* 122). In a quote from Vardamann, all the fears that fueled Southern whites are succinctly expressed in one sentence: "'You can scarcely pick up a newspaper whose pages are not blackened with the account of an unmentionable crime committed by a negro brute, and this crime, I want to impress upon you, is but the manifestation of the negro's aspiration for social equality, encouraged largely by the character of free education in vogue'" (*Becoming* 123). The paper is "blackened," the black beast rapist emerges, and this horrible figure is fueled by thoughts of equality that sprouted from education. This type of rhetoric fueled the belief of white superiority and encouraged the atrocious acts implemented in support of that belief.

The rhetoric used by Vardamann and others echoed through Faulkner's childhood as did the deeds it encouraged. Weinstein notes that Mississippi had the highest number of lynchings in the Union between 1889 and 1909 and one of the most notorious, the lynching of Nelse Patton, occurred in Oxford in 1908. Patton was accused of having murdered a white woman named Mattie McMillan with a razor blade then fleeing the scene. Weinstein references historian Joel Williamson who illustrates how journalists and politicians fueled the rage of the white population, a rage that ended in castration and a

lynching, “First reported as ‘a white woman,’ Mattie was within hours referred to as ‘a white lady’; at first she was ‘killed,’ but within hours the papers reported her as ‘assaulted and killed.’” (*Becoming* 123). According to Weinstein, Faulkner claims he never witnessed a lynching, though this one happened one thousand yards from his house. Weinstein says, “He didn’t have to have seen that ritual dismembering to remember its impact for the rest of his life” (*Becoming* 123).

Despite Faulkner’s upbringing and the politically charged environment of his home state he explored the color line in groundbreaking ways. Unlike many of his contemporaries he attempted to illustrate the political and social shortcomings of the South in an unsentimental manner. Through his novels Faulkner reflects the horrifying effects of segregation on black and white alike. Eric J. Sundquist speaks of Faulkner’s turn to race relations in *Light In August* noting that the novel emerged at the peak of the Jim Crow South when old racist fears were refueled due to a surge in demand for black equality. In his book, *Faulkner: The House Divided*, Sundquist says, “Those years, which more or less encompass the lives of Joe Christmas, Quentin Compson, and Ike McCaslin, belong to Faulkner, who became a major novelist over the same period of time but did so by reminding us how old the new fears were, how little they had changed, and how long they were likely to last” (69). Through the novels *Light In August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner paints vivid pictures of the South in which he was raised. Through his writings we see: the creation of the black beast rapist, the influence of racism taught in the home, the willingness to destroy a brother rather than accept his black blood and the willingness of a society to destroy itself rather than accept defeat and acknowledge past wrongs. Faulkner created stories that revolved around the history in

which he was immersed, but unlike his contemporaries he did not rewrite the history in order to romanticize this broken world.

Faulkner elucidates the creation of the black beast rapist in *Light In August*. The lynching of Nelse Patton, though not seen by Faulkner, obviously planted itself in his psyche and emerged as the murder of Joanna Burden and “execution” of Joe Christmas. In *Light In August*, Joe Christmas murders Joanna Burden by nearly decapitating her with a razor blade then flees the scene. The crowd gathers and stares at Joanna’s sheet covered body. Faulkner writes about the crowd, “who believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro and who knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward” (*Light*<sup>2</sup> 288). Here Faulkner illustrates the discourse of rape that precedes a lynching. The drama need not unfold before the white townspeople in real time, they are already writing the story that will lead to a lynching regardless of actual facts that may emerge. Similar to how the real-life Mattie McMillan went from a white woman to a white lady, Joanna is transformed by the townsfolk from an abolitionist and “nigger lover,” a person whom the town had shunned and ostracized, into a white woman who deserves vengeance. Faulkner says, “some of them with pistols already in their pockets began to canvas about for someone to crucify” and “she bequeathed to the town in which she had been born and lived and died a foreigner, an outlander, a kind of heritage of astonishment and outrage, for which, even though she had supplied them at last with an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday almost, they would never let her be dead in peace and quiet” (*Light* 289). The white crowd has reason enough for a lynching, it doesn’t

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<sup>2</sup> All subsequent citations to this text will be listed as *Light*.

matter that they hated Joanna for sympathizing with black people. Now dead, she is white, murdered, raped; a black man must pay.

Not only does Faulkner portray the creation of the black beast rapist, he highlights the fear of miscegenation that fueled the desire for segregation. Worse than a black man having murdered a white woman is a black man who everyone thought was a white man, one who lived among them as a white man, murdering a white woman. Joe Brown/Lucas Burch turns in Christmas for the murder of Joanna. When the police continuously poke holes in Brown's story and begin to accuse *him* of the murder, he reveals that Joe is actually a black man, "'That's right,' he says. 'Go on. Accuse me. Accuse the white man that's trying to help you with what he knows. Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free. Accuse the white man and let the nigger run'" (*Light* 97). Brown/Burch calls Christmas a nigger twice, juxtaposing the claim of Christmas' blackness against his own whiteness with full knowledge of the effect of his words. The marshall pauses for only a moment saying, "'You better be careful what you are saying, if it is a white man you are talking about,' the marshall says. 'I don't care if he is a murderer or not'" (*Light* 98). The marshall's advice to "be careful" highlights the fact that accusing a white man of being black is worse than the murder the man may have committed. A quote in Litwack's book from an anonymous woman sums up the position in which Joe now finds himself: "'I dread to see my children grow. I know not their fate....It does not matter how good or wise my children may be, they are colored. When I have said that, all is said. Everything is forgiven in the South but color'" (218). To be colored is to be the incarnation of sin, the ultimate sin, according to the white population in the South. The sheriff's easy acceptance of Brown/Burch's accusation of Joe having black blood reveals how deeply

immersed this society is in the fear and revulsion of miscegenation. The sheriff says to Brown/Burch, “I believe you are telling the truth at last.” (*Light* 99). The officers have not believed a word of Brown/Burch’s thus far, Brown/Burch is a known liar, untrusted by all who have had contact with him in Jefferson, yet the moment he accuses Christmas of having black blood he is suddenly trustworthy. Having been immersed in a culture that feared unknown social interaction with a person of color to such an extreme that segregation was the law of the land, Faulkner aptly portrays the damning effect of black blood.

We further witness Faulkner’s deep immersion and understanding of the unsound culture of the South in his portrayal of the town’s reaction to the knowledge that Joe was part black. “‘A nigger,’ the marshall said. ‘I always thought there was something funny about that fellow’” (*Light* 99), “and the womenfolks were in the kitchen, getting dinner, they told it again: ‘He don’t look any more like a nigger than I do. But it must have been the nigger blood in him’” (*Light* 349), “I said all the time that he wasn’t right. Wasn’t a white man. That there was something funny about him” (*Light* 308-309). Not even Byron Bunch, who is thought to be an honest, godly man, questions the verity of Burch/Brown’s statement. “‘That’s what Brown says,’ Byron says, his tone quiet, stubborn, convinced. ‘And even a liar can be scared into telling the truth, same as an honest man can be tortured into telling a lie’” (*Light* 100). The fact that Christmas has no physical indication of being black doesn’t matter, and the murder he committed has faded into the background. Joe is a “nigger” and must pay, not for the crime of Joanna’s murder, but for daring to pose as a white man.

Faulkner extends his deeply rooted knowledge of the segregated South to the South pre-civil war in *Absalom, Absalom!* and through Thomas Sutpen's design shows the influence of the custom of slavery. Thomas Sutpen devises a plan based on a learned social order. Sutpen claimed that before his family came down out of the mountains when he was a boy, "he didn't even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat . . . because of what color their skin happened to be . . . it had never occurred to him that any man should take any such blind accident as that as authority or warrant to look down at others, any others" (*Absalom*<sup>3</sup> 179-180). After being turned away from the front door of a wealthy plantation owner and told to go to the back door by a black servant Sutpen becomes determined to become the equal of the plantation owner, and in doing so, secure a place in society for his future family, insuring that they would never be rejected from a front door. In his quest he travels to Haiti, wins the hand of a wealthy plantation owners' daughter by helping quell an insurrection by the plantation's slaves, and produces the son (so desired by Sutpen) to carry on his design. Upon realizing that his wife is part black, Sutpen leaves her and disowns his son. Sutpen tells Quentin's grandfather:

there had been not only reservation but actual misrepresentation on their part and misrepresentation of such a crass nature as to have voided and frustrated without his knowing it the central motivation of his entire design, but would have made an ironic delusion of all that he had suffered and endured in the past and all that he could ever accomplish in the future toward that design (*Absalom* 211).

The black blood, though undetectable, "voided" Sutpen's design. The black blood rendered his wife and son less than he was as a "poor-white-trash" boy who was turned

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<sup>3</sup> All subsequent citations to this text will be listed as *Absalom*.

away from a plantation owner's front door by a slave. His design was to become the plantation owner's equal and to have his children be equal to the owner's children. His son could not be equal with black blood. Through Sutpen Faulkner illustrates the allure of white supremacy and the ease in which a person can accept the principles needed to back the idea in order to further their own destiny. Quentin speaks of the practice as a "disease." Faulkner shows us how the disease spread, and as a result the society in which he grew up continued, "looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret" (*Absalom* 7). Faulkner unflinchingly displays the absurd beliefs of the society in which he was entrenched.

Faulkner contests the belief that a drop of black blood makes a person socially unacceptable amongst the white population, a belief ingrained in the society in which he was deeply immersed, in his portrayal of Charles Bon, the son Sutpen disowned. Bon is described by Mr. Compson as a person who "must have appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere—a man with an ease of manner and a swaggering gallant air in comparison with which Sutpen's pompous arrogance was clumsy bluff and Henry actually a hobble-de-hoy" (*Absalom* 58). More sophisticated than the son Sutpen deems acceptable, Bon is almost ethereal in his grace and beauty. Henry loves and admires Bon and Bon becomes betrothed to Judith (Sutpen's daughter and Henry's sister). The black blood that Sutpen thought would be an "ironic delusion" (*Absalom* 211) to his design is so undetectable that Bon has managed to seduce both of Sutpen's children. Henry, "who aped his clothing and manner" (*Absalom* 76), so loves Bon that when Sutpen refuses to allow him to wed Judith, revealing that they are in fact brothers,

Henry repudiates his inheritance and family and enlists in the war (Civil War) with Bon. Even knowing that Bon is his half-brother, Henry does not refuse him Judith's hand.

Faulkner illustrates through the Sutpen family drama how deeply the fear of miscegenation ran in the South; he depicts the irrational mindset that emerges in a world where white children are taught from their first breath that black blood is inferior and that black people are slaves, chattel, subhuman. As long as Bon's heritage is unknown it is inconsequential. Henry so admired Bon that even incest was not motivation enough to reject him as Judith's betrothed; however, in the South in 1865 miscegenation was a crime far worse than incest. Upon learning that Bon is part black Henry finally fulfills his father's wish and refuses to let Bon marry Judith. When Bon persists, Henry shoots him and, in this act, Sutpen's design is destroyed. Henry had no proof that Bon was part black, but he believes it without question when told, just as the accusation of Joe's blood is believed without question, and years of admiration and comradeship are erased. It doesn't matter that Bon is worldly, handsome, an officer in the army, a friend, and in every way Henry's superior: the second the black blood is made a factor, Bon is no better than the slaves on Henry's boyhood plantation. Quentin and Shreve imagine the scene between Henry and Bon when Henry tells Bon that he cannot marry Judith. In their conjured scene Bon hands Henry his pistol and tells Henry he must shoot him to stop him. Henry says, "*You are my brother*" and Bon replies, "*No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry*" (Absalom 286). Quentin and Shreve understand the reality of the situation, even forty-four years removed, and imagine Bon does as well. He is no longer brother or friend. He is now a "nigger" to Henry, and just as his mother was unsuitable for Sutpen and his design, Bon

is now unsuitable for Judith as a husband and for Henry as a friend. Shreve and Quentin assume that the imagined taint of the “black blood” is impossible for Henry to accept as miscegenation is impossible to accept for the people Faulkner called friends, neighbors and family.

Faulkner continues exploring the dichotomy of “what is” and “what is imagined” in reference to the supposed taint of black blood in *Go Down, Moses*. In a series of vignettes focused mainly on the McCaslin family, he breaks down stereotypes by illustrating situations on both sides of the color line. Sandwiched between stories of the McCaslin’s is an extraordinary story, “Pantaloon in Black.” Part 1 of the story is focused on a black man named Rider who has just lost his wife, Mannie. The story opens at Mannie’s funeral with Rider furiously shoveling the dirt into her grave. As Rider himself performs the last act required of his wife’s physical body, overwhelming grief spills from the pages. The story continues to follow Rider as he attempts to process his grief. As he arrives back at the house he shared with Mannie his sense of loss is overwhelming: “But when he put his hand on the gate it seemed to him suddenly that there was nothing beyond it. The house had never been his anyway, but now even the new planks and sills and shingles, the hearth and stove and bed, were all a part of the memory of somebody else” (*Moses*<sup>4</sup> 135). Upon entering the house, he encounters Mannie’s spirit. He says, “Hit’s awright. Ah ain’t afraid” then as her spirit begins to fade, “Den lemme go wid you, honey” (136); his grief is heartbreakingly apparent. He continues to keep himself busy, walking through the woods, going to work, and eventually turns to alcohol to drive the thoughts of his dead wife from his mind. Part 1 ends with Rider murdering a white man

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<sup>4</sup> All subsequent citations to this text will be listed as *Moses*.

whom he caught and outed for cheating at a game of dice. As the white man reaches for his pistol, obviously prepared to shoot Rider for revealing the cheat, Rider, drunk, reacts faster and slices the man's neck with a razor.

Rider's grief is obvious and understandable, but in Part 2 Faulkner displays the white population's ability to transform a black person's actions; the mindset that creates the black beast rapist is on full display. As a deputy relays the story to his wife the actions of Rider's grief are transformed and dehumanized. The color of Rider's skin darkens the actions and changes them into actions that only a "nigger" would make. The deputy begins with:

"Them damn niggers" he said, "I swear to godfrey, 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, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffalos. Now you take this one today---" (*Moses* 149-150).

He proceeds to examine Rider's actions after the death of his wife and transform them from actions made out of extreme and overwhelming grief into callous and unfeeling actions. He says of Rider burying Mannie himself, "'maybe that's how he felt about her. There ain't any law against a man rushing his wife into the ground" (150). On Rider showing up to work the day after the funeral the deputy says, "McAndrews and everybody else expected him to take the day off since even a nigger couldn't want no better excuse for a holiday than he had just buried his wife, when a white man would

have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife, when even a little child would have sense enough to take the day off when he would still get paid for it too” (151). Commenting on the murder of the dice-cheater and its aftermath he says, “the simplest way to find him would be just to stay close behind them Birdsong boys. Of course there wouldn’t be nothing hardly worth bringing back to town after they did find him, but it would close the case” (152). The deputy succinctly reduces all black people to “a herd of wild buffalos,” refuses to acknowledge that Rider’s actions stemmed from grief, and is more concerned about closing the case than the fact that a group of men would take it upon themselves to torture and murder Rider.

In presenting Rider’s extreme grief first then presenting the prevailing white opinion/reaction to that grief, Faulkner shows how the white population is able to rationalize their belief that blacks are inferior in any and all situations. The deputy comments that “even a black man couldn’t want no better excuse for a holiday,” but if Rider had taken the day off, he would have been seen as a “lazy nigger” who was using his wife’s death as an excuse to take a holiday. The deputy comments that he walks off the job-site in the middle of the day, as if that is unbelievable, just seconds after he claims he shouldn’t have been there in the first place, “And then, when everybody had finally decided that that’s the way to take him, the way he wants to be took, he walks off the job in the middle of the afternoon” (*Moses* 151). Racism is so ingrained in the society about which Faulkner writes that any and all actions taken by a black person can be explained as the default in their race, a default that is believed to be grounded in the color of their skin and in their blood.

Faulkner illustrates how this belief of the inferiority of black skin and blood passes smoothly, without question, from one generation to the next, in the story, "The Fire and the Hearth." Henry Beauchamp, a black boy, and Carothers Edmonds, a white boy and son of the owner of the land where both boys live, grow up side-by-side and consider themselves foster brothers. The white man's house and the negro cabin are "interchangeable: himself and his foster-brother sleeping on the same pallet in the white man's house or in the same bed in the negro's and eating the same food at the same table in either" (*Moses* 107). One day Carothers decides that Henry should sleep on the pallet beside his bed and he in the bed above Henry. Faulkner describes the sudden change of mindset in Carothers as follows, "Then one day the old curse of his fathers, the old haughty ancestral pride based not on any value but on an accident of geography, stemmed not from courage and honor but from wrong and shame, descended to him" (*Moses* 107). In an instant, with the flip of a switch in Carothers' head, the boys change from "foster-brothers" to a white boy and a black boy, the white boy desiring an elevated position for reasons unknown even to himself. When Carothers regrets his actions and attempts to act as if nothing had changed, he realizes it is "forever and forever too late" (*Moses* 109). The next evening, rather than asking, Carother's informs Molly, Henry's mother and the woman who raised Carothers from infancy, that he will eat at her house that night. When she calls him in for dinner, he finds a place set for one; Henry, having eaten already, is headed out the door. The boys' conversation is as follows, "'Are you ashamed to eat when I eat?' he cried./ Henry paused, turning his head a little to speak in the voice slow and without heat: 'I ain't shamed of nobody,' he said peacefully. 'Not even me.'" (*Moses* 110). In an instant, with the act of a child testing out the social hierarchy he sees playing

out all around him, Carothers' world is changed. His foster brother becomes the black boy that lives on his land and his foster mother becomes the black woman who raised him. As Hale said, it is time for his feelings for his foster family to be "packed up with the baby clothes" (Hale 118).

### **The Genius of Faulkner**

The fictional examples of the destruction slavery wrought upon society as a whole, as well as to individual people, are endless in Faulkner's work; in studying scholars' interpretations of these examples, Faulkner's keen understanding of race relations is better understood. Faulkner portrayed the society in which he lived through his writing, but his portrayals are more than mere reflections of the people and events around him. Faulkner seemed to understand what the South as a whole attempted to deny: the color line that white Southerners wanted desperately to define in a rigid black and white manner was a line already blurred beyond definition. Not only was the line blurred, but the people responsible were the ones denying the fact. Faulkner dedicated some of his most critically acclaimed books to exploring the mulatto nature of the South as well as the warped mindset that resulted from the practice of slavery.

Faulkner's understanding of the systemic nature of race is so advanced for his time that it is completely misinterpreted by some of his contemporary literary scholars. Cleanth Brooks, a renowned Faulkner scholar and considered by many to be the archetypal New Critic, deals with the issue of race in Faulkner's work as background for what he defines as the main themes. In his foreword to his book *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, he lists the themes that appear in *Light In August*, "To mention

only a few: there is the role of the community, the theme of isolation and alienation, Puritanism under the hot Southern sun, the tension between the masculine and feminine principles, and the relation of the characters to the past” (viii). To give him credit, he does preface the list with “To mention only a few” but the fact that the issue of race didn’t make it into this listing of major themes in *Light In August* seems indicative of Brooks’ inability to see race as a theme worth exploring. In his analysis of *Light In August*, Brooks points to “latent homosexuality” as the reason for Joe Christmas’s “suspicion of tenderness” when it comes to Joe’s relationship with women (56-57). Brooks acknowledges that Faulkner traces Joe’s sexual development from the toothpaste incident with the dietician to his relationship with Bobbie, his first girlfriend, but Brooks says of Faulkner, “he has not forced the development to extremes. Joe is not made into an overt homosexual. But his distaste for women and his fear of them is accounted for, and his antifeminine attitude becomes, as we shall see, a meaningful part of the novel” (56). He continues in this vein with, “It is Joe’s latent homosexuality that involves him with Joanna” (57). Brooks does not acknowledge that Joe’s “antifeminine attitude” began when the dietician, who previously represented only pleasing associations to Joe, turns on him and calls him a nigger and is sealed when Bobbie, his girlfriend/first-love, rejects him, also calling him a nigger.

Brooks seems similarly blind to race in his analysis of *Go Down, Moses*. He writes, “‘Pantaloon in Black,’ may be described as a kind of ‘Wordsworthian’ story – that is to say, the story of a simple and primitive man who displays a capacity for grief and an intensity of emotion that put to shame the man of cultivated sensibility.” (254-255).

The simple and primitive man is, of course, Rider. In summing up the story Brooks makes no mention of the fact that Rider is a black man. This could be looked at two ways: either the description “simple and primitive” is meant to denote he is black, which is a problem, or Brooks does not see the fact that Rider is black as a major part of the story, which is also a problem. Frankly, it is hard to say which scenario is worse. He says of the sheriff who recounts Rider’s actions from his own perspective in the second half of the story, “All the latter part of the action is related by the deputy sheriff, who is frankly baffled, quite unable to understand the man’s motives.” Brooks ends this train of thought with, “The reader, however, can understand if he will, though if he becomes preoccupied with the sheriff’s apparent heartlessness and lack of sympathy with a Negro murderer, he may miss the story too. For the deputy sheriff’s function is not to call attention to himself or even to what he represents, but to provide a means for our understanding” (255).

Suddenly race is mentioned when Rider becomes a “Negro murderer.” As Brooks says the reader might miss the story, he himself misses the point. The deputy sheriff is meant to call attention to himself and to every other white man who finds it impossible to attribute human emotion to a black man. The point of juxtaposing Rider’s story with the deputy-sheriff’s recounting of the story is to shed light on the white man’s inability to see the black man as an equal in thought, word and deed. He is providing a “means for our understanding” as Brooks says, but not of understanding Rider, of understanding the magnitude of damage that has been done in treating humans as chattel for generations. Faulkner uses the deputy-sheriff as a means for understanding the warped mentality of the Southern white man.

While Brooks sees race as a secondary issue, a background upon which more important issues play, Alwyn Berland attempts to explore it as a primary theme in Faulkner's works. In his book, *Light In August: A Study in Black and White* Berland debunks Brooks' claim that Joe's treatment of women stems from his latent homosexuality. He says, "This attribution of latent homosexuality seems to me a serious mistake about Joe Christmas, and about the novel's meaning. It is true that Joe is suspicious of, and even hostile to, the 'feminine principle.' But Faulkner never even hints at the issue of sexual preference." Berland reaches the conclusion, "It is Joe's social conditioning that creates this hostility, and not some innate sexual bias" (45-46). Berland is closer to the mark; social conditioning has shaped Joe, but when Berland attempts to delve deeper into his idea of this social conditioning he loses momentum. He claims, "The only times in the novel that Joe's black blood becomes important are when sex is important too" (Berland 40). He makes an especial point that during the years with McEachern, Joe's blood is not an issue. While this is true as far as McEachern is concerned, for he never knows that Joe believes himself part black, it is not true in relation to Joe. Joe fantasizes about telling Mrs. McEachern as a form of punishment for the kindness she bestowed upon him that he did not understand nor ask for, a "secret payment for the secret dishes which he had not wanted" (*Light* 167). Joe imagines himself saying, "Listen. He says he has nursed a blasphemer and an ingrate. I dare you to tell him what he has nursed. That he has nursed a nigger beneath his own roof, with his own food at his own table" (*Light* 168). This thought occurs without any relation to sex. He sees his black blood as something McEachern would detest and so in telling Mrs. McEachern he would force her to make the choice to keep that horrible secret or to tell

Mr. McEachern when she knows his “immediate and predictable reaction to the knowledge would so obliterate it as a factor in their relations that it would never appear again” (*Light* 167). It can also be argued that Joe’s revealing of his blood to Bobbie is not related to sex. The scene begins, “That night they talked. They lay in bed, in the dark, talking. Or he talked, that is. All the time he was thinking ‘Jesus. Jesus. So this is it’” (*Light* 195). Joe is in love for the first and only time in his life. Joe’s admission of his supposed origins is not sex-fueled, it is a tender, loving admission, an admission that longs for acceptance. His discussion with Joanna about his supposed origins is also not sexual in nature. Joe comes home from work and finds Joanna in the cabin where he stays, sitting on his cot. He thinks, “*She has come to talk to me*. Two hours later she was still talking, they sitting side by side on the cot in the now dark cabin” (*Light* 240). In neither instance where we see Joe candidly discuss his supposition that he has black blood does sex fuel the conversation.

Berland continues linking Joe’s black blood to sex and concludes that this link leads to a religious theme in *Light In August*. He says, “As in any Calvinistic universe, the world of *Light In August* is a world of black and white, a world in which natural depravity, original sin, tends inevitably, even exclusively, to mean sex. This leads me to a crucial thesis about the novel: The terms *black* and *white* here refer not only to race but to something within the individual, to the radical divisions of the Calvinist world” (40). Berland’s thesis is not only based on a theory of sex and Joe’s black blood that can be disproven, but his thesis also marginalizes the social construct of the black blood and turns it into a spiritual aspect; a religious categorizing of good and bad. While the argument for Calvinistic undertones in *Light In August* is worthwhile, Berland places it

front and center and, in doing so, downplays the actual issue of race. Berland states, “Faulkner makes us feel that while his tragedy is grounded in the particular milieu of the American South, Joe Christmas remains in our minds and memories as emblematic of universal human suffering” (82). This tone-deaf statement furthers the argument that Berland sidelines the issue of race. Joe’s suffering is not at all universal. Joe’s suffering is born out of a specific practice in a specific region of the world; to classify it as universal is to erase the racial aspect of Joe’s suffering.

Brooks does not explore the dominant theme of race in Faulkner’s work, Berland acknowledges the theme but overshadows it with a Calvinistic twist, whereas Melvin Seiden is offended that he is forced to analyze the theme of miscegenation in *Absalom, Absalom!* Seiden says:

The life and death of Charles Bon pose difficult moral questions. How do we - how are we intended to - react to the ominous stranger whose mixed blood predisposes him to dangerous purposes, who cannot be trusted because we do not know how to take him, who cannot be the object of simple love because fear contaminates that love, who cannot be righteously hated because deep affinities embarrass that hatred, who cannot be accepted by a society that seeks to preserve its homogeneity or rejected with impunity by one that wishes to retain its humanity? Clearly there is an urgent necessity to confront squarely Faulkner’s lurid racist theme (676).

Seiden proceeds to analyze the “lurid” theme in a relatively enlightened way; enlightened in the fact that he does analyze the idea of miscegenation thoroughly, going so far as to question the laws in place in 1963 that illegalize miscegenation; but in the end his

conclusion, like Berland's, pushes the miscegenation aside to make way for a different theme. Seiden says, "The incest theme turned out to be a camouflaging of the miscegenation issue, and now we discover that this in turn reveals itself as concealing an even more basic theme, and that is the search of a son for a father" (687-688). Like Berland he seems to want to find another theme on which to focus beyond the theme of race. In discussing this father/son theme and exploring where Sutpen's guilt truly lies, Berland says, "that Sutpen is guilty not only in the simple act of repudiating his son, but more profoundly, in refusing to acknowledge the existential reality of Bon's truly being in all integrity no more and no less than what he feels himself to be – and that is, of course, the white son of a white father" (689). Seiden seems to want to say that "black" blood is not an indicator of one's abilities or of one's personality, that being black does not mark one as other; but instead of saying that Bon is worthy of being Sutpen's son with a mixed race heritage, he pulls Bon all the way over to the white side of the color line in an attempt to eliminate the black blood altogether.

The inability of these scholars to fully comprehend the magnitude of race in Faulkner's writings is a testament to Faulkner's understanding of his chosen subject matter. Also, prominent literary criticism was primarily written by white scholars whose ability to overlook or downplay the issue of race was rooted in the same society that made the construction of race possible. Weinstein notes in his book, *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns* that scholars changed their perspective in regard to race in Faulkner's works around the 1980s. He notes that as long as New Critical criteria reigned as the primary producer of literary commentary, "race (like gender) tended to remain an aesthetically minor dimension of writing – its production, its orientation, and its

reception. The great writer, it was generally agreed, transcended such secondary conditions as racial makeup in his embodiment and pursuit of the timeless and the essentially *human*” (*Cosmos*<sup>5</sup> 42). The transcending of race is easy when your own skin color is not considered an indicator of your humanity. In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills says, “But in a racially structured polity, the only people who can find it psychologically possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged, for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them, whiteness as the ground against which the figures of other races – those who, unlike us, are raced - appear (Mills 76). These critics marginalized the issue of race in Faulkner’s work; for them race was not an issue therefore it was not worth exploring as a dominant theme. The fact that the construction of race is a central theme in Faulkner’s most critically acclaimed books, whether recognized by his contemporaries or not, proves that he was willing to confront and explore what others attempted to sideline.

Though early interpretations of Faulkner’s work managed to obtusely interpret or even willfully ignore the glaring racial themes, contemporary critics agree that through *Christmas*, Faulkner begins to fully explore the culture of his upbringing, the absurd beliefs spawned from that culture and the fears that fuel those beliefs. Theresa Towner says, “Standing perhaps as Faulkner’s greatest example of the constructedness of racial categories and their relationship to individual identity is Joe Christmas, who murders and is murdered because of the American color line, yet who never knows where he stands in relation to it” (59). Lee Jenkins says, “He has no respectful or defining self-conception, because of his own internal division which reflects the irreconcilable racial conflict in life

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<sup>5</sup> All subsequent citations to this text will be listed as *Cosmos*.

about him” (62). Eric J. Sundquist says, “By embodying that problem in a character whose very physical and emotional self embodies the sexual violence of racial conflict, Faulkner made the problem painfully visible and immediate” (90). Weinstein notes that *Light In August* is Faulkner’s first in-depth exploration of the fact that race is not based on biology, as the culture in which Faulkner was raised wanted to believe, but that race is a social construct. As Faulkner reveals race as a social construction, he reveals that the white male’s identity is based on the assumptions provided from this construction; the social construct of race is intertwined with the white male’s defining of his own identity in the South. Weinstein says of Faulkner, “He found, in the overdetermined chaos that is Joe Christmas, that the domain of racial difference, gender distinction, and sexual desire fuse into a single magnetic field as covertly appealing as it is officially taboo: miscegenation” (*Cosmos* 52-53). Joe Christmas is Faulkner’s original embodiment of race as a social construct.

Joe was not Faulkner’s first observation of race as a social construct, as Quentin had observed in *The Sound and the Fury* “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” (86). Sundquist says that this realization not only leads Faulkner into his major works for the next two decades, but also, “comes into dramatic perspective in *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Faulkner reimagines and redirects Quentin’s dilemma and suicide with an obsessive historical fury, enclosing it within the more haunting, more feverish and far-reaching story of Sutpen’s Hundred” (67). Sundquist notes that this recreation of Quentin’s story could not have happened without his first exploring the theme of race more thoroughly in *Light In August*. He believes that the creation of Joe led Faulkner to

*Absalom, Absalom!*, his most profound work on race. In this novel Faulkner brings Quentin back from the dead to explore the devastating effects of race, placing the time frame of the book right before Quentin's suicide. Sundquist comments, "He brings to a culmination, with an intensity only the war and its aftermath could make visible, the several fratricidal dimensions of America's national sin" (100). Sundquist observes that Faulkner, by focusing his artistic lens on one man's design and the repudiation of his "black" wife and son in order to achieve said design, illustrates the terrifying results wrought by slavery and the construct of race more vividly by turning brother against brother.

Weinstein explores the significance of Charles Bon in relation to race as a social construct in *Absalom, Absalom!* In Weinstein's biography he gets at the heart of this drama. Bon, like Christmas, represents the social construct of race; but in keeping his black blood a secret until the end, Faulkner forces the reader, regardless of any inclination toward racism he/she may possess, to see Bon as he is presented. Weinstein observes that in discovering that Bon is black after reading him as white for the majority of the book the reader is forced to acknowledge the absurdity of racial construction. Weinstein says, "Absurd because Bon so transcends the stereotype, brutal because its daily imposition prevented Mississippi slaves from remotely becoming Bon. Faulkner has created, in the guise of this socially impossible figure, so much that the South had experienced but could not allow itself to conceptualize" (*Becoming* 152). Bon is a polished, educated, graceful being who charms everyone he encounters. When Faulkner reveals his origins, the reader is forced to consider race as a social construct. The rejection of the idea is still possible but, as Weinstein points out, the absurdity of thinking

that black blood transforms Bon into a different character only highlights the tragic results of slavery. Grace Elizabeth Hale and Robert Jackson comment in their article, “‘We’re Trying Hard as Hell to Free Ourselves’: Southern History and Race in the Making of William Faulkner’s Literary Terrain” that in fusing the Sutpen family’s history to the history of the South, *Absalom, Absalom!* poses Henry Sutpen’s murder of Charles Bon as the final act that destroys the architecture of a civilization built upon the original flaw of racism. Hale and Jackson state, “not the black race, as many segregationists feared, but a racism traceable to Thomas Sutpen’s disavowal of his mulatto wife and infant son. The novel implies the most advanced position on race Faulkner would ever take. Essentially, it is the vision of a mulatto South” (38). Faulkner is attempting to illustrate what the South refuses to see: the mulatto landscape of the country is a reality that cannot be controlled or regulated. Barbara Ladd speaks of this issue as well in her article “The Direction of the Howling.” She says, “the construction and reconstruction of Charles Bon recapitulates the construction and reconstruction of the creole Deep South as site of the struggle between an ahistorical ideology of American transcendence of history and American history itself” (231). Ladd observes that miscegenation and the concentrated effort to stop or ignore the fact of the mixing of the races is a discussion that dates back to before the Civil War. She says this issue as presented in *Absalom, Absalom!* “is a return, through the medium of psychological family drama, to the issue of assimilation versus segregation of the creole as it was defined and discussed in the political discourse of American nationalism between 1803 and the beginning of the Civil War” (231-232). Charles Bon assimilates. He is functioning as a gentleman in the South. He is admired to the point that his classmates, also Southern gentlemen, mimic him. The

revealing of the black blood transforms Bon in the eyes of Henry; Faulkner is forcing his readers to acknowledge whether it transforms Bon for them as well. Ladd ends this article with a quote from Carolyn Porter's book, *Seeing and Being*: "by the time we find out what's going on, we are already implicated in it" (Porter 49). This quote reflects what Weinstein also expressed, upon realizing Bon is part black, the reader is forced to face the implications of their feelings towards Bon as first a white man, and finally as a black man.

Sundquist explores the themes of incest and miscegenation as they appear in *Go Down, Moses*. In *Absalom, Absalom!* these themes are thwarted by Henry Sutpen shooting Charles Bon at the gates of Sutpen's Hundred. In *Go Down, Moses* they are fully realized but the source of these threats is reversed. It is not "*the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister*" (*Absalom* 286), it is the white father who will sleep with his black lovers' daughter, his own daughter, reversing the southern creation of the black beast rapist into the reality that is the southern landscape. Sundquist comments that in *Light In August* Faulkner linked the curse of race to Calvinism and religious damnation, in *Absalom, Absalom!* he sets the drama in the middle of the Civil War and combines racism with incest and finally, "in *Go Down, Moses* those themes are joined to a third American theme, the sacrifice of the totem animal" (Sundquist 139). Sundquist continues in saying that the juxtaposition of these themes is contradictory but "It depends, in short, on the continued insistence of commentators both more or less 'racist' in their points of view that the Negro is a 'beast' - physiologically, emotionally, socially, or in every conceivable way" (Sundquist 139). Sundquist continues this line of thinking while linking the hunt, miscegenation and Isaac McCaslin's repudiation of the land that is his

birthright. He says that the idea of a black person as a beast, which was used to rationalize the practice of slavery and fueled the postbellum hysteria over race relations, was a result of “repressed guilt over the visible actualities of slaveholding miscegenation, the language in which such fears were expressed, both before and after the war, reveals a psychological instability that makes the analogy between repressed white lust and projected black threat acute by frantically denying it, closer for the paradox” (142). The hunt for the beast is the inverted strain running through *Go Down, Moses*, from the chase of Tomey’s Turl in “Was,” to the actual hunt in “The Bear” to the hunting of the “doe” (Carother’s mulatto mistress) in “Delta Autumn.” Sundquist proposes that these “hunts” are Faulkner linking the “black beast rapist” hysteria to the actual rapists, who were the white landowners. Old Carothers’ rape of his own daughter is what leads Isaac to repudiate his birthright. Weinstein says, through *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner illustrates the far-reaching oppression of blacks by whites due to the practice of that which the white population claims to abhor. He continues, “Bound to each other through seven generations that begin and end with miscegenation, the blacks see in the whites the conditions they cannot escape, the whites see in the blacks the guilt they cannot assuage” (*Cosmos* 62). *Go Down, Moses*, while more convoluted than *Light In August* or even *Absalom, Absalom!*, focuses on the same key themes: miscegenation, the fear of miscegenation, and the fact that the mulatto landscape of the country, that is denied and feared by the white man, is his own doing.

Critics of Faulkner’s work acknowledge his ability to unflinchingly portray the reality of miscegenation and the changing landscape of the South despite the absurd denials of the white population; in looking to Charles Mills’ theories on race in his work

*The Racial Contract*, the mentality behind Faulkner's portrayals of the South and his critics' analysis of these portrayals can be better understood. Mills says, "Realizing a better future requires not merely admitting the ugly truth of the past – and present – but understanding the ways in which these realities were made invisible, acceptable to the white population" (92). In looking at Joe Christmas it is important to understand not only that he was troubled over his supposed origins but why he was troubled over those origins. A brief look at exactly what "The Racial Contract" outlines would be prudent. Mills says, "the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them" (11). The Racial Contract is an enlightened social contract that does not sideline or make a footnote of race, instead it makes race an integral part of the contract. With that in mind, looking at whether or not Joe actually has black blood is inconsequential as many critics point out; the fact that he believes he does is of import, and that belief fuels his internal conflict. Mills says, "Whiteness is defined in part in respect to an oppositional darkness, so that white self-conceptions of identity, personhood, and self-respect are then intimately tied up with the repudiation of the black Other" (58-59). Having been raised as a white child, this teaching of the "black Other" and the superiority of white people would have been as integral in Joe's upbringing as the catechism McEachern attempted to force upon him; but how do you repudiate the "black Other" when you believe it resides beneath your own white flesh? Joe encountered this repudiation from others throughout his formative years: first with the children on the playground with their taunts of "nigger," then with the dietician (whom he associated with goodness) who repudiated

his blackness when it served her purpose, and finally when his first love, Bobbie, used the knowledge of the “black Other” to reject him. Mills says, “No matter how poor one was, one was still able to affirm the whiteness that distinguished one from the subpersons on the other side of the color line” (59). The dietician affirmed her power as white by accusing Joe of being black and in so doing erasing his knowledge of her sexual tryst; Bobbie, a prostitute, believed herself better than Joe because of her whiteness, and finally Joe’s fate is sealed when Brown/Burch uses his knowledge of Joe’s “Black other” to accuse him of murder. As critics repeat again and again, Joe is the embodiment of race as a social construct.

Mills explains that the spacing of land and towns plays a key part in the white population’s control over the color line and this spacing contributed largely to Joe’s psychological inability to reconcile his own identity. Joe’s personal relationships contributed to his identity crisis, but the color line that he fought within himself was not learned solely from relationships: it was littered through every aspect of life around him. The spacing of race was a part of the society in which he lived. Blacks lived separate from whites: Jim Crow laws designated different train cars, different water fountains, different bathrooms, different seats in theatres and in courtrooms. Everywhere Joe looked reaffirmed his idea that the “black Other” residing within him made him inferior. Mills says, “Part of the purpose of the color bar/the color line/apartheid/jim crow is to maintain these spaces *in their place*, to have the checkerboard of virtue and vice, light and dark space, *ours* and *theirs*, clearly demarcated so that the human geography prescribed by the Racial Contract can be preserved” (48). Joe’s internal conflict arose from the fact that he could not see a space for himself on the checkerboard. His white upbringing would not

allow him to accept a life as a black man, though he tried. Faulkner portrays Joe living as a black man after “he entered the street which was to run for fifteen years” (*Light* 223).

Faulkner writes:

He lived with negroes, shunning white people. He ate with them, slept with them, belligerent, unpredictable, uncommunicative. He now lived as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving. At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the 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 (225-226).

The Racial Contract has Joe caged-in from both sides. His white upbringing has conditioned him to reject the “black Other” and his “black Other” cannot allow him to believe he is worthy of being white. Obviously there is no “black Other,” but again, Joe believes there is and that is the important point. Mills explains that “racism as an ideology” is directed at both the white and nonwhite populations, indoctrinating the whole population into the idea of nonwhite inferiority. Mills says, “the Racial Contract prescribes nonwhite self-loathing and racial deference to white citizens. The ultimate triumph of this education is that it eventually becomes possible to characterize the Racial Contract as ‘consensual’ and ‘voluntaristic’ even for nonwhites” (89). Faulkner’s portrayal of Joe highlights the mentality wrought from the “Racial Contract” of both

black and white alike. His internal battle straddles the color line and highlights the war fought across that color line throughout the country.

Joe Christmas portrays an internal battle that is a direct result of the Racial Contract, but Charles Bon portrays a different aspect: Charles highlights the mental status agreed upon by the white man when he accepts the terms of the contract. Mills says, “that *white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement” (19). He makes the point that this “misunderstanding” is not accidental but demanded by the Racial Contract in an effort to create and preserve the idea of white supremacy. As critics point out, learning at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* that Charles has black blood highlights the absurdity in categorizing people based on skin color. Bon is a romantic figure, loved by all except Sutpen; and the novel drives toward finding out just why Sutpen disapproves of him. Upon finding out why, Henry, as well as the reader, is forced to decide whether to accept the reality of Bon’s black blood and therefore admit that the racial contract is null and void or reject Bon regardless of all evidence decrying him worthy of the love originally felt. To accept Bon is tricky for a white population whose identity is based on the Racial Contract; accepting Bon means accepting that black blood does not make a person sub human. Accepting Bon means being a race traitor. Mills says, “There *is* a real choice for whites, though admittedly a difficult one. The rejection of the Racial Contract and the normed inequities of the white polity does not require one to leave the country but to speak out and struggle against the terms of the Contract” (107). Bon forces the reader to consider this struggle. Mills goes on to say,

“For as the term signifies, where morality has been racialized, the practice of a genuinely color-blind ethics requires the repudiation of one’s *Herrenvolk* standing and its accompanying moral epistemology, thus eliciting the appropriate moral condemnation from the race loyalists and white signatories who have not repudiated either” (108). Sutpen could not accept Charles and his mother because in doing so he would forfeit the “design” that would make him an equal to other plantation owners; he would have to repudiate the one thing given to him that he didn’t have to fight for, his whiteness. Henry could not accept Bon, even though he loved him, because he could not overcome his belief that the black blood did, in fact, change Bon due to Henry’s upbringing in the deep south. Faulkner is forcing the reader to make this same choice, and in so doing reinforcing the legitimacy of the Racial Contract. Weinstein says, “To read *Absalom* is to undergo a racial education that moves – over time – from cognition into tragic recognition” (*Becoming* 155).

*Absalom, Absalom!* depicts the consequence of accepting the terms of the Racial Contract; *Go Down, Moses* takes a step further and illustrates the horrific deeds that are performed when a person blindly accepts that whiteness makes him superior. The action of *Go Down, Moses* revolves around Old Carothers McCaslin’s rape of his own daughter. Faulkner, as indicated by Sundquist, uses this rape in conjunction with the hunt and Ike McCaslin’s repudiation of his birthright over this rape, to highlight that the animal is not the black man, it is the white man who enslaved him. Mills says, “As European, as white, one knew oneself to be a member of the superior race, one’s skin being one’s passport: ‘Whatever a white man did must in some grotesque fashion be ‘civilized’” (29-30). Carothers McCaslin raped his daughter because she was his to rape; he did not rape her as

his daughter, but as his property. His white skin afforded him her ownership and in owning her she ceased to be a human, she became a sub-human, and a sub-human could not be his daughter, nor could any act that he chose to take regarding her be wrong. This mentality of black people as sub-human is also illustrated in “Pantaloon in Black” when the deputy sheriff claims, “Because they ain’t human” and claims them to be “a damn herd of buffalos” (*Moses* 149-150) and uses this analogy to dehumanize Rider’s very human feelings. The ability to reduce humans to chattel based on skin color is the very basis of the Racial Contract. Mills states, “The terms of the Racial Contract mean that *nonwhite subpersonhood is enshrined simultaneously with white personhood*” (56). *Go Down, Moses* attempts to highlight this ranking of sub-person that white people assign to black people, and in doing so gets at the very heart of the Racial Contract.

The poignancy of Faulkner’s writing stems not only from his forcing his readers to think of race as a social construct but in his ability to conjure images that prompt readers to physically see the construct. In *Light In August* a thorough physical description of Joe is never given beyond the fact that he is “parchment colored.” The first description of Joe is as a grown man, “His face was gaunt, the flesh a dead parchment color (34), and in the orphanage as a boy he squirts the toothpaste onto his “parchmentcolored finger” (120). The nondescript color of “parchment” leads the reader to imagine he is void of any color at all. When the dietician is trying to convince the matron of Joe’s black blood she says, “I don’t see how we failed to see it as long as we did. You can look at his face now, his eyes and hair” (134). When he is confessing his supposed heritage to Bobbie, Joe says, “You noticed my skin, my hair,” waiting for her to answer, his hand slow on her body./She whispered also. ‘Yes, I thought maybe you were a foreigner’” (196). These

nondescript descriptions highlight just how little Joe's appearance matters in the determining of his heritage. There is no physical evidence, no real description of his eyes, face, and hair, yet the whisper that he is black makes him so and underlines just how constructed his race is. Faulkner goes further and reverses the construction with other images involving Joe. When the dietician realizes that she can have him sent to a black orphanage and imagines him there she thinks, "*He will look just like a pea in a pan full of coffee beans*" (130). This reverse-image highlights the absurdity of segregation. Joe will stand out among the black children, where he is supposed to "belong" more than he stands out among the white kids. This image illustrates that the separation of people by skin color in the South only served to highlight the mulatto landscape the white population attempted to deny.

Sundquist examines two passages where Faulkner makes use of darkness and lightness in order to elucidate the significance of Joe's character. Faulkner plunges Joe into darkness after his murder of McEachern, "He laughed back, into the lamp; he turned his head and his laughing, running on up the stairs, vanishing as he ran, vanishing upward from the head down as if he were running headfirst and laughing into something that was obliterating him like a picture in chalk being erased from a blackboard" (*Light* 208). Sundquist says of this immersion into full blackness, "The climate of fantasy that cancels out what is visible, what is "white," makes the sacrifice of Joe Christmas all the more necessary and haunting" (70). He claims Joe's sacrifice is necessary because Joe makes the reality of miscegenation visible; in so doing the repression of this reality requires his violent end. Faulkner's plunging Joe into darkness after murdering his stepfather foreshadows Joe's fate. Sundquist goes on to say that this image must be examined

alongside its opposite image which occurs on the night before his murder of Joanna. The image is as follows, “He stood with his hands on his hips, naked, thighdeep in the dusty weeds, while the car came over the hill and approached, the lights full upon him. He watched his body grow white out of the darkness like a kodak print emerging from the liquid” (*Light* 108). Sundquist says this image illustrates a, “simultaneous concealment and revelation, a figure that marks with explosive precision, at a point of passing from one to the other, the ambiguity of Joe Christmas . . . He is at once a reminder (of the amalgamation of white fathers and black mothers during slavery) and a threat (of the amalgamation of black fathers and white mothers ever since)” (71). Joe, Sundquist claims, is a reminder not only of the deeds performed by slave owners before the Civil War but of the threat of the black beast rapist after the war. Faulkner forces the reader to physically see that race is not biological or physical but purely a means to forward white supremacy.

In *Light In August* Faulkner illustrates the amalgamation of black and white through various physical representations of Joe Christmas; in *Absalom, Absalom!* he uses a host of characters to the same end. Faulkner describes Charles Bon as, “a young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy and with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents” (58), there is no mention of his skin color. Charles’s mother is seen as a shadow, “a bent face, a single cheek, a chin for an instant beyond a curtain of fallen hair, a white slender arm raised, a delicate hand clutching a ramrod” (201). Bon’s octoroon mistress and son are described as “a woman with a face like a tragic magnolia, the eternal female, the eternal Who-suffers; the child, the boy, sleeping in silk and lace to be sure yet complete chattel

of him who, begetting him, owned him body and soul to sell (if he chose) like a calf or puppy or sheep” (91). Again, the octoroon is described at Bon’s grave, “the magnolia-faced woman a little plumper now, a woman created of by and for darkness who the artist Beardsley might have dressed” and with her Charles Etienne Valery Bon, “a thin delicate child with a smooth ivory sexless face” (157). Later, Clytie scrubs Valery Bon, “as if she were trying to wash the smooth faint olive tinge from his skin” (161). Clytie, Sutpen’s daughter with one of his slaves, is described as a child with Judith, “two Sutpen faces this time – once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her” (22) and later grown, “*It was Sutpen face enough, but not his; Sutpen coffee-colored face*” (109). Valery Bon’s wife is described as, “coal black and ape-like” (166). Finally, the last Sutpen left, Jim Bond, is described as, “*the hulking slack-mouthed saddle-colored boy*” (173). Faulkner gives his reader a spectrum of skin colors ranging from magnolia white to coal black, all of which are describing people who are considered to be racially black; in doing this he again illustrates the mulatto landscape that is the South. Most interesting is the comparison of Eulalie and Charles Bon to Bon’s octoroon mistress and son, Valery Bon. All four of these characters are imagined as white skinned, with the exception of Valery Bon later in life, who has an olive tinge to his skin that seems as if it could pass as a suntan; but the difference of their situations is purposefully portrayed by Faulkner to illustrate the absurdity of the construction of race. While Sutpen repudiated Eulalie and Charles, they were still free to continue their lives as wealthy sugar plantation owners. They freely moved to New Orleans where Bon was raised in luxury to become a worldly gentleman who surpasses Henry and Thomas Sutpen in grace and charm. Faulkner layers Eulalie and Charles right on top of the octoroon mistress and her son in order to show that the

differing situations are chance that does not revolve around the “black blood.” The octoroon and Valery Bon are described as chattel. The octoroon is a product made and sold and the boy is spawned from the product, also able to be sold. The octoroon and Valery Bon are literally a construction juxtaposed against Eulalie and Charles, whose fate was sealed by a social construction. Faulkner understands and illustrates that absurdities concerning racial identity abound from the South’s practice of slavery.

### **Faulkner’s Folly**

While scholars agree that Faulkner’s writings on the subject of race are innovative, many scholars also find that there are inherent problems. Faulkner undoubtedly shed light on the atrocities of our past, atrocities upon which our country was founded, but what is important to remember is the fact that Faulkner was very much a white man raised in Mississippi in the early 1900s. His approach to race, however enlightened, was ultimately limited due to the influence of his environment. Faulkner paints a vivid picture of the amalgamated South and in doing so sheds light on the actions people were willing to take in order to hold on to their imagined ideal: a South neatly divided by the color line. Despite Faulkner’s efforts to portray the absurdity of this ideal, his sympathies fell on the white side of the color line. On closer examination of the mulatto landscape presented in Yoknapatawpha County, the central struggle in Faulkner’s life and work becomes clear. Faulkner struggles between what his intellect sees as socially unjust and what his sensibilities, due to his upbringing, cannot come to fully understand. In trying to make sense of the South’s approach to the color line Faulkner reveals his own inability to fully accept the inevitable solution of integration;

instead he envisions a future where the problems surrounding race relations will eventually work themselves out organically. The scholarship focused on the limits of Faulkner's view on race leads directly into my own conclusion: Faulkner's solution to race relations in the South, as he expresses in his fiction as well as in his own personal statements, is that eventually the African American population will "bleach out," or cease to exist through interracial relations. This understanding of race underlies his approach to the color line in his major works.

Faulkner's focus on the white side of the color line is grounded in the environment in which he lived. He wrote his novels focused on race from a singular time and space in American history. Hale and Jackson call this time the "Golden Age – perhaps the only age – of white Southern liberalism" (29). They say of this Golden Age, "The middle ground carved out in the thirties and early forties by white Southern liberals was an integrated white space, not an integrated space. The distinction was crucial." (32). They make the point that black people were only present in this space as symbols and say "The 'we' of Southern liberalism -- the first person plural who mattered, who spoke for the region, suffered its backward reputation, and worried about its future – remained white" (32). From this space came, *Light In August* which bore Joe Christmas, whom Hale and Jackson call a "literary and spiritual force with extraordinary utility and meaning – for whites" (37). Weinstein observes in his biography on Faulkner that Joe Christmas reflects how Faulkner imagines it would feel to wake up realizing he had black blood running through his own veins. He says, "there was no question of what *they* might feel like. The novel didn't ask who (as a community living in segregated 'freedman's' districts of every town in the South) they might be. No emphatic entry into Southern

blackness, virtually no blacks in the novel at all” (*Becoming* 155). Joe’s agonizing struggle is born from the integrated white space that Faulkner and other white liberals carved out for themselves, a space in which they claimed the “role of regional saviors” for they had “suffered the sins of their region, they had loved its white and black inhabitants” (Hale and Jackson 33). The suffering that mattered in this white liberal space was, of course, the suffering of the white population. Weinstein says that the absence of black bodies in *Light In August*, “reveals what conditions Faulkner required to turn – for the first time seriously – to race relations in the South. Those conditions mandated that the one suffering from such relations be white – a man trapped in a weave of racial rumor about his identity at its core genetic level. The man had to be unable to know what blood ran in his veins.” (*Becoming* 155). Sundquist notes that the reader must remember when considering *Light In August* that the book is written by a white man who is confused about his own feelings toward segregation. He says, “for enslaving the myth of racial hysteria in the twentieth century necessarily surrounds and contains ‘within’ itself the literal horrors of slavery it refers to but suppresses at the same time. The paradox, in this respect, seems almost a simple one: not how can a black man be a white man, but how can a white man be a black man” (Sundquist 71). Through Joe Christmas, Faulkner presents the agonies and horrors of race as they are suffered not by the black population, but by the white population.

Weinstein expounds on this shared idea that Faulkner’s concern with race relations lies on the white side of the color line and focuses on Faulkner’s marginalization of his black characters. Weinstein claims Faulkner’s black characters, “often take on incandescent symbolic importance for the anguished whites viewing them . . . but their

importance is mainly symbolic . . . their importance is for others alone. The plots through which Faulkner comes upon his black figures . . . rarely escape . . . the pinched options of tragic exploitation or crucifixion, on the one hand, or comic trivialization, on the other” (*Cosmos* 44). As he notes the dearth of black bodies in *Light In August*, he examines the treatment of the plethora of black characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* Clytie in *Absalom, Absalom!* is seen only as a symbol of Sutpen’s past transgressions, an answer to the driving question of the novel. Weinstein says, “She patiently awaits a reader or character capable of decoding her genesis, of realizing that if Sutpen could impregnate one black woman he could impregnate others” (*Cosmos* 57). Beyond her plot function we know little about Clytie; she has no purpose of her own. Weinstein says, “She remains thus a mute key to the mystery, her meaning eloquently residing in the pigment of her skin rather than the quality of her soul or the revelation of her words” (*Cosmos* 57). Clytie is a black body seen as an example and a means to move the plot along, not as a black life to be understood. Weinstein says of Jim Bond, “Jim Bond is heard, not felt . . . He may have a putative soul, a unique interiority through which he registers his world, but Faulkner has not produced it textually, and so we as readers do not imaginatively credit it. His is not a black life we are invited to recreate from within” (*Cosmos* 63). Faulkner does not illustrate Bond’s life from either an outside perspective or from the inside of his own mind: all that is known of Bond is his howl. The howl signifies the fall of the house of Sutpen, but there is no human connection made with Bond, he is merely noise. Weinstein says, “This is the significance, it seems to me, of a marginal character . . . one whom he turns into a symbol for the white spectators in and out of the story who regard him” (*Cosmos* 64). Weinstein also points to Eulalie, Charles Bon’s mother. He says, “Eulalie

engineers the collapse of that (Sutpen's) design. Her role, only marginally represented, actually matches (and eventually overmasters) Sutpen's point for point in plot import. But the subjective focus for her ordeal always lodges outside her – in Sutpen who betrayed her or in Bon through whom she wreaks her revenge" (*Cosmos* 57). Faulkner repeatedly marginalizes his black characters throughout his novels.

Weinstein continues examining Faulkner's characterizations of his black characters as he points out the stark relief between Faulkner's treatment of his black-skinned characters and his white-skinned black characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* He says, "Faulkner produces black in this novel with a schizoid intensity, the foreign pole as seductive and lingered upon as the homegrown one is either neutral or repellant: in any case marginalized. Another way to put it is to say that in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner can imaginatively desire the union of white and black only by exoticizing black" (*Cosmos* 57). Faulkner affords his white characters with black blood romantic descriptions, descriptions that elicit sympathy and compassion. The octoroon has a "magnolia face" (157) (and octoroons are described as "more valuable as commodities than white girls")(93). Eulalie Bon possesses a romantic, mysterious air with a "curtain of fallen hair, a white slender arm raised, a delicate hand" (201). The dashing figure of Charles Bon elicits feelings of romance. Weinstein says, "All who see him (except, ironically, his father) or get caught up in the telling or the reading of his story run the risk of falling in love with him" (*Cosmos* 55). Valery Bon, Charles Bon's son with the octoroon, is described as a "white-colored man" with "body and limbs almost as light and delicate as a girl's" (167). On the other side of the spectrum is Valery Bon's wife whom Faulkner cruelly dehumanizes. Weinstein says she is, "a black woman described more

abusively than any other in Faulkner's fiction" (*Cosmos* 56). Shreve describes her as "coal black and ape-like" who "existed in that aghast and automan-like state in which she had arrived, did not, possibly could not, recount . . . how he had found her, dragged her out of whatever two dimensional backwater . . . her mentality had been capable of coercing food and shelter from" (166-167). Shreve envisions her "ape-like body" and how Valery Bon "installed her, kenneled her" (167) in a slave cabin he rebuilt. Shreve further describes her as "resembling something in a zoo" and "the black gargoyle" (169-170). Weinstein says, "owing apparently everything to the mother and nothing to the father, is Jim Bond." He goes on to ask, "What is one to make of this genealogy? What has Jim Bond in common with Charles Bon? What does it mean that this black descent, unlike the white one in *The Sound and the Fury* and unlike the white and black ones in *Go Down, Moses*, feels abbreviated and built wholly of extremes?" (*Cosmos* 56).

Weinstein points out that this exoticizing of black in Faulkner's rendition of Lucas Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses* produces puzzling results. He points to the physical description of Lucas, "the face the color of a used saddle, the features Syriac, not in a racial sense but as the heir to ten centuries of desert horsemen. It was not at all the face of their grandfather, Carothers McCaslin. It was the face of a generation which had just preceded them: the composite tintype face of ten thousand undefeated Confederate soldiers almost indistinguishably caricatured" (104-105). Weinstein posits, "What, we may ask, is Faulkner doing here?" He points to the description of "Syriac, not in a racial sense but as the heir to ten centuries of desert horsemen." Weinstein says, "Systematically exoticized, Lucas's face is being rewritten: the rewriting proposes an identity to be understood 'not in a racial sense.' Lucas's heroic status is conditional upon

his being figuratively removed from his own black heritage” (*Cosmos* 70). Weinstein continues examining Faulkner’s characterization of Lucas noting that the description of Lucas’s blood is even more inexplicable than the description of his face, “Instead of being at once the battleground and victim of the two strains, he was a vessel, durable, ancestryless, nonconductive, in which the toxin and its anti stalemated one another, seethless, unrumored in the outside air (*Moses* 101). Weinstein says, “It seems to me that this passage proposes a desperate resolution . . . For reasons that lie deep within the culture’s racist ideology, Faulkner simply will not imagine the two bloods merging in time . . . One might speculate that the text wants all of Lucas’s history, on condition that it be cleansed of its racial coloration (*Cosmos* 71).

Weinstein raises many pertinent questions about Faulkner’s treatment of his marginal characters, and in building on Weinstein’s ideas and questions we can better understand Faulkner’s intent in his varied descriptions of his black characters. Scholars agree that Faulkner’s primary flaw in his major novels on race relations in the South is the fact that his sympathies consistently fall on the white side of the color line. Weinstein explores this argument in depth and states that Faulkner classifies his black characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* as “homegrown” and “foreign,” and points out that Faulkner exoticizes the foreign characters, rendering them more seductive. This point is close but being foreign is not enough for Faulkner to exoticize a character; to be seductive Faulkner requires the whitening of his characters. Faulkner describes Sutpen’s dark-skinned Haitian slaves not as exotic, but as “wild men,” their language, “a dark and fatal tongue” (*Absalom* 27). They are too wild, in fact, to breed with the tame “homegrown” slaves of Mississippi. Jason Compson recounts when Sutpen brings his “wild” slaves to

Jefferson, “two of the niggers in the wagon that day were women . . . He saw to that, who had doubtless seen even further ahead than the two years it actually took him to . . . show his good intentions to his neighbors until they allowed him to mix his wild stock with their tame” (*Absalom* 48). Sutpen chose the women, “with the same care and shrewdness with which he chose the other livestock” (*Absalom* 48). The foreign aspect of Sutpen’s slaves is not “seductive,” proving that the exotic nature of Faulkner’s white skinned characters does not seduce; their white skin allows them to be desirable. This point is also pronounced in the last Sutpen heir, Jim Bond. The foreign, exotic appeal of his (white-skinned) grandparents and father is rendered useless when mixed with the homegrown (black) blood of his mother. When Weinstein says, “The result of this union, owing apparently everything to the mother and nothing to the father, is Jim Bond... What is one to make of this genealogy?” (*Cosmos* 56) he is partly summarizing Shreve, but in closely examining Shreve’s words we find an answer. Shreve says, “who had inherited what he was from his mother and only what he could never have been from his father” (*Absalom* 174). “What he could never have been” is a white man. His father’s whiteness had lightened his mother’s “coal black” to “saddle colored.” Faulkner points out that, idiot or not, Bond could never have had the same chance of escape that his father had. His mother, “inescapably negro,” (*Absalom* 168) was not only responsible for Bond’s mental state, but for the color of his skin. Bond’s skin entraps his fate more than his mental status does. The same can be observed in Faulkner’s odd descriptions of Lucas. He attempts to make Lucas “ancestryless” yet the “saddle colored” face belies the “tintype face” of the Confederate soldier. The black blood is revealed in Lucas’s skin therefore he

is at a “stalemate,” with too much McCaslin to be seen as a black man but not lightened enough to be perceived as white (*Moses 101, 104-105*).

In *Light In August* Faulkner links the black and white population’s fates through the curse of the black man’s skin color, and in doing so produces some of his most extreme polarizations of black and white. Joanna Burden tells Joe Christmas about her family and describes when her father came home with his first wife and child. Joanna’s grandfather, Calvin, an abolitionist, says in musing over Nathaniel’s wife, mistakenly thinking an African heritage makes her skin dark, “Damn, lowbuilt black folks: lowbuilt because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their flesh.” His gaze was vague, fanatical, and convinced. “But we done freed them now, both black and white alike. They’ll bleach out now. In a hundred years they will be white folks again. Then maybe we’ll let them come back into America” (*Light 247-248*). Calvin claims that the black population is black because God cursed them, marking them as slaves, but now that they are free they will bleach out and in bleaching out will be welcomed as equal citizens. During this same conversation Joanna tells Joe about her father taking her to her grandfather and brother’s graves who had been shot over “a question of negro voting” (*Light 248*). Nathaniel said, “Remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race . . . A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white man’s doom and curse for its sins” (*Light 252*). The curse is slavery. Nathaniel is claiming the curse was put upon the black population by God due to the fact that God made them black. Since God cursed the black man to be a slave, he cursed the white man as the sinner/enslaver. Nathaniel tells Joanna, “You must struggle, rise. But in

order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level. I see that now, which I did not see until I came down here. But escape it you cannot. The curse of the black race is God's curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God's chosen own because He once cursed him'" (*Light* 253). As long as the black race casts a shadow, a black shadow, they cannot rise to the level of the white race; more to the point, as long as the shadow, the black, exists the black race and the white race both are cursed.

In this exchange between Joe and Joanna, Faulkner explores his personal feelings on race relations in depth. He presents slavery as a curse, which is an idea to which he returns throughout his writings focused on race relations, and in doing so labels the white man a sinner for taking advantage of that curse. He acknowledges that the sin of the white man is learned, passed from one generation to the next, and through this cultural training the sins of the South perpetuate. Faulkner attempts to illustrate through Nathaniel's learned racism that the South knows their black folks better than the northerners or the abolitionists and upon exposure even the abolitionists would come to understand what the people of the South already know. Faulkner again expresses his idea of cultural training at the end of the conversation between Joe and Joanna. Joe asks why Nathaniel didn't shoot the man who shot his family. Joanna says, "we were foreigners, strangers, that thought differently from the people whose country we had come into without being asked or wanted. And he was French, half of him. Enough French to respect anybody's love for the land where he and his people were born and to understand that a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act" (*Light* 255). Considering Faulkner's cultural background and upbringing, these ideas could be

perceived as enlightened, even progressive; Faulkner, however, offers these ideas while standing solidly on the white side of the color line. He believes the curse of the black population is rooted in their skin. Nathaniel says, “The curse of the black race is God’s curse. But the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God’s chosen own because He once cursed him” (*Light* 253) which echoes Calvin’s sentiment, “lowbuilt because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their flesh” (*Light* 247). The white man’s sin is linked to the skin color as is the curse on both black and white people. Faulkner fails to explore not only why the white population sins beyond the idea that God marked the black man, he fails to identify the black population outside the realm of their curse. Faulkner focuses primarily on the influence of the curse on the white population’s fate and avoids examining the realities of race as seen and experienced by black Americans. Instead of examining the root of the curse or the sin, Faulkner turns back to the underlying logic of his explorations and imagines the world eventually turning safely and uniformly white. Again, this idea could be seen as progressive; in order for this uniform world to become a reality Faulkner would be forced to endorse miscegenation and in endorsing miscegenation Faulkner would be accepting the mulatto nature of the country. However, Faulkner does not see a country of mixed-race faces; he sees a world in which race is black and the blackness bleaches out.

Faulkner posits the idea of bleaching out as inevitable in *Absalom, Absalom!* as he explores a practice performed in New Orleans; he compares this purposeful “bleaching out” to an evolutionary “bleaching out.” Jason speaks of the tragic nature of the octoroon as he imagines how Bon explained his mistress to Henry:

Yes: a sparrow which God Himself neglected to mark. Because though men, white men, created her, God did not stop it. He planted the seed which brought her to flower – the white blood to give the shape and pigment of what the white man calls female beauty, to a female principle which existed, queenly and complete, in the hot equatorial groin of the world long before that white one of ours came down from the trees and lost its hair and bleached out – a principle apt docile and instinct with strange and ancient curious pleasures of the flesh (which is all: there is nothing else) which her white sisters of a mushroom yesterday flee from in moral and outraged horror (*Absalom* 92).

Here Jason, as he imagines what Bon would say, describes a combination of “bleached out” skin (beauty) and “ancient” sexual instinct that he conceives in the creation of the octoroon. He paints a picture of the monkeys, who became the white population, coming out of the trees first and bleaching out and losing their sexual energy. In this comparison black people are closer to the monkeys than the white people as they haven’t bleached out yet. The octoroons are in the middle, bleached out for beauty but still containing the “curious pleasure of flesh” in their genetic make-up. Faulkner means for this vision of the octoroons to be tragic, but he portrays it as a sensual, beautiful tragedy that “God Himself neglected to mark” and “did not stop;” a tragedy that is grounded in that drop of black blood, the drop of blood that makes them a commodity, not a person. Remove the reminder of that drop of black blood, bleach out the rest of the black population, and the octoroon is now equal to “that white one of ours” who “came down from the trees and lost its hair and bleached out.” Through Jason and Quentin’s conversation Faulkner is exploring the idea that to “bleach out” is an inevitability, something that has already

happened and something that is currently happening. The octoroons are intentionally created, “creatures taken at childhood, culled and chosen and raised more carefully than any white girl” (*Absalom* 93), yet that “white one of ours” also started in the trees and her transformation is seen as a natural one.

Faulkner buried both Calvin’s and Jason’s words about “bleaching out” amongst a host of provocative statements and images, but Shreve’s controversial prophesy at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* brazenly states the same idea. Shreve says:

I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings (302).

Scholars widely discuss this prophecy. Hale and Jackson quote Frederick R. Karl who notes that Faulkner “appears on the edge of suggesting that the resolution of the South’s (and the nation’s) racial dilemma was in a single race, one that would transcend black and white by becoming black-and-white” (Karl 558). Hale and Jackson make the point that in the moment of reading Shreve’s prophesy, “it is almost tempting to see Faulkner as a kind of white liberal Moses figure” but conclude that “Such a reading would also obscure the fact that Faulkner’s design in *Absalom* no less than in *Light In August* depends on the integrated white space of 1930s Southern liberal thought, appropriating such figures as Charles Bon and the mulatto slave Clytie in the service of the white Sutpens’ tragic arc” (38-39). Hale and Jackson are correct; Faulkner is not suggesting a race of black-and-

white. Not only would this vision belie the driving force of his novels heretofore, but in comparing Shreve's statement about bleaching out to Calvin's and Jason's, my previous point becomes undeniable. Faulkner does not envision a mulatto landscape; Faulkner suggests that black will eventually become white, erasing the issue of race relations completely.

Shreve's prophecy that the African American race will "bleach out" seems the point toward which Faulkner drives not only in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but throughout his novels concentrated on race. To requote, Shreve says, "they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow" (*Absalom* 302). Faulkner's treatment of his dark-skinned characters in relation to his light-skinned characters highlights that he does not envision a race of coffee colored or saddle colored faces; he conceives the bleaching out of all discernible differences in skin color as the key to race relations. Faulkner suggests that if race cannot be seen it ceases being an issue. Faulkner's characters who are "inescapably negro" (*Absalom* 168) due to their skin color appear stagnant, unable to change their fates. The white characters with black blood have a choice, but the knowledge (or lack thereof) of their black blood coupled with society's treatment of those whose blood appears in their skin tone, forces a sort of identity crisis, as Faulkner illustrates through Joe Christmas and Valery Bon. If the playing field were completely leveled, the black blood washed clean with white blood, and no one race or person shows up "sharp against the snow," (*Absalom* 302) the issue itself would cease to exist.

In *Go Down, Moses*, Isaac McCaslin does not suggest that bleaching out is the answer, but he encourages the black people in his life to wait until the white population

has “endured” the curse; suggesting the solution to race relations will be a naturally occurring event. In “The Bear” Isaac finds Fonsiba, Lucas’s sister, and her new husband, and is appalled at the way they are living. He says to Fonsiba’s husband:

‘Don’t you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse onto the land: maybe for that reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted. Then your peoples’ turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now. Not yet. Don’t you see?’ (266).

Isaac McCaslin, a Southerner, a character made impotent by his guilt, a character who gives up his land due to the fact that he cannot face the atrocious actions of his ancestors performed on the land, urges a free black man with his own land to wait his turn, to wait until the white man has endured and outlasted the curse. Just as Calvin expresses that a person cannot be expected to act differently than he has been taught, Isaac claims that the Southerner cannot “resist” or “combat” the curse. He must “outlast” it. In “Delta Autumn” Isaac echoes this advice of “not now.” A woman who has a child with Roth, his great nephew and inheritor of the land that Isaac gave up, comes to see him in hopes he has word for her from Roth. As they speak, she mentions that her aunt takes in washing to earn money and Isaac suddenly realizes her heritage, “the pale lips, the skin pallid and dead-looking yet not ill, the dark and tragic and foreknowing eyes. *Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America*, he thought. *But not now! Not now!*” (Moses 344). This woman has “bleached out,” like the octoroons, but the reminder of her black blood still exists everywhere. “Not now” Isaac says to Fonsiba’s husband and thinks while

interacting with this woman; “not now” for the curse has not been “outlasted;” evidence still exists.

Faulkner alludes to the idea that bleaching out is the answer in Isaac’s advice to this woman in “Delta Autumn.” He says, “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. Marry a black man. You are young, handsome, almost white; you could find a black man who would see in you what it was you saw in him” (*Moses* 346). Again, he urges the necessity of waiting. Even more interesting is his urging her to marry a black man who “would see in you what it was you saw in him.” Isaac assumes that this girl was attracted to Roth because he was white and that with him her children would be white. This is what a black man would see in her, white skin and the chance for whiter children. Just as Bond received, “what he could never have been” from Valery Bon (*Absalom* 174), this woman could give a black man’s child the opportunity to escape the “sin of human bondage staining their flesh” (*Light* 248). Isaac presents the “bleaching out” solution as a goal toward which the black population strives, whether consciously or unconsciously.

While Faulkner presents the solution of “bleaching out” in all three of these novels he distances himself from the idea. In *Light In August* he places the words in Calvin Burden’s mouth. Calvin is an abolitionist and is characterized as fanatical and a bit deranged. Through Calvin, Faulkner suggests the unimaginable: Faulkner suggests miscegenation. Weinstein says, “the act of miscegenation, remains within his frame of values a taboo act. The traditional South would, it seems, collapse to its foundations if it were to assent to such a mixing of the races” (*Cosmos* 62-63). By burying the idea in the fanatical ravings of Calvin, Faulkner places it apart from his own personal views. The

same can be said for the presentation of the phrase in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner first places the words in Jason Compson's mouth, a Southerner, yet Jason is speaking for Charles Bon. Jason is imagining how Bon would explain the octoroon mistress to Henry in order to make the idea palatable enough that Henry would not see it as a reason that Bon could not marry Judith. Faulkner twice removes himself from the idea that we all existed in the trees together and white people just came down and bleached out first. The final prophecy that concludes the book is uttered by Shreve, a Canadian. Shreve does not understand the South or Southerners. He spends the whole book commenting on how different the South is from anything he knows. The same distance of character is not found in *Go Down, Moses*. Isaac is a Southerner, his family has owned land and slaves for generations, he understands the South and the people who live there, but Isaac does not use the words "bleaching out." He alludes to the idea, he asks for time so that the South can "outlast" the curse, but he does not suggest interbreeding as the key outright. This point of Faulkner distancing himself from the idea of "bleaching out" loses momentum when we turn to Faulkner's personal interviews and letters.

Faulkner not only spoke of "bleaching out" through his characters, he himself spoke of the eventual disappearance of the African American race in an interview. In his controversial interview with Russel Howe<sup>6</sup>, which took place on February 21, 1956 and was published on March 4, 1956, Faulkner reiterates the idea of letting the issue of race

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<sup>6</sup> Faulkner wrote a letter claiming "parts of the interview were incorrect and offered to share with the interviewer the blame for this situation by saying that 'statements which no sober man would make, nor, it seems to me, any sane man believe,' had been imbued to him" (Meriwether and Millgate 257). The statements in question were not the ones quoted within this paper. For more about this see the interview found in the book listed in my works cited.

resolve itself, of bleaching out. Faulkner says, "I would wish now that the liberals would stop . . . it would take a lot of wisdom to say 'Go slow.' Perhaps it is too much to ask them, but it is for their own sake . . . I try to think of this in the longterm view . . . In the long view, the Negro race will vanish in three hundred years by intermarriage. It has happened to every racial minority everywhere, and it will happen here" (Merriwether and Millgate 258). Jason Compson claims that the bleaching out has already happened once, with the current white population being the result, Shreve says it will happen "in time" but not "in our time" (*Absalom* 302). Calvin Burden says, "In a hundred years they will be white folks again" (*Light* 247-248). Isaac thinks, "*Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America...But not now! Not now!*" (*Moses* 344) and Faulkner himself in an interview, not through a character, claims all problems will be solved when the "Negro race will vanish" in "three hundred years" (Merriwether and Millgate 258). Assuming that Faulkner was not positing this as an actual solution to race relations in his novels as well is irresponsible.

Coupled with Faulkner's theory that the negro race will vanish given time is Faulkner's advice to the black population to "go slow." This advice is strikingly similar to Isaac's refrain of "not now." Faulkner felt compelled to repeat this advice in his "Letter to a Northern Editor" written in March of 1956 for *Life* and found in the collection *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*. Faulkner wrote:

So I would say to the NAACP and all the organizations who would compel immediate and unconditional integration: 'Go slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment. You have the power now; you can afford to withhold for a moment the

use of it as a force. You have done a good job, you have jolted your opponent off-balance and he is now vulnerable. But stop there for a moment (*Essays*<sup>7</sup> 87).

This “power,” Hale and Jackson note, was *Brown v. Board of Education* and the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional. Hale and Jackson say, “Faulkner ignored the history he had mined with such complexity and depth in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, the violence at the core of a land of equality founded on slavery and segregation, the rapes and murders and lynchings” (39). Faulkner chose to ignore the history he seemed to understand because he felt that the issues could not be resolved as long as the physical evidence of slavery was still visible. He ends this letter asking for time in which the Southerner can, “get his breath and assimilate that knowledge” and that the Southerner “faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure” (*Essays* 91). Faulkner, suddenly forced to choose between integration and segregation, tried to hold onto the middle ground he trod throughout his life. Hale and Jackson say, “The history African Americans created in the fifties and early sixties would force white Southern liberals to abandon their peculiar “middle” and to side, finally, with segregation or integration” (33). Faulkner was not ready to choose a side, for in his mind the time had not come and so “go slow” became his malapropos refrain.

Faulkner continued to repeat the idea to “go slow” (and the theory that the South would work the issue out itself) repeatedly throughout interviews and speeches for the rest of his life. Sundquist says, “Faulkner’s notorious ‘go slow’ attitudes toward desegregation diverged little from those of the country at large and were not far out of

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<sup>7</sup> All subsequent citations to this text will be listed as *Essays*.

keeping with the language of the *Brown* decree of implementation in 1955 ('a prompt and reasonable start,' 'good faith compliance at the earliest practicable date,' 'with all deliberate speed')" (65). This idea to go slow and let things work themselves out naturally was a sort of battle cry of the South now that the scales had finally begun tipping toward real solutions for racial equality. In "A Letter to the Leaders in the Negro Race" Faulkner attempts to explain this attitude of "go slow" and in doing so becomes increasingly incoherent. He says, "By 'Go slow, pause for a moment', I meant, 'be flexible'. (*Essays* 108). Then, "This was Gandhi's way. If I were a Negro, I would advise our elders and leaders to make this our undeviating and inflexible course – a course of inflexible and unviolent flexibility...But always with flexibility: inflexible and undeviable only in hope and will but flexible always to adapt to time and place and circumstance" (*Essays* 109). Faulkner believes he offers valuable advice but his sympathies in real life fall on the white side of the color line, just as they do in his literature. He urges the black population to "go slow" under the guise of advice he would give "if he were a Negro," yet the advice is given on behalf of the white population, to make them feel more comfortable. He furthers his advice saying the black population should also become the white man's superior in "cleanliness, decency, courtesy and dignity," as if in mastering these qualities the black population will become worthy of equality, indicating that they are not worthy yet. Faulkner concludes with, "We as a race must lift ourselves by our own bootstraps to where we are competent for the responsibilities of equality, so that we can hold on to it when we get it" (*Essays* 112). When Faulkner says "competent," he means white enough. When he urges "cleanliness," he urges looking and smelling like a white man. A year later, while writer-in-residence at

the University of Virginia, Faulkner answered questions about *Absalom, Absalom!* He was asked about a theme in his work: “that there’s a curse upon the South.” Faulkner said, “The curse is slavery, which is an intolerable condition—no man shall be enslaved—and the South has got to work that curse out and it will, if it’s let alone. It can’t be compelled to do it. It must do it of its own will and desire, which I believe it will do if it’s let alone” (Gwynn and Blotner 80). Faulkner again and again, through both his literature and through personal comments, urges the black population to “go slow,” and claims the South will work its own issues out if allowed to do so. Faulkner asks for time so that the South can “work that curse out,” but does not believe that working the issues out is the answer. He longs to avoid the issues. The issues must be “endured” and “outlasted,” (*Moses* 266) and if everyone would just wait long enough for the black population to fade, to not “show up so sharp against the snow” (*Absalom* 302) the issue itself will fade away; only then will the curse be “outlasted” and “they will be white folks again. Then maybe we’ll let them come back into America.” (*Light* 248).

In trying to make sense of Faulkner’s views on race—and his strange mix of seemingly progressive representations and predictably white conservative positions—Mills’ *The Racial Contract* becomes a useful tool. Mills says:

The Racial Contract makes the white body the somatic norm, so that in early racist theories one finds not only moral but aesthetic judgements, with beautiful and fair races pitted against ugly and dark races. Some nonwhites were close enough to Caucasians in appearance that they were sometimes seen as beautiful, attractive in an exotic way...But those more distant from the Caucasoid

somatotype--paradigmatically blacks (African and also Australian Aborigines)--were stigmatized as aesthetically repulsive and deviant (61).

Faulkner allows his “white” black characters to be seen as exotic and desirable, but the farther away from white his character’s skin gets, the more harshly he portrays their physical appearance. Faulkner, through his idea of “bleaching out,” suggests an “aesthetic norming” of the black population. Mills quotes Harmannus Hoetink, who “argues that all societies have a ‘somatic norm image,’ deviation from which triggers alarms” (Mills 61). If this deviation is voided, then it no longer causes alarm. More than aesthetic appeal, white skin would not induce guilt from the white man. Faulkner dwells upon the white man’s guilt beautifully throughout his novels. This guilt is grounded in the skin color of those who were enslaved. Mills highlights, “the degradation of *racial* slavery meaning, as has often been pointed out, that for the first time (and unlike the slavery of ancient Greece and Rome or the medieval Mediterranean) *slavery acquired a color*” (57). A race of people were marked, not by God but by the white population, as inferior due to their skin color and systematically enslaved, raped and lynched. Faulkner cannot see how, looking into their faces, recognizing all of these atrocities in the color of their skin, a white man can move forward unless a black person’s skin no longer marks them as the people who were so very wronged. Faulkner wants to “bleach out” the guilt; guilt that he cannot see past the skin color himself, guilt over the actions of his forefathers, guilt that he is impotent in the face of such a crisis. Faulkner cannot see how to get past the guilt, so he wants to erase the guilt. Only then, he believes, can the South be at peace. Only then, when “the Negro race will vanish in three hundred years by intermarriage” (Meriwether and Millgate 258) can the white man be released from his agony

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The intent here is not to accuse Faulkner of being a racist. He was born in the deep South in 1897, just a little more than thirty years after the civil war; he grew up with Jim Crow being the law of the land; desegregation did not begin to happen until the end of his life. His environment, of course, affected his sensibilities; but to say “that’s the way things were” or “he is a product of his environment” is reckless and ignorant. Separating Faulkner’s personal tendencies from his writing is even more reckless. Sundquist says of Faulkner’s public comments, “They are worth bearing in mind here simply because it is easy to take them either too lightly (and thus divorce his fiction from the realities it constantly struggled to incorporate) or too seriously (and thus convict Faulkner of a lapse in moral vision)” (65). Sundquist’s point, that we cannot take them too lightly, is valid; however taking them too seriously is an impossibility. Faulkner was absolutely guilty of a “lapse in moral vision,” as were many men who are considered the “enlightened” leaders of their time. We must acknowledge and understand that lapse of vision. If we ignore or downplay Faulkner’s missteps in lieu of his greatness, we ignore the root of the problem of race. Faulkner wanted to “endure” the problem of race until the problem solved itself. He wanted to “outlast” the curse. In ignoring this desire and praising his ability to acknowledge the problem, we, ourselves, perpetuate the idea that the problems will go away if we just “sit tight” long enough.

In trying to make sense of Faulkner’s personal statements, Weinstein compares Faulkner’s advice to the black population in “A Letter to the Leaders in the Negro Race” to his portrayal of Joe Christmas at the end of *Light In August*. He says, “The novelist

imaginatively knew, in 1932, what the letter-writer of the 1950s seems to have forgotten. Joe Christmas does not need to be reminded how to dress. With exquisite irony, he bestrides the town as though he owned it . . . his moves eloquently counter white racist expectations point for point” (*Becoming* 144). Weinstein notes that Faulkner understood and illustrated that race is a social construct through Joe’s actions. He goes on to imagine Joe’s inner dialogue, “I look like you, perhaps better than you. I am clean, tall, and self-possessed. I enter and exit your segregated spaces—your barbershop and stores—and you do not see my difference. You do not see it because it does not exist” (Weinstein 144). Weinstein claims the mob that wants to see Joe lynched feels as if Joe is “mocking the racial conventions that underwrite their sanity” (Weinstein 144). Weinstein is correct that Faulkner understands the concept of race as a social construct in 1932, but the Faulkner of 1950 had not forgotten. Faulkner portrays Joe physically as a white man. The black blood that supposedly runs in his veins is never definitively proven. Joe has no physical traits that belie the black heritage if it does exist. While Faulkner is illustrating through Joe that race is a social construct, he is also illustrating what he sees as the solution. Joe is bleached out, therefore he is able to assimilate into the white population unnoticed. If the black population as a whole bleached out, there would be no reminder that some people might have a black heritage. Faulkner did not forget the knowledge that created Joe, he just became ever more forthcoming in how he presented his solution to that knowledge, and therein lies the problem.

I am not asserting that Faulkner proposes a systematic bleaching out of the black population. He does not envision this solution as one that can be consciously executed. He sees the bleaching out as an eventuality; an inevitability. His call to “go slow” relates

to his idea of bleaching out. Ultimately, the inefficacy in Faulkner's thinking does not reside in his "bleaching out" solution or in his advice to "go slow"; it is in the fact that after leading the reader to a higher understanding of race he abruptly stops and hides behind these ideas. He cannot bring himself to support integration. Faulkner in 1950 stubbornly attempted to tread the middle ground that was once considered liberal; Faulkner's way of thinking had not changed, the environment in which he found himself had shifted. Yet he himself refused to embrace the change and be a part of the solution. In his novels written from his liberal, integrated white space we have Joe in *Light In August*: a white man who struggles with the idea that he might be black. In *Absalom, Absalom!* we find Charles Bon, a white man who definitely has some African American heritage yet assimilates a good deal more easily than Joe, a Canadian who says that eventually all will be solved with the bleaching out of the black population, and Quentin, the tortured Southern gentleman who can only repeat, "I don't hate the South." In *Go Down, Moses* we are introduced to Isaac McCaslin, who, like Faulkner, sees clearly the dilemma and the root of the dilemma, and whose solution is to extricate himself from it entirely by relinquishing his right to the land upon which his ancestors were the problem. Faulkner brilliantly depicts the problems that arise from the construct of race, he forces his readers to acknowledge these problems, but he lacks the courage to take the next step toward endorsing a real solution in his fiction or in real life. Here lies the heart of Faulkner's folly: his inability to take action towards, or even to foresee, an integrated world. This inability, which was shared by the majority of the white population across the country, led to the state of race relations today.

Faulkner's absurd solution of "bleaching out" as the key to race relations is reflected in the white population's current desire to claim that race is no longer an issue. Faulkner wanted the issue to be erased; today many people want to pretend that the issue does not exist. Mills says, "By treating the present as a somehow neutral baseline, with its given configuration of wealth, property, social standing and psychological willingness to sacrifice, the idealized social contract renders permanent the legacy of the Racial Contract" (77). The issue of race cannot be "bleached out," erased, or ignored. The issue of race will never cease being an issue. Race, a social construct, exists because it was constructed. Mills says, "To speak of 'race theory' in the officially nonracist climate of today is thus likely to trigger alarm bells: hasn't it been proven that race is unreal? But it is a false dichotomization to assume that the only alternatives are race as nonexistent and race as biological essence." (125-126). Race is not biological, but race does exist, and ignoring this fact out of a desire to claim that we, as a country, have moved past race only empowers those who still seek to find authority in their white skin.

Perhaps the key to figuring out where we are today in regard to race relations lies in the missteps of the brilliant minds of the past (for Faulkner was brilliant regardless of his short-sighted view on race). Weinstein says, in acknowledging that Faulkner's writings were flawed but still worth attention and study, "individuals experience their lives through their 'own' subjective prisms. However fissured, however mystified, however overdetermined, subjectivity is the Imaginary space through which we uniquely know and feel ourselves, through which we register the Other in all its ramifications" (*Cosmos* 165). In acknowledging *that* Faulkner's subjective prism is flawed, we begin to understand *how* it is flawed. In understanding the flaws of past perceptions, we

acknowledge and begin to understand our current perceptions. I quoted Toni Morrison in my introduction, saying she read Faulkner “to find out something about this country and that artistic articulation of its past that was not available in history, which is what art and fiction can do but sometimes history refuses to do.” Proper historians no longer turn a blind eye as they once did to the facts of our country’s past, but this statement still rings true. Faulkner’s work reveals the mindset of the “liberal” white man during times of segregation and this mindset formed the foundation of today’s current line of thinking: race is to be avoided or ignored and eventually it will go away. Weinstein says, “There can be no agential reshaping of our practices, no refocusing of our optics, until we measure how penetrated we are by arrangements we did not invent and do not control” (*Cosmos* 165).

Faulkner writes most poignantly when he writes from the view of the agonized white man who is trying to make sense of the mess that his ancestors made. Though he acknowledges the mess, Faulkner’s white man stands in the wake of the destruction, wringing his hands and hoping it will all pass soon. In succumbing to impotence, he allows the problem to survive. We can no longer afford to succumb. In studying the flaws in Faulkner’s views on race perhaps we can begin to learn how to acknowledge the problems that still exist today.

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