"…garrulous outraged baffled ghosts…"

Recentering White and Interracial Resistance to Racism in the Imagination of William Faulkner

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William Faulkner is often credited with the following statement: "To understand the world, first you must understand a place like Mississippi."[1] Through Faulkner's career, most of his fictional works were isolated to his home state; however, much of the content of his narratives can be expanded to the greater culture of the American South. While Faulkner discussed various themes and social issues in depth, perhaps the most central to his focus was that of racial disharmony. The legacy of slavery as well as the legal and socially constructed forms of discrimination that emanated from the white community and were thrust upon black men, women, and children are as paramount in Faulkner's canon as they are in the historical record of the period. Time and again in Faulkner's works the nature and effects of racism are weighed, probed, invaded, and launched directly into the forefront of the reader's consciousness. Faulkner's works so often take place near the beginning of the twentieth century, a very fragile and unique moment in Southern history and in the history of the country as a whole. Faulkner tactfully bridges the gap between the remnants of the old South and the approaching newness of the

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[1] W. Ralph Eubanks, *A Place Like Mississippi: A Journey Through a Real and Imagined Literary Landscape* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2021), 21.

future, particularly as it pertains to racial changes. He isolates the "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" of the dead confederacy and places them within their afterlife—the new environment of progress.[2]

Faulkner famously describes this cultural shift as a stark dichotomy, an internal struggle that manifests within white Southerners and throughout their culture as a whole. He characterizes this formula directly in the opening chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!* while outlining the internal conflict of the chief protagonist Quentin Compson*:*

> he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was—the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage.[3]

As is made clear in this passage, the depth and complexity of the shift in cultural identity that white Southerners experienced is a crucial component of Faulkner's work. However, scholarly examinations of Faulkner's novels rarely isolate this component and analyze it to the depth that its importance should necessitate. This is especially problematic considering how vital these experiences were to the real historical occurrences and cultural shifts that took place in the South over the course of the twentieth century.

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[2] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1993), 3.
[3] Ibid.

Rather than focusing on any of the "white" aspects of Faulkner's works and how white Southerners navigated turbulent cultural waters, the vast preponderance of scholars opt to weigh the racism and racialized cultural and legal systems prevalent in Faulkner's works. To be sure, these descriptions are key factors in Faulkner's fiction, and they certainly carry gargantuan weight and importance both in his narratives and in the real culture that his novels represent. A serious scholar cannot in any way marginalize or underemphasize the gravity and reality of racism perpetrated by white Southerners upon black men, women, and children in the history of the South. Eric J. Sundquist has written that "Neither the tradition of classic American literature nor that of Afro-American literature adequately defines the problem of race; like the larger social history that they reflect, the two traditions must be read together for their interactions and conflicts, their revisions of one another."[4] In much the same manner as Sundquist describes, I posit that proper, full analysis of Faulkner's discussions of race must not only account for the racism that was wielded by white Southerners upon black Southerners, but it must also consider white and interracial action against racism, which is also a primary component of Faulkner's racial narratives.

Faulkner certainly presents historically prescient portrayals of the widely held conceptions of racism in the South of the early twentieth century. However, in keeping with his stylistic approach and grand scope, he disrupts some of these notions by revealing nuanced moments of white and black resistance and sophisticated instances of interracial unification against racial discrimination. In so doing, he provides a more accurate, far-reaching depiction of racism in the early twentieth-century South than is generally gleaned from analysis of his works. On a literary level, this approach better envisions the breadth and goals of Faulkner's social criticism. Furthermore, because Faulkner's works are deeply mimetic of the spatial and temporal environment he wrote of, this approach restores to modern understanding of the past South what has been obscured by oversimplification of racial events by both literary and even historical researchers.

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[4] Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, *Faulkner and Race* (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press), 3.

An analysis such as this requires pinpointing a problem in research and literature. Certainly, not all fictional literature is warranting of such a sharp eye for its accordance with the realities of its cultural and physical settings. It is fiction, of course. But as Faulkner's work relating to race is so revered *because* of its sharp social messaging and *not* as a byproduct of it, it is necessary to arrive at some conclusions as to how literary scholars have apprised his narratives on race and racism. There are shortcomings and gaps in the academic literature with respect to how whites as well as whites and blacks together resisted the culture of racism endemic to the South in Faulkner's imagination. To understand this, both lay and scholarly works on the topic should be discussed.

The greatest inadequacy in research and analysis of Faulkner's narratives on race do not reside in inaccuracies but rather in absence. There is a multitude of firm, substantial discussions of Faulkner's treatment of racial questions, ranging from examinations of particular texts to his own beliefs as a private individual. Scholars have at length investigated and interpreted the racialized atmospheres that Faulkner laid out in his novels and short stories, focusing on various aspects of these atmospheres, including the plight of black Southerners contending with white violence and institutionalized racism, the relationship between black and white characters, and the decaying remnants of racist philosophies in the South as the region became more progressive and industrialized. However, there is scant analysis of white characters' resistance to the racist culture of the period. This absence is glaring because it is a center-point of much of Faulkner's narratives, and moreover, understanding this particular resistance provides a better historical grasp of the complexities within white and black culture in the region, something Faulkner intended when he constructed his novels in the first place.

All of the focus on racism in general in Faulkner's work with little attention to white and cross-racial resistance manifests as a fundamental conceptual misunderstanding of Faulkner's full position on race and racism in the South. There is plenty of research, and rightly so, of black resistance to white racism in the South as it is presented in Faulkner's work. Charles D. Peavy writes in *Go Slow Now: Faulkner and the Race Question*, "Faulkner's almost obsessive interest in the Negro has, of course prompted a

body of criticism which attempts to analyze his attitudes toward the Negro. Much of this literature is of the subjective or impressionistic variety, and unfortunately, much of it is quite erroneous."[5] Peavy correctly diagnosed a problem as far back as 1971, one which has yet to be addressed in volume. Curiously, Peavy immediately follows up this inadequacy by engaging in a similar pattern of misdirection—writing an entire monograph on the connection between Faulkner's "nonfiction statements concerning race relations" and the portrayal of black Southerners in his fiction.[6] This is not a meritless task, but Peavy, like many others, misses an important mark. Faulkner's obsession was not with black Southerners; it has been the scholars themselves who are obsessed with Faulkner's treatment of black Southerners. In contrast, Faulkner's authentic fascination was with white *and* black Southerners and how the culture and systems that oppressed them in different ways was enforced and resisted by each group individually and together. Isolating one group would be to envision the South of the early twentieth century as a place where there was no overlap between races, and yet there was profound overlap in myriad ways.

It is difficult to provide evidence of absence, but in this case it is vital to illustrate the general literary landscape on Faulkner's treatment of race to determine whether there is indeed a hole in the literature. Perhaps the most comprehensive examination of Faulkner's racial narratives can be found in *Faulkner and Race,* a 1986 compilation of essays on topics within the scope of Faulkner's treatment of race.[7] Essays in this collection include, but are not limited to: "Faulkner, Race, and the Forms of American Fiction"; "Minstrel Nightmares: Black Dreams of Faulkner's Dreams of Blacks"; "Marginalia: Faulkner's Black Lives"; and "Faulkner's Negroes Twain." Overall, the essays in this compilation tackle questions as to Faulkner's ability to present black characters in a way that is not distorted by his own whiteness. The central inquiry posed and addressed by these authors is whether "Faulkner, a white

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[5] Charles D. Peavy, *Go Slow Now: Faulkner and the Race Question* (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 1971), 11.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Fowler and Abadie, *Faulkner and Race.*

Southerner, the great-grandson of a slave owner,…[can] enter a black consciousness or render accurately black lives?"[8] This is a deep question deserving of acute attention. But although the depths of this question have been plumbed, and to positive effect, there is little attention to Faulkner's discussion of white and interracial action and what these elements of his narratives could mean. Not a single essay in this collection confronts this issue, something that is particularly vexing considering the repetitive and integral nature of white and interracial resistance to racism that is present in many of his works. Regarding Faulkner's discussions of race, scholars seem to have missed the forest (resistance to racism) for the trees (specific characters Faulkner has created).

The problem with the literary analysis of Faulkner's race-related narratives is not that they are inaccurate; rather, it is that the body of work isolates a few aspects of his fiction and remains silent on others. Critics and scholars have digested and discussed at length the atrocities of racism present in novels such as *Intruder in the Dust* and *Light in August.* Systems of racism against black Southerners were pervasive and abhorrent, and Faulkner does show the harsh realities that they were forced to endure. In addition though, Faulkner provides glimpses of light, major acts of resistance that were not just levied by black Southerners but also by whites and black and white together. Indeed, that solidarity is the most central narrative point of *Intruder in the Dust,* which only makes it more egregious that this absence in the literature has not been filled. What has been yielded by this one-track-mind approach is a generalized abstraction of race in Faulkner's works, which can then be transmogrified into a faulty understanding of Southern history; that is, if this analysis of Faulkner's work is observed on its face. Faulkner illustrated the scope and injustice of racism, but he did so as a backdrop to stage his greatest champions, those who would sacrifice and anguish to resist racism.

Harry L. Watson argues that "Abstractions, even stereotypes, like 'white supremacy' and 'racist demagogue'" have significant veracity to them—they were quite real and were very active in the

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[8] Ibid., vii.

period Faulkner set his stories.[9] Just like any other corner of the earth, "southerners are not really immune to abstractions…. Not everyone who embodies an abstraction is a fake, of course, but no one lives up to the expectations of the role with perfect consistency. And though the abstract qualities that might be used to define southern culture all appear in individual southerners, not all southerners share them all in equal measure."[10] The singular focus of scholars has resulted in a view toward Faulkner's work on race that reduces Southerners to abstractions, stereotypical entities that obfuscate the pockets of resistance and widespread internal struggle that eventually would lead to a successful civil rights movement that would make significant racial progress in the South. Faulkner centered much of his racial discourse on the living agents—both white and black—who contradicted widespread racism. In truth, poor whites and blacks who made up most of the South's population sometimes helped one another, but animosity often prevailed, too.[11] Faulkner focused on those exceptional people and how they united to defy political and business interests that were a common enemy to them. This is the most sizable absence in the analysis of Faulkner's work. When this absence is accounted for, various nuances of Faulkner's treatment of race and resistance to racism become apparent.

A key component of much of Faulkner's race-related narratives depicts racism as an economic outgrowth. His characters often resist hierarchal systems of racism that originate from wealthy white actors within the Southern economy. Because Faulkner's novels almost always focus on poor white characters in rural Mississippi, it stands to reason that these individuals were not those empowered to create or enact broad forms of institutionalized racism. Of course, a vast amount of these characters shared racist views toward non-whites, particularly black Southerners, just as the real people they represent did. However,

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[9] Harry L. Watson, "Front Porch," *Southern Cultures* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 2.

[10] Watson, "Front Porch," 2.

[11] Julia Leyda, "Reading White Trash Class, Race, and Mobility in Faulkner and Le Sueur," in *American Mobilities: Geographies of Class, Race, and Gender in US Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 34.

viewed through a lens of white and interracial resistance to racism, it is apparent that the legal forms of racism present in the South were largely derived from wealthy individuals at the top of the economic ladder. In this way, Faulkner's race narratives describe a Marxist conceptualization in which elites strive to subordinate a permanent underclass. In the case of the South, it was in the interest of these wealthy elites to do all within their power to prevent poor white and black Southerners from uniting in a common cause.

Evidence for this theory is abundant. Between 1900 and 1940, the cotton industry in the South was in a precarious position. The shift from a slave-based labor force to one built on sharecropping was dubiously constructed and quite fragile. Sharecroppers, a labor force that was vast and comprised both blacks and whites, worked long and painstaking hours in the fields with virtually no prospect of climbing out from the poverty in which they were mired. Large landowners, mostly white men of considerable wealth, used their influence to maintain the conditions of the agricultural economy that enriched them, even going so far as blocking New Deal efforts to "distribute [federal] funds to the tenants on their plantations."[12] Eventually, the planters were enticed by federal funds and the lucrative potential of transition away from sharecropping for sake of further technologization and mechanization. This paid off in the short term, but in the process they laid off vast amounts of workers. This set the groundwork for a "seismic shift… [that] influenced race relations too, creating a climate more favorable than ever before to the demands of the full-fledged civil rights movement that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s."[13] Wealthy planters were not as interested in maintaining institutionalized racism after they no longer were dependent upon poor whites and blacks for agricultural productivity.

Because agriculture was the bulk of the Southern economy and elite white planters had a strong interest in keeping a firm grasp on their labor force, it is reasonable to deduce that they would act to

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[12] Allison Davis, Burleigh Bradford Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), xxvi.
[13] Ibid.

prevent their labor force from dissipating or seeking other financial opportunities. Furthermore, there was strong incentive for landowners and other wealthy white elites to keep the underclasses pitted against one another along racial lines. This would preclude poor whites and blacks, who made up the vast majority of the rural South, especially in Mississippi, from colluding against their mutual oppressors. Richard H. King has written that during and after slavery, the wealthy white class in the South "maintained its position not by violence alone, but by imposing a world view upon the underclasses as well. This 'hegemony' linked the classes by a common set of assumptions, values, and attitudes which masked class contradictions. Hegemony was not necessarily planned; rather, cultural domination was in the nature of class rule."[14] For a long period, these elites were highly effective at dominating the imaginations and philosophical belief systems of the poor whites living in the South. Although there are numerous factors that contributed to racist ideologies, the political and economic pressure exerted by the elite class had a tangible impact.

This is not to say that acts of violence and discrimination carried out by poor and working-class whites should be blamed on other parties—far from it. Even Faulkner would attest to the ultimate responsibility of the individual and their decision-making capacity to act ethically or unethically. But when weighing an entire wide-scale culture of racism, it is absolutely paramount to determine whether and who consciously made efforts to enculturate such a vision, especially if those doing so had an incredibly pronounced ability to make their actions felt owing to their increased set of resources. Additionally, if it truly was the case that racist philosophies can be traced up the economic and political strata, then resistance to it can be, at least in some degree, characterized as resistance to a form of economic oppression.

Faulkner's discussions of race largely take place along this ideological wavelength. A prime example of this unfolding is in the novel of Faulkner's that most candidly addresses the nature of white racism toward blacks in the South—*Intruder in the Dust*. The story follows Lucas Beauchamp, a black man of advanced age who

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[14] Richard H. King, "Review: Marxism and the Slave South," *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 118.

is wrongfully accused of murdering a white man. He is targeted as the perpetrator in no small part because of the townspeople's contempt for him, which has grown out of the public perception that Beauchamp acts above the station that they believe his race connotes. His perceived haughtiness, especially for a non-white, is offensive to them, and when the opportunity arises to pin a murder on him, it seems rational to them that he would have had the audacity to commit it in the first place. Even if he did not do it, he would be paying the price for his years of unearned stature. Faulkner writes in the novel, "every white man in that whole section of the country had been thinking about him [Beauchamp] for years: *We got to make him be a nigger…. Then maybe we will accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted.*"[15] This is not just inconsequential posturing or conjecture in the novel either. When news of Beauchamp's arrest begins to circulate, a young boy announces excitedly to a friend, "Your friend Beauchamp seems to have done it this time…. They're going to make a nigger out of him once in his life anyway."[16] This kind of treatment of black men in the South was sadly commonplace. The reality of legal and social forms of racism carried out by poor whites in Faulkner's books is palpable. He mentions this in *Intruder in the Dust* in relation to the propensity for lynch mobs to materialize, often times without a scintilla of evidence of any perceived offense and over supposed infractions that were minor in the extreme. Faulkner writes that these men were "in every little Southern town, who never really led mobs nor even instigated them but were always the nucleus of them because of their mass availability."[17] Racism was endemic and abhorrent in the South; Faulkner confirms this at length.

The question is not whether this description is true; rather, it is whether analysis of Faulkner's work has left something out of this conversation. Blyden Jackson has asserted that what makes Faulkner's black characters so endearing and effective is that they "are not all identical. They differ in color, size, age, disposition,

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[15] William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 18.
[16] Ibid, 31.
[17] Ibid, 42.

mental ability, and moral character… he derived, for Yoknapatawpha, a Negro who was not an ideogram but a multifaceted human individual, living and acting, in his consistencies and inconsistencies, much as actual people do, somehow, really live and act."[18] What Jackson lauds about Faulkner's black characters is precisely what literary scholars invert upon Faulkner's white characters. In the bulk of the analysis of his narratives on race, white characters are painted with such a broad brush that their individual capacities are removed. This is doubly so with regard to their action or inaction toward racism. What of the whites who acted independently or with black characters to push back against, or outright defy, the South's culture of racism?

Intruder in the Dust meets Southern racism head-on, and scholars have discussed these elements in depth. However, the novel also delves into white and interracial resistance to racism, which has largely not been remarked upon, at least not to the same degree of rigor and volume. This incongruence is intensified considering that the novel's central theme hinges on the basic goodness and inherent human value of *all* people, regardless of race. A number of white characters repudiate racist philosophies in *Intruder in the Dust.* The sheriff who arrests Beauchamp treats the accused with dignity, even picking up the man's hat and placing it back on his head after it falls off while his hands are cuffed.[19] Two white characters, Doyle Fraser and "old Skipworth," save Beauchamp from being "lynched immediately out of hand" by a mob before the sheriff can apprehend and protect him.[20] There are more examples than these, but the most noteworthy are young Chick Mallison and his uncle Gavin Stevens, a lawyer. They believe Beauchamp's pleas of innocence and risk a great deal to evade authorities and renegades to prove that he did not commit the murder. Ultimately, they are successful and the real culprit pays for his crime.

Most notable in this analysis is how the culture of racism is presented by Faulkner and why the action by a unification of white and black Southerners is not more frequently a subject of literary critique. There are events transpiring beyond the text, events that

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[18] Fowler and Abadie, *Faulkner and Race*, 62–63.

[19] Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*, 43.

[20] Ibid.

Faulkner was quite aware of and that are historically prescient. The aforementioned characters from *Intruder in the Dust* are in many ways victims to a grander design, one that has been carefully devised and descended upon them. The ruling class that has strived to maintain these structures is as real in the novel as it was in history, which is largely what makes Faulkner's narrative so competent and compelling. Wealthy whites invented various means to encourage animosity among poor black Southerners and "poor whites in order to prevent cross-racial alliances that would challenge white hegemony."[21] Interracial solidarity was beheld as a serious threat to the elites' regime, and they exhaustively worked to advance notions of racism that would prevent such a unification of races. For instance, "many Southern states instituted 'stern police measures against whites who illicitly fraternized with blacks' and attempted to keep white and black laborers separate."[22] Not all racism was generated from the top down, but the economic and power interests in maintaining racial separation cannot be denied.

When Faulkner's novels are read in the context of these economically based efforts to prolong and condition a culture of racism, vital elements of his characters' actions emerge, as do generalized clarification of the thematic messages of his works. With regard to *Intruder in the Dust,* a band of otherwise unaffiliated white and black characters converge to resist racism in the South. Independently, they have little power to reverse the heinous designs of an entire ruling class, but together they can at least exact a modicum of justice that, in the case of this narrative, saves a man's life. Faulkner makes this clear near the end of the novel, writing in the voice of Gavin Stevens:

> Lucas' life the breathing and eating and sleeping is of no importance just as yours and mine are not but his unchallengeable right to it in peace and security and in fact this earth would be much more comfortable with a good deal fewer Beauchamps and Stevenses and Mallisons of all colors in it if there were only some painless way to efface not the clumsy room-devouring

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[21] Leyda, "Reading White Trash," 33.
[22] Ibid, 33-34.

carcasses which can be done but the memory which cannot—that inevictable immortal memory awareness of having once been alive which exists forever still ten thousand years afterward in ten thousand recollections of injustice and suffering, too many of us not because of the room we take up but because we are willing to sell liberty short at any tawdry price for the sake of what we call our own which is a constitutional statutory license to pursue each his private postulate of happiness and contentment regardless of grief and cost even to the crucifixion of someone whose nose or pigment we dont like and even these can be coped with provided that few of others who believe that a human life is valuable simply because it has a right to keep on breathing no matter what pigment its lungs distend or nose inhales the air and are willing to defend that right at any price.[23]

A white character making a pronouncement such as this contradicts the racist abstraction that is often cast upon the vast majority of Southern whites, both historically and in Faulkner's fiction. This stereotype, although valid when applied to many, perhaps even most of the whites in the early twentieth-century South, carries only as much truth as any stereotype does. The exceptions to this standard are what Faulkner was interested in; it was these exceptions that acted as the agents for racial progress. Likewise, the cooperative action between poor whites and blacks against their mutual oppressors was a central aspect of his narratives.

It is useful to consider parallel story elements to further substantiate the centralization of Faulkner's focus on white and cross-racial resistance to Southern racism. Throughout Faulkner's fiction, he discusses the plight of women in the early twentieth-century South in much the same way he addresses discrimination against black Southerners. The coalitions formed by some female characters to push back against these modes of mistreatment is

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[23] Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*, 237–238.

similar to the unified forms of resistance seen between racial groups. Overall, understanding how women resisted discrimination and how men allied with these oppressed women in his novels adds vital context to the social messaging that Faulkner intended to provide, both with regard to women and racial minority groups. Ultimately, these two avenues of discussion contribute to a comprehensive narrative resistance to socioeconomic power dynamics rather than a simple conversation about prejudice and its harmful consequences. If Faulkner's points here are derived from or representative of historical realities, as most literary scholars and historians would agree to some extent, then this reading is vital to restoring a more sophisticated vision of resistance to discrimination in the South.

Great advancements have been made in the United States concerning the treatment of women since Faulkner's lifetime. Even a shallow overview of American history provides an exorbitant amount of ways that women were subordinated in governmental and societal spheres. Patriarchal structures were firmly entrenched in government and in cultural customs that marginalized women's freedoms, reducing their agency and often rendering them dependent upon men. None of this is a matter of dispute. However, it is how Faulkner presents female characters and their resistance to these repressive norms that is unique and noteworthy. As it concerns this study, it shares fundamental tenets of Faulkner's narrative treatment of black and white Southerners in their responses to oppression of non-white peoples.

A pristine example of this dynamic playing out in a Faulkner narrative is in his 1931 novel *Sanctuary*. The plot follows a somewhat rebellious socialite, Temple Drake, who is a student at the University of Mississippi and the daughter of a rich and respected judge. She is convinced by a young bachelor by the name of Gowan Stevens to accompany him on a trip, but unbeknownst to Drake, Stevens is an alcoholic and a man of ill repute. He takes her to a bootlegger's operation in the secluded Mississippi countryside where she is intimidated, harassed, and eventually held against her will. The chief villain, the cruel and murderous Popeye, horrifically rapes Drake and transports her to Memphis where she is imprisoned in a brothel and used by Popeye for sexual purposes. Even more tragic and repulsive, Drake is emotionally drawn into this seedy criminal underworld and begins to sympathize with her

captors, culminating in a climactic scene where she testifies in court that a henchman of Popeye's who tried to save her was actually a murderer and her rapist. This man is soon lynched and set on fire by the angry townspeople.

Dominant in this narrative is a deep and resounding prejudice against women, wielded most notably by Popeye. However, Popeye's most egregious form of misogyny need not obscure the more endemic and less extreme forms. In analyzing Faulkner's message here, it is critical to mine the purpose of this prejudice and why it is employed. Furthermore, what was the general atmosphere of gender and sex in the setting of the novel and the period it represents? These questions are crucial because the answers to them divulge a wealth of information as to the conclusions that should be gathered from Faulkner's stories.

The main villain Popeye first abducts Drake at an illegal bootlegging operation, one that is well off the grid, so to speak, and that is frequented by other nefarious or foolish characters, such as Gowan Stevens—the one who takes Drake to this dangerous location in the first place. A culture of misogyny is present throughout the entire plotline. This can be seen in the fact that Drake was expected to be chaperoned and trusting of a man she hardly knew. Even her reluctant submission to him was a cultural norm. She could have avoided the entire debacle had she not trusted Stevens, but—as was common at the time—she followed his lead.

The narrative takes place during a backdrop of cultural transition not unlike the changes that were transpiring in society with race. The events of the novel occur in 1929, a time period that was quite turbulent. Women had only recently secured suffrage rights, and various other forms of legal and societal changes were affording them more rights than their female forebears. Louise Michele Newman has written the following about this period:

> U.S society was undergoing massive and unprecedented social and economic changes that were sparked by the Civil War, a cataclysmic event that left deep scars in the country's collective consciousness…. Whites throughout the country remained obsessed with the Negro

> Question, arguing over what to do about the ever-growing numbers of lynchings and incidents of vigilante violence. Growing concern with the "woman question"—that is, white women's increased visibility in the public sphere and their demands that they be granted equal political rights with white men—occurred simultaneously with these other developments.[24]

Many of the misogynistic qualities of *Sanctuary* and Temple Drake as a character can be understood against the backdrop of changes to cultural norms regarding women and race. Drake is a new-age young woman through and through; she does not conform to the traditional customs and gender roles of her female predecessors. Although it is microcosmic, many of the men in the novel use and abuse her based on the distorted gender characteristics that they perceive about her, of which they harbor significant contempt. This behavior is representative of a broader culture of anger, contempt, and resistance to liberation for women, which was felt in the extreme in the South for various reasons, but in no small part because it was occurring alongside a change in societal and political structures of race. Of course, this was all happening at the tail-end of the first feminist movement in the United States, in which women "formulated theories about intelligence, personality development, and sex roles that not only altered American thinking about the nature of women and men, but also affected the whole course of American social science."[25] The cultural shifts were so massive and so seemingly sudden that many men were extraordinarily resistant to change, and many lashed out violently, something that is a major part of *Sanctuary*.

The thematic messaging Faulkner provides in *Sanctuary* regarding women's changing roles in Southern society aligns fundamentally with his treatment of race. Both are derivative of

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[24] Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14-15.

[25] Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1982), xiii.

economic interests in that men were leery of women becoming more active in political and public life, fearful that this change would reduce men's earning capabilities. Feminist thought leaders were crystal clear about their goals in this arena. Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued about the importance of women forsaking domestic lifestyles, saying that progress for women and Americans as a whole "involve the collective activities of all the trades, crafts, arts, manufacturers, inventions, discoveries and all the civil and military institutions that go to maintain them."[26] Also similar to Faulkner's discussion of race, his narratives portrayed men attempting to stem the flow of women's liberation by asserting dominance over women, especially women with higher social status or whose lifestyles are more progressive. The male pushback to this is excessive in the novels, just as it was extreme in the early twentieth-century South. In fact, historian Danielle L. McGuire in *At the Dark End of the Street* traces the ghastly extent of rape and sexual violence that was often used in the South by men to maintain some semblance of control over the women in their society. This was so prevalent and damaging to women and their families, especially to women of color, that McGuire argues that the entire civil rights movement should be reinterpreted to account for these crimes and the victims' resistance to them.[27] These atrocities are at the forefront of Faulkner's narratives, and he uses them to provide sharp social criticism about oppression.

Although Faulkner's narratives are saturated with the negative, bigoted aspects of Southern culture at the time, what is also common to these narratives is characters who fight back against these widespread environments of bigotry. They do this across racial and gender lines, sacrificing their social standing and even endangering their lives to stand up for the morally righteous position, even though it is unpopular. In *Sanctuary,* the attorney Horace Benbow works strenuously to find and free Temple Drake, and he does what he can through legal channels to apprehend and convict her assailants. Lee Goodwin, although a fiend and a

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[26] Newman, *White Women's Rights*, 141.

[27] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance — a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), xx.

bootlegger, finds himself at odds with his associates when he tries to prevent Popeye and his gang of lackeys from abusing Drake. Eventually, Goodwin pays the price with his life as he is wrongfully convicted of murder and is lynched by furious townspeople.

Similar cross-gender resistance to misogyny takes place in Faulkner's 1932 novel *Light in August*. In this story, a young pregnant woman is abandoned by her child's father, and she journeys alone through rural Mississippi in search of him. An honorable man named Byron Bunch falls in love with her and tries to help her, but she rejects him only to find her child's father and be abandoned again. Bunch confronts the man and is soundly beaten for his trouble. Even more interestingly, Bunch pronounces beforehand that he knows he will lose the fight but that he will confront the man anyway, saying,

> You're bigger than me… but I dont care. You've had every other advantage of me. And I dont care about that neither. You've done throwed away twice inside of nine months what I aint had in thirtyfive years. And now I'm going to get the hell beat out of me and I dont care about that, neither.[28]

Bunch's thoughts elucidate a universal message across many of Faulkner's works—the willingness of characters to voluntarily dissolve the bonds of their racial or gender group to pursue the honorable, righteous path, all to help someone in need. The universalism of this theme cuts across all of his narratives, extending solidly to his accounts of racism and misogyny, creating a foundational message that is more representative of the complete landscape of discrimination and resistance in Southern life.

Another largely unexplored facet of Faulkner's treatment of race is in how his narratives contribute to conceptualizations of whiteness. In his texts, whiteness is seated much more in a specific sub-group of racial categorization that is then transposed upon all whites within the narrative's boundaries. Too often white characters in his novels are considered as holding viewpoints and identities that are entirely homogeneous. Faulkner does no such

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[28] William Faulkner, *Light in August* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 439.

thing. Transversely, he presents his central characters as unique and highly individualized persons acting from myriad beliefs and externalities, just as real people do. He does this with respect to characters of any race, and his contributions to conceptions of whiteness are in alignment with this dynamic. Just as Faulkner's narratives focusing on race and gender are undergirded by economic and power interests, his contributions to whiteness are grounded in a specific value system that commodifies whiteness as a tool of elites. This assertion is substantiated by scholars within the realm of whiteness studies.

Whiteness studies, an ever-burgeoning sociological field, provide a wealth of insight into Faulkner's narratives related to race. It is first necessary to understand that historically and at present whiteness is not considered to be static; it is fluid and at times has been afforded to various groups dependent upon pertinent social and political situations. Matthew Frye Jacobson argues the following:

> As races are invented categories—designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating peoples along lines of presumed difference—Caucasians are made and not born. White privilege in various forms has been a constant in American political culture since colonial times, but whiteness itself has been subject to all kinds of contests and has been subject to all kinds of historical vicissitudes.[29]

The categorization of whiteness is highly variable, and the overlapping qualities between different degrees of whiteness is very complex and has more to do with the spatial and temporal context it rises out of than a simply definable set of attributes encompassing all Caucasians. Historically, especially in the American South, being considered white connoted a number of social and political affordances. One does not have to be a historical scholar to have a solid comprehension of what these

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[29] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

privileges were and how they manifested in public life. What is most intriguing and curiously absent in critical analysis of Faulkner's work is where whiteness emanates from and what purpose it serves in the novel—and also, how it is resisted.

A very narrow conceptualization of whiteness is advanced in Faulkner's novels, one that is founded in social and economic dominance by elites rather than being contrived from the common man as a means of superiority or social privilege. Peter Kolchin has supported this concept, writing:

> The central question one must confront in evaluating whiteness studies is the salience of whiteness as an explanation for exploitation, injustice, and, more generally, the American past. In addressing that question, the matter of context becomes crucial. Simply put, in making whiteness omnipresent, whiteness studies authors risk losing sight of contextual variations and thereby undermining the very understanding of race and whiteness as socially constructed.[30]

In the context of Faulkner's narratives, white characters represent different materializations of whiteness. However, the form that is most notable and corrupting is that which is derivative of the wealthy elite whites who fashion their vision of whiteness as one of inherent superiority, justifying in their eyes their discriminatory beliefs and actions. Faulkner features this form of whiteness, but just as importantly, he shows how some white characters repudiate and reject it.

Copious evidence exists showing the enhanced role of wealthy white elites in creating a cultural perception of whiteness that was in alignment with their philosophies and that served their interests. Jim Crow laws and other methods of systemic discrimination were legal manifestations of their warped philosophies, and it is a matter of record how they were designed by those in positions of political and social power. Laws that prevented fraternization between whites and blacks were common in the South. If these were not implemented to

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[30] Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 95, no. 1 (2009): 123.

serve an isolated group of elite whites, why would it be necessary to ratify and enforce laws that would prevent interracial mingling? If they were generated from the bottom or even the middle of the socio-economic hierarchy, they would not be necessary at all. Simply put, there is no need for the people to make laws to prevent what the people in mass already abhor. No, it was the ruling classes who created these laws to stop fraternization that could potentially be damaging to their power structures.

Another example of this can be found in scientific spheres. Much of the scientific and social-science community mobilized over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to provide a scientifically-based reasoning for racial hierarchies. These explanations have since been debunked and rightfully denounced, but their sway at the time was eminent. And regardless of their veracity, they provided cover for elite whites to use racism as a means of empowering themselves. In the South this was very operative and powerful. Since the antebellum period, social Darwinists applied Darwin's philosophies on nature to American society. Essentially, this philosophy "held that what *is* is Nature's stamp of approval of what *ought* to be." Transporting this conceptualization from nature into human civilization led to a system of severe discrimination. It argued that even if the competition is unequal or certain individuals are given an edge "that the element of chance, along with motivation and natural ability, were the deciding factors in determining an individual's or a group's fate," leading to an "anti-humanist position but also one that promotes social indifference and social cruelty."[31] The effects of these philosophies are clearly on display in Faulkner's novels, and there is no question where they originate: the upper echelons of intellectual and power circles.

Faulkner shows in his novels the mindless racism that is incorporated into the public consciousness of the towns and communities in which his stories are set. The senselessness of it is striking to the reader, even more so when those incensed by these racist ideologies commit heinous acts. The senselessness of racism is

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[31] Rutledge M. Dennis, "Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race," *The Journal of Negro Education* 64, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 244-245.

what makes it so offensive and frustrating; it seems so senseless because the truth of its elite origins is obscured. Regardless of its origins, the effects of racism are widely felt and abominable, but Faulkner is at least equally interested in the environment of racism as he is creating characters who fight against it. In *Intruder in the Dust,* for instance, he "does not emphasize lynchers, victim, or atmosphere, as is conventional in most lynching stories…. Rather he focuses on Chick, so that quite early a reader realizes that not social issues themselves but their psychological implications for whites are Faulkner's primary theme."[32] Certainly Chick's conceptualization and ethical evaluation of whiteness is askew of the one that permeates much of the general South. He and his white allies who assist Lucas Beauchamp have identities that are dissimilar but overlap in various ways. Regardless, their basic philosophy of whiteness must be far from that of the elitist view, which would incentivize their subordinating of non-white people. Once again, this conveys a fragmentation that is incongruent with many of the more superficial analyses of Faulkner's discussions of race.

If there is a penultimate thematic quality that rises out of Faulkner's discussion of race, one that directly challenges racism in the early twentieth-century South but that has not been properly prioritized by scholars, it is the moments of interracial unification against oppression. Rather than simply detailing racial discrimination in the South and all of its myriad impacts, Faulkner creates characters with honor, imperative visions, and the willingness to take great risk to seek justice. There are white and black characters who possess these attributes, and although they sometimes act independently, there are profound instances where they interact, violating the racial suppositions of the world of which they live. This is not merely a compelling feature of Faulkner's novels; it is the apex of his thematic discussions of race.

The stark realities of racism that Faulkner presents are critical because they allow him to inject characters who unify across racial lines to attack these philosophies. Although Faulkner does this to grand effect in many of his works, *Intruder in the Dust* executes this in perhaps the most powerful, direct manner. A host of white

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[32] John E. Bassett, "Gradual Progress and Intruder in the Dust," *College Literature* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1986), 207.

characters ally with Lucas Beauchamp to prove his innocence, all in the face of derision and contempt from enraged townspeople who are actively seeking to lynch Beauchamp. What should be gleaned from Chick and his uncle's defense of Beauchamp is something that has a *meta* quality, rising out of the novel into a substantive social criticism. This message "is the key to Faulkner's relationship to both Gavin and Chick: the author of this novel believes that what he writes may, like what Gavin teaches, help those who follow to do a little better, to be a bit more tolerant, to understand a little more than their elders."[33] Faulkner uses the solidarity between white and black characters as a strategy to show the type of world that can be achieved when people defy injustice regardless of the social capital they must expend to do so. More importantly, he shows that no matter the depth and severity of social and political injustice, people can and will still respond to the most basic elements of humanity inherent to everyone.

Faulkner himself cited mixture of the races as means of conveying his most deeply held stances on social issues. Considered by some to be his masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!* was published in 1936, the same year *Gone with the Wind* was also released. Faulkner said that he hated the "moonlight and magnolia" tradition to which Margaret Mitchell's bestseller belongs, "and claimed he should get twice what she had for the movie rights. He added that his own book was about 'miscegenation'; but there were no takers."[34] The real-world situation into which Faulkner produced his fictional work was antagonistic to the subject of his novel. Filmmakers had no interest in a novel of such weight with such controversial content, opting to produce an epic film version of Mitchell's book, which is notable for its portrayal of slavery and the glorification of those who benefitted from forced labor. Faulkner's novel could not have been more adversarial to Mitchell's narrative about the South. Where he challenged the atrocities prevalent in Southern culture, she built ostensibly sympathetic characters whose very lifestyles were founded upon those atrocities. The resistance

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[33] Bassett, "Gradual Progress and Intruder in the Dust," 210.

[34] Michael Gorra, *The Saddest Words: William Faulkner's Civil War* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 26.

Faulkner found to his novel was mimicked by the resistance that his characters struggled against.

A powerful methodology Faulkner used to wage this battle was the creation of characters and plotlines that revolved around miscegenation. Building characters and plots involving "interbreeding" at a time when fraternization between races was explicitly illegal and an unsubstantiated claim of harassment could result in a black man being lynched was a bold thing to do. For these reasons, the fact that Faulkner would characterize one of his greatest novels as being *about* miscegenation is even more compelling. At the time, miscegenation was considered to be a "remarkable form of insanity" that was gratuitous and deemed by scientific, elite circles as a subject that "will not find a place in future scientific literature."[35] Common men and women were no greater supporters of "mixing the races" than the intelligentsia and the wealthy elites. Knowing this, why would Faulkner centralize novels on such a controversial topic? The answer is that it has the most impressive and influential capacity to challenge the racism that was prevalent in the South before and during his lifetime.

The novel where miscegenation takes the most central position is *Light in August*. In this story, a main character named Joe Christmas believes himself to be of African American descent, but his skin color is so light that he passes as white. He is a wanderer who has an incredibly haunted past full of crime and abuse. Although he is ostensibly white, he suffers from an obvious inner struggle. To assuage his guilt and anger, he lives a criminal lifestyle as a bootlegger and starts fights with both black and white men, as if he is equally furious at both groups for his perceived misfit status. Even more egregious in the racial context of the time, Christmas has a consensual sexual relationship with a white woman. Although she is not aware of his true racial heritage, Christmas and the reader are. This character and the plot he is involved in are of such a taboo nature that it is remarkable Faulkner made it such an integral part of the novel and that his publisher permitted it. Faulkner brilliantly sets up Christmas' death so as to present the reader with a paradoxical situation where

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[35] Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, "Miscegenation," *The Anthropological Review* 2, no. 5 (May 1864), 116-117.

racial preconceptions and racist notions have to be questioned, and ultimately, discarded. After Christmas is found out to have African American lineage and to have committed a murder, he is apprehended by furious vigilantes. Faulkner makes clear that this lynching is largely a result of people's anger at Christmas' audacity in presenting himself as a white man. After catching him, several of the men refer to him as the "white nigger," and a white woman, upon seeing Christmas' bloody body, says, "He dont look no more like a nigger than I do, either."[36] These lines are so obtuse that they reveal the absurdity of the racism that these people believe. Their racist beliefs are so tenuous, so shoddily constructed that when they encounter a man who has duped them into believing he was white, they are sent into a murderous frenzy. It begs the question that if race was such an important, impactful attribute, how could it have been possible for so many people to be fooled? Faulkner deconstructs their philosophy by shattering the fragile ground on which it is built, just as many cases of fraternization between races and even miscegenation exposed racism in the South.

William Faulkner's novels have been appreciated for a wide array of reasons—his inventive stream-of-consciousness style, his masterful prose, his ability to generate powerful imagery, and, of course, his fearless, innovative approach to addressing social issues. The fashion in which he discusses race and the conclusions that can be derived from his works are crucial features of his fiction. Although scholars have been correct in describing the importance of racism in his works and his subsequent dismantling of it, it is attention to the methodology for *how* he has done so that has often been lacking. Faulkner uses white characters and unification of white and black characters to attack the oppressive nature of racism in the South, something which, although was not as common as basic racist philosophies, was still an important part of history. The characters he fashioned were representative of those who acted as the agents for racial progress in the South, and these people certainly did exist. The racism he discusses is prevalent, to be sure, but its origins are most accurately traced to elite classes who used racism to advance their own agendas. As Faulkner wrote mostly of poor white and black characters, they can be better understood as

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[36] Faulkner, *Light in August*, 344–346.

flawed individuals who are responsible for their own acts of discrimination and violence, but who are in many ways pawns in a game whose scope is much more expansive than they can behold and cognitively process. This same dynamic extends to Faulkner's treatment of women, and the parallels between his discussions of racism and misogyny are clear. The fragmented nature of some of his white characters presents a notion of whiteness that has been heretofore left wanting among literary scholars. In Faulkner's imagination, whiteness as an identity or self-image is as fractured and variable as the individual, and white individuals can transgress common notions of whiteness in order to serve a higher moral calling. Ultimately, cross-racial unification and resistance, sometimes culminating in moments of miscegenation, is the highest order of repudiating racism as a system of belief.

All of these tenets of Faulkner's thematic messaging can be connected to the real history of the period. Consequently, a better theoretical lens applied to Faulkner's novels provides a better understanding of historical realities. All of these events were not entirely unique to the South or Faulkner's home state of Mississippi, but they were in many ways much more intensely felt in this corner of the country. Using this place as a testing ground of sorts to better contemplate and grasp human nature would be an apt procedure. In any event, this rationale provides confirmation for Faulkner's famous phrase that to understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi. But then, how does one understand Mississippi and all its complexities? Faulkner's fiction is a good place to start.