

Reflections on William Faulkner's Faith in Humanity

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**SIGNATURE PAGE**

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## Introduction

Lawrence Langer states in his essay, *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*: "the age of heroism is over" (3). Accordingly, renown scholar Joseph Campbell alludes to this idea by declaring that "modern literature is devoted, in great measure, to a courageous open-eyed observation of the sickeningly broken figurations that abound before us, around us, and within" (27). Both statements refer to the complete absence of traditional heroic virtues. More specifically, the attributes of honor, duty and triumph of good over evil, all of which are literary staples of the Homeric tradition, have been cast aside. Langer's reasoning for this sudden and rather unprecedented shift in literature is this: "the facts of recent history have destroyed much of the sustenance that once fed our conceptions of human dignity" (3). The agent Langer is referring to is the immense scale of death and destruction that resulted from both World Wars. The technological changes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century spurred an optimism and a promise of prosperity, that all but evaporated within a few decades. The advent and the deadly backlash of technology allows for the possibility of humanity's complete extinction. This looming scepter of death and hopelessness permeates much of modern literature. Campbell believes that this unique turn in literature was ushered in by the philosophy of Nietzsche; Langer argues that its inception came with the H-bomb. Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear; literature, in step with the technology has taken an irreversible leap forward.

James Joyce is one of the modern writers who initiated this literary change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with his novel *Ulysses*. Evidence of this shift away from the Homeric model

of heroism lies in the fact that the entire novel is joke or pun on all that was held sacred until this time in history. To indulge in the sly humor of Joyce is to acknowledge that much of the literary constructs of myth, language and artistic ideals are out dated; if they weren't we wouldn't get the joke. Shortly after Joyce, William Faulkner entered the scene. Faulkner, considered by many to be Joyce's only serious peer as a novelist, sought to articulate the realm of human existence by avoiding the tendencies of the epic tradition while at the same time not allowing his vision of humanity to be overshadowed by the nihilism and pessimism that characterizes the modern age.

Faulkner's work is, at times, notoriously complex and difficult to read, not to mention frustratingly ambiguous. For this reason, this essay will approach Faulkner's method of redefining the modern hero from a structural perspective. Peter Swiggert points out that Faulkner's characters fall into two categories: the "primitive" or the "puritan." Within this framework the "puritan" characters are posited against the "primitive" characters. The "puritan" connotes and refers to not only those associated with the extreme, exceedingly harsh religious sects of the South, but also it generally refers to any other figure in Faulkner's works that adhere to an implicit or explicit moral code. These literary types are invariably the antagonists which usually take the form of a Southern Baptist or Southern Democrat. Faulkner is unambiguous in his disdain for rigid moral standards that govern and subsequently destroy the human soul. Elizabeth Kerr points out "Faulkner's novels are riddled with appalling examples of the good"(Kerr177). The "puritan" figures who attempt to define what is morally "good" are the characters that invariably disrupt and destroy the lives around them.

The correlative factor in this approach is the "primitive" people. Again the term itself conjures ideas that apply directly to the character, but this quality is not intended as a pejorative. The notion that the "primitive" are untouched, and unaffected by their "puritan" counterparts is the very essence of their nature. Hence these figures should not be misconstrued as deviant or immoral; they merely exist outside the moral caste system.

Ironically, it is Faulkner's unabashed inquiry into the "primitive" aspects of human consciousness that caused many of Faulkner's novels to be ill received. What Faulkner intended was not to create unnecessary contention among the scholarly elite, but rather to "write the human soul in one sentence" (MSAL 699). Anyone familiar with the people of Yoknapatawpha county will recall Joe Christmas, a man who kills gratuitously and then takes on Christ-like qualities. Or Lena Grove, who in the last month of pregnancy, sets out on foot across Alabama in search of the man she believes to be the father of her child. Her journey can be misunderstood as simply a bizarre notion of a wanton woman; or as Faulkner intends, an exquisite testament of faith. Lena Grove's journey becomes virtuous in itself, as she trudges the back roads of Mississippi. With only her unshakeable, unquestioning faith as her guide, Lena epitomizes the simple, wholly unadulterated "primitive" being reminiscent of the Eden-like world. Her primal innocence wins out over the dogmatic, ferocity of the "puritans" who, blinded by their extreme sense of morality, shun and deride her at every opportunity. Her character evinces an unadulterated faith that affords absolute freedom and hope for the individual as it transcends societal condemnation. As George W. Van Vender points out, "Faulkner's philosophy has been difficult for many critics. He believed in God but did

not pretend to be a Christian. He borrowed freely from the Bible, yet used as parallels to Christ uncouth characters such as Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. Both a Greek Stoic and a Christian humanist, William Faulkner believed in the worth of the individual, most especially his ability to endure and prevail" (MSAL 669).

The theme of modern heroism begins with this familiar dichotomy and then is developed through the psychological strata of each character. The result is the triumph of the ordinary person. In fact, the more inauspicious or "backward" the person, the more profound and edifying the presence in Faulkner's work. The unexpected kinship readers find in Faulkner's endearing characters is not so much a product of his dexterity as a convincing writer, as it is evidence of our preconditioned formula of what constitutes a hero and heroism. Faulkner speaks plainly through his stories as if to say that the age of heroism is not over, for it never was, but rather our delusions of heroism are coming to an end. Faulkner reasserts the dignity of the individual by bringing to light heroic qualities that have always been overshadowed by the grandiosity of epic story telling. In essence, the hero of the modern age finds no need to question faith, no need to obscure the simple life with morality and materialism; and perhaps most importantly, the modern hero is one who revels in life itself. William Gass sums up the modern mindset by noting-"Nietzsche thought a grazing cow could be happy because it had no memory of the past or vision of the future, hence no regrets, no anxieties, no invidious comparison- *an eternal now was enough*" (78 my emphasis). It is precisely this idea that Faulkner applies to the novel in order to define heroism for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the characters of Sergeant Gray and Uncle Willy will show by contrast, Faulkner understood that heroism comes from the most unexpected and most unlikely

sources, and like the human being, it exists in and of itself. It is not wrought from circumstance, nor can it be shaped by religious dogma.

## Chapter I

### The Modern Hero Redefined in Faulkner's "Victory" and "Uncle Willy"

Faulkner portrays Sergeant Gray as the quintessential "puritan" in his short story *Victory*, and not surprisingly, embodies and reenacts several aspects of the typical epic hero. To begin with, one must recognize the pattern that typifies the hero's life. Joseph Campbell notes that "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (30). Campbell's definition here is intended for and refers to the ancient model of the hero quest. It epitomizes the values and ideals of an era that no longer applies to the present. In fact, this notion of the ancient epic hero is the very means by which, the reader is culturally conditioned to expect the life of our heroes to play out. Faulkner is aware of this sort of cultural conditioning, and thus he patterns Gray's life in a similar fashion but with a peculiar twist. Faulkner is able to undermine this ancient model of archetypal hero by involving his readers in aspects of Gray's life that are less than heroic to say the least. Hence Gray's life is told dually, or rather we are both privy to what is purported to have happened and what actually happened.

Faulkner familiarizes the reader with Gray's duplicitous nature almost immediately. Following the prescribed pattern of the hero's leave taking, Faulkner writes "so young Alec [Gray] went to enlist, descending the hill on a weekday in his Sunday clothes with a New Testament and a loaf of home-baked bread tied in a handkerchief" (442). Not long after venturing into the world in search of his "decisive victory"

in the midst of WWI, young Gray is sentenced to seven months in the penal battalion, having been cited for insubordination. While serving out his sentence, Sergeant Gray maintains a correspondence with his family back home in Clyde. It is here that Faulkner begins to intimate aspects of this double life. The reader is a witness to what is really happening in the life of Sergeant Gray, as he relates a different story to his family. Here Faulkner is juxtaposing what is expected of the hero figure with what is actually happening. Or, in other words, Faulkner is holding up an ideal of heroism we have long since outgrown and shows us that it can no longer be the model for the person of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gray's young life becomes a furious attempt to live the prescribed ideal of heroism, as he resorts to ever greater levels of violence and treachery in order to maintain the semblance of honor and duty. Taciturn by nature, Gray's correspondence invariably consists of "I am well" and not much else. His letters are completely void of any detail of his real situation and they offer little in the way of emotional content, except for when he indulges in a bit of ironic cruelty by relating that he still has and abides by "the Book." He fails to mention that it has long since been put to different use, that is, Gray, along with the other inmates, use the pages of the Bible to light cigarettes. He relates nothing about his situation for the obvious reason that he is attempting to maintain an image of what is expected of him. It is this sort of vehement adherence to illusionary notions of honor and duty that not only consume the life of this soldier, but also leave the reader painfully aware of how specious these assumptions of heroism really are.

After his release from the penal battalion, Sergeant Gray finds himself in the muddy trenches of France. He is still seeking to procure a position of honor and self

definition in the maelstrom of war. But as Campbell points out there is a delineation of values, for the “the hero-deed to be wrought is not today what it was in the century of Galileo” (388). For Sergeant Gray the times have changed drastically but he still holds to moribund ideals even though they continue to fail him. Faulkner is showing Gray as a metaphor for society as a whole. For he captures the sense of cultural and moral confusion that plague the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Clearly, one can sympathize with Gray, because he is struggling to uphold up what went before, not realizing or refusing to realize just how completely his perceptual footing has been shaken on all fronts. In trying to maintain or regain his balance, as it were, he clings to what is familiar to him, even though this act initiates an inexorable downward spiral in his character. Again to quote Campbell who acknowledges this unprecedented shift in modern literature, “the lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two” (388). Faulkner illustrates this point with the dual life of Gray, but then furthers it by showing just how irreconcilable our ideals and the reality of the modern world have become.

Gray is compelled to murder his superior officer -- not surprisingly the same one who cited him for insubordination -- in order to attain a position of authority. Faulkner relates- “The earth-muffled bomb thuds; the sergeant-major is in the act of catching another bomb from the sack about his neck as Gray’s bayonet goes into his throat” (446). Having murdered the “big man,” Sergeant Gray then proceeds to mutilate the corpse. In finding that the mud in the trench softens the blows directed at the sergeant-major’s face, Sergeant Gray procures a “duckboard upended in the mud. He drags it free and slips it beneath the sergeant-major’s head and hammers the face with his rifle-butt” (Faulkner

446). On first glance one might be apt to read this as temporary insanity on the part of Sergeant Gray. But more importantly, this scene refers to the culminating angst wrought by the fear and disillusionment that characterizes an era of immense change, upheaval and destruction. Having no psychological recourse or precedent to fall back on, the modern person is caught between the consequences of the past and an unknowable future. Hence this particular incident is more symbolic and more powerful in its implications. This is the only time that Gray steps out of his insipid character and smashes the archaic rules of chivalry and moral code that will in the end, rob him of every last vestige of his individuality. The deed is horrific and immoral to be sure, but symbolically it becomes a small attempt by this confused everyman to go against the grain of the past. By attempting to throw off the yoke of what went before, Gray is making a conscious attempt to define himself by his own actions. Or more specifically Gray becomes for a moment what Campbell calls "the universal god-man" which he believes "is immanent and effective in all of us" (389). In this light Gray is not so much "hammering" away at the face of the deceased but rather at the face of traditional values and norms that have in essence betrayed him in this modern age.

Faulkner twists this situation, however, in order to show that Gray is unable to break away from the past. Herein lies the tragedy, as Faulkner sees it, of the modern man. This inability to split from the moribund ideals of yesteryear is reflected continually as Gray's existence becomes defined by fear and anxiety. Hence Gray unwittingly becomes the most salient conspirator in his own downfall. Gray's rather ironic citation and medal of honor for his "heroism" in the trenches initiates this downfall. Faulkner again is calling into question the validity of our expectation of

modern heroes. For once again Gray dons the manacles of the rigid morality and social uprightness which has speciously lauded his barbarism. This in itself is another prompting from Faulkner to reexamine what is considered man's highest ideal. Needless to say, the long held notions of the hero and acts of heroism remain under serious scrutiny.

Gray, having attained the respectable rank of captain, rejects the humble virtue of ordinary life in favor of the superficial pomp and circumstance of military life. Oddly enough, Gray himself is aware of the speciousness of it all, for he reflects "that no man has courage but that any man may blunder blindly into valor as one stumbles into an open manhole in the street" (454). Nevertheless, he chooses his own subjection to this hollow and morally prescribed existence. Gray's rationale to his father, who attempts to convince of the value of the ordinary life, is that he is "a captain now, with two ribbons in the box"(454). Faulkner is clearly alluding to the conventional notion of heroism and the predictable life of strict moral duty that it entails. Hence there is little wonder as to why Faulkner relentlessly, not to mention sardonically, describes Gray and his mannerisms with an intentional overuse of the word "correct". In so doing he maintains his attack on the narrow mindedness of those who live so implicitly by the established rules at the expense of their very soul.

Faulkner continues to balance what is known of Gray and what is expected of him by showing how Gray parleys his "heroic" deed that ensured his promotion. Upon returning to civilian life, Gray attempts to live the life that is expected of him. Faulkner relates that "his position was waiting. It was in an office. He had already had cards made: Captain A. Gray, M.C., D.S.M., and on his return to London he joined the

Officers' Association, donating to the support of the widows and orphans"(Faulkner455). In one respect Gray is noble and charitable. But in light of what Faulkner has related about him, this juxtaposition is quite hypocritical and appalling. The lengths that Captain Gray has traversed and the human sacrifices he has made to adhere to "duty" and societal expectation are sickening and disturbing at the very least. Faulkner creates a dissonance between Gray's inner and outer life that forces the reader to reconsider heroic ideals. His indictment of the modern mindset forces the reader to see the irreconcilability of what one expects to see and what is the reality of the times. Gray has committed premeditated murder, killing a superior officer and jeopardizing the precarious safety of those in his company, in order to become greater, if only on paper or in the form of "two ribbons in the box." In essence Faulkner continues to lay bare the pretense and falsehoods of the presiding moral code of outward "correctness."

A final aspect in modern literature that figures into Faulkner's redefinition of the hero and heroism is the notion of the "unexamined death." This idea is derived, of course, from the Socratic axiom that "an unexamined life is not worth living," which has influenced much of western art and culture. It is the examination of one's life that necessitates the importance of a hero's high moral standard. Also this concept has functioned over the centuries to alleviate much of the anxiety over death. But as Lawrence Langar points out, in an age when ancient heroic standards have been abandoned and gratuitous death and atrocity are commonplace, it is the flipside of this axiom that is seems more applicable. The focus for modern writers has been that an "unexamined death is not worth dying." The significance of this idea is based on the

unprecedented change in human life. Moreover, it refers to the looming possibility of humankind's complete annihilation. Langar writes

the chaos of modern history has wasted individuals, racial identities, national minorities and general populations in staggering numbers, as if dying in extremity were the natural aim of creation and the ability to tolerate its necessity the sign of the civilized man. (3)

Having served in WWI and been witness to the incalculable devastation of WWII, Faulkner clearly understood the need for this sort of reexamination. His inquiry into the soul of humankind in the modern age, places the burden of responsibility on the "puritan" figure.

Sergeant Gray symbolizes the rational human mind that has brought history to this particular point. He is the "old style" hero who adheres vehemently if not obsessively to a rigid code of moral virtue. Faulkner intentionally exaggerates aspects of his character, like his perfunctory mannerism and sense of self importance and duty to illustrate this. Moreover, Faulkner incorporates unmistakable images of death and decay - "the man[Gray] had almost white hair, moustaches waxed to needle points. He wore a frayed scarf in which could be barely distinguished the colors and patterns of a regiment. His threadbare clothes were freshly ironed and he carried a stick" (463). What is key to understanding Faulkner's position is in the following passage in which an old friend of Sergeant Gray's tries to approach him -- "but the other man [Gray] only stared at him with eyes that were perfectly dead" (Faulkner463). The description of "perfectly dead" will take on even greater significance with regard to Uncle Willy, but in this case it literally represents one who is "dead" and doesn't even know it. Faulkner

locates the source of tragedy in human existence as the adherence to all things fleeting and temporal, that eventually leads to one's inability to distinguish between life and death. The "perfectly dead" Gray is a walking ghost of the past, whose life and death basically slipped "unexamined" into obsolescence.

Clearly key elements regarding the "puritan" archetype in Faulkner's work shows the ineffectuality of adhering to rigid moral standards. These features, which typify a long held literary tradition in the western culture, invariably lead to an aberrant premature, and "unexamined" death of the individual. Faulkner abhorred this sort of heroism stating unequivocally in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1950 that "the basest of all things is to be afraid" (1). Fear, whether it be of death or life, is precisely what necessitates the application of morality. Faulkner elaborates on this idea by stating-

our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about. (2)

Faulkner's belief in the immortal soul of man overshadows the pessimism of the modern era, but at the same time is not wholly given over to spiritual rhapsodizing. He saw that morality existed not to enrich the individual but rather to reduce the individual. In other words, nuance and particularities that make up human character are suspect and subsequently traded off with the imposition of societal conformity. For this reason,

Faulkner took great pains to define the modern hero as the epitome of non-conformity, who appears at times to be quite eccentric as well.

Faulkner redefines the idea of heroism by giving the literary world Uncle Willy, an unpretentious man who quietly lives his life in Jefferson running a dilapidated general store/pharmacy. Uncle Willy becomes Faulkner's quintessential hero, for everything about Willy is unmarked for heroism. As Peter Swiggert points out in his book, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels*, "just as Faulkner makes social action destructive and in this sense demonic, he locates human value in primitive characters who are generally free of social involvement as well as puritan rationality"(17). Accordingly, Uncle Willy is so unmarked for greatness, so riddled with human failings that Faulkner's elevation of his character in light of the "Christian community" has an indelible effect. It seems that true heroism cannot be canned into a simple formula, but rather it surfaces particularly when it is least expected, taking shape in the most inauspicious characters.

Faulkner again uses the same sort of moral code of social uprightness and duty that in effect destroyed the character of Sergeant Gray, as the demonic force that Uncle Willy must contend with in this tiny backwoods town. The fundamentalist Christian community is portrayed as the very antitheses of the salvation they hope to impose on Uncle Willy. Put another way their need to intervene in the life of Willy has more to do with their intolerance of others, those who do not conform to the dictates of their society, than it does with guiding souls to the path of righteousness. For example, it is well known that the community cannot stand the fact that Uncle Willy attends Sunday School, sitting in regularly with the children in Mr. Barbour's class. The narrator notes Mr. Barbour's displeasure by relating that even though Willy sat among the children

attentive and eager to learn week after week, "Mr. Barbour from the Sunday school never called on him"(227). One might think that Faulkner is merely trying to make a mockery of Christianity with this episode. However, Uncle Willy's character belies this notion entirely. Faulkner is alluding to is the simple virtue and unadulterated faith that exists only among the young who have yet to be inculcated into the rigors of social right and wrong. Uncle Willy finds among the children in Jefferson an acceptance that does not exist among the adults. His refusal to grow up, as it were, and join the pillars of community is not so much a character fault but rather a conscious effort to avoid the hypocrisy and condemnation of others that so characterizes adulthood. To think like a child is to entertain hopes and dreams of what will later be deemed impossible or irresponsible by the staid and dour Baptist community. As will be shown, it is this particular community that bands together in order to thwart Uncle Willy's life long dream of flying an airplane. Unlike Willy, who truly believes in the possibilities that life offers, the community seems to thrive on making much of life a burdensome load of impossibilities.

The Christian community proves to be the overarching monster in Uncle Willy's life. For after Uncle Willy turns sixty years old they band together and decide that his time on earth is short and that he must be cured of his intemperance. As the narrator notes their preemptive strike doesn't last long-- "It began one Sunday morning and it was finished by the next Friday" (227). Uncle Willy is ambushed one morning in Mr Barbour's Sunday school class. As he is bodily removing Uncle Willy from his seat, Reverend Schultz gives this reasoning- "Now, Brother Christian, I know you will hate to leave Brother Barbour's class, but let's you and I go in and join Brother Miller and the

men and hear what he can tell us on this beautiful and heartwarming text” (Faulkner 227-228). This entire episode becomes a parody of societal conformity that is based on religious dogmatism. Faulkner clearly disdains this sort of charity for as this scenario plays out, those Christians who try to “help” Uncle Willy become increasingly more malevolent and aggressive. In fact the Christian brothers and sisters become downright devious their attempts at “curing” Uncle Willy. Reverend Schultz and Mrs. Merridew both at intervals physically restrain Willy, all the while smiling and promising “cool lemonade and a nice chicken dinner” (229). Faulkner continues to undermine the intentions of “Mr. and Mrs. Christian” by invoking a familiar theme that Swiggert notes is the “repressed emotions of Faulkner’s puritan” which is “mask-like facial expression” (132). This “simultaneous calm and rapturous”(Swiggert 133) theme reoccurs through much of Faulkner’s work, and in this case recalls the implacable correctness of Sergeant Gray. What is clear in both cases is that the shell of social convention cannot contain the fury that lies beneath. This rage is the very essence of humanism that struggles to resist the superficial and, frankly, rather farcical outward pretense. As with the splenetic Sergeant Gray, Mrs. Merridew and company cannot contain the immense distrust and malice they have for those who refuse to follow the prescribed societal norm. In fact Mrs. Merridew while “holding Uncle Willy by the back of the neck and shaking him” (Faulkner 232) reveals much about the nature of her institution. She alone epitomizes the vicious, self-determined religiosity that has sanctified much of the gross injustices of the Deep South. One will note that after Uncle Willy escapes her clutches, she remarks “You little wretch! You little wretch! Slip off from *me*, will you?” (230). Faulkner is parodying Mrs. Merridew’s efforts to “guide” Uncle Willy to the path of righteousness.

Uncle's Willy's life continues to be ravaged by the well intentioned Christians in Jefferson. His once inconsequential existence becomes a series of periodic visits to Keeley, an insane asylum outside of Memphis. Each trip to Keeley involves the brute force of the Christian community and following each return of Uncle Willy it is proclaimed that he is finally "completely recovered, completely cured. Yes. Cured" (234). The narrator relates that Uncle Willy "came home with his skin the color of tallow and weighing about ninety pounds now with his eyes like broken eggs still but dead eggs, eggs that had been dead so long that they didn't even smell dead any more-- until you looked at them and saw that they were anything in the world except dead" (Faulkner 233). This description may appear contradictory at first glance, but it is clearly not. For this is merely the clever, feigned docility that Faulkner shows as the hollow, superficial standard of moral conduct. The key to understanding this passage is the description of the eyes. One will recall that Sergeant Gray's eyes are described as "perfectly dead," whereas as Uncle Willy's eyes are described as "anything in the world except dead." This idea of the eyes denoting the nature of the human spirit permeates both short stories, but in the case of Uncle Willy it takes on even greater significance. To illustrate, following one of his many returns to Jefferson from Keeley, Uncle Willy acquires some bath-tub gin, much to the dismay of Mrs. Merridew. Mrs. Merridew has moved in with Uncle Willy in order "to look after him" (233). Here again the vicious, Christian morality is juxtaposed with the amoral passivity of this unlikely hero- "he [Uncle Willy] was sick again, and Mrs. Merridew storming into the house, jerking out the drawers and flinging things out of the closets and Uncle Willy lying in the bed and watching her with those eyes that were a long way from being dead" (235). Faulkner's emphasis on being

alive and its association with Willy is a theme that is repeated throughout the text. Willy's ability to maintain a certain vivacity in the face of the ossified moral code of the community and to elude every last one of their efforts to "help" or "cure" him alludes to the quest of the modern hero. Uncle Willy's imperviousness to the community's "rehabilitative" efforts, shows the tenacity of Faulkner's "primitive" character, but also the idea here is that the modern hero, as Nietzsche put it, must learn to "Live." Lastly, in this regard, Faulkner's own belief in the human being's ability to "endure and prevail" particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is shown through Willy. This is most evident when Uncle Willy becomes a fugitive from the Christian community in order to save his own soul from their brutal impiety.

Faulkner continues to display the ignorance and ineffectuality of the Christian community in Jefferson by relating an episode in which it is apparent that they are unable to recognize their own virtues. After a particularly lengthy bender, Uncle Willy returns home on "a hot morning in July, sprawled out on the back seat, and on the front seat with Secretary and a woman twice as big as Uncle Willy" (236). In other words, Uncle Willy got married, and the Christian community is furious. As the narrator relates "it was worse than if he had started dope again. You would have thought he had brought smallpox to town" (236). At this point the reader can easily deduce that Willy rather innocently or obliviously stumbled into this arrangement. But the real significance is how the community reacts to Willy's latest venture. How will the community receive Willy's attempt, albeit an accidental attempt, to live by their dictates. The narrator recalls- "Mrs. Merridew telephoned Mamma that afternoon, you could hear her from away out at her house, over the wire, clean out to the back door and the kitchen:

“Married!*Married!* Whore!Whore!*Whore!*” (236). The situation spirals into a uproar as Willy’s new wife is forced to contend with the Reverend Schultz and the others by brandishing the “wedding license as if it was a gun or a knife” (237). As with other noted episodes in “Uncle Willy,” Faulkner parodies the fundamental tenets of the self-righteous community that dominates society in Jefferson. In doing so, the reader is brought face to face with the flawed ideas of humanity, tolerance, and “Christian Brotherhood” which this community purports to hold in high regard.

As mentioned previously, the idea of the “unexamined death” permeates much of modern literature. In “Uncle Willy,” Faulkner figures this notion into the work in a way that is best understood in how it correlates to “Victory.” The archaic heroic ideal, Sergeant Gray and Faulkner’s humanistic hero, Uncle Willy are defined by their awareness of life and death. One will recall that Faulkner repeatedly differentiates Gray as being “dead,” and Uncle Willy is invariably marked by his vitality. Hence, Uncle Willy’s suicide is less of a moral transgression and more of an act of sublime freedom. To assume, as Elizabeth Kerr mistakenly does in her work *Yoknapatawpha Faulkner’s Little Postage Stamp of Native Soil*, that Uncle Willy is simply “a gentle dope addict that is driven to suicide by the church women who try to reform and rehabilitate him” (177), is to blatantly overlook all of the attributes of enthusiasm and life that exude from Willy himself. Uncle Willy could only be misconstrued as being a weak character if the character we expect him to aspire to is more akin to the brittle person of Sergeant Gray.

Recently sprung from another extended stay at Keeley, Uncle Willy, unbeknownst to his Christian “caretakers,” sells off all of his worldly property and buys an airplane. At this point Willy is unable to return to Jefferson for fear of being returned to Keeley.

So he must rely on his friends, Job and Secretary to show him how to fly because "Captain Bean at the airport wouldn't teach him to run it himself because he would need a permit from a doctor" (241). Willy himself acknowledges the ever increasing constraints on his freedom/life as he tries to break free and live out his dream- "By God, damn if these Republicans and Democrats and XYZ's ain't going to have soon where a man can't even flush the toilet in his own bathroom"(241). Undeterred by the gathering forces of "well meaning folks," Uncle Willy learns the art of flying. His eyes "bright behind his glasses" and "looking fine in his new checked cap,"(240) Willy epitomizes the enthusiasm of youth and the realization of dreams. The fact that he must learn to fly in secret shows the ever burgeoning obstacles that the community places on an individual who refuses to live the prescribed life and refuses to be caged with conventionalism.

The narrator describes Uncle Willy on the day prior to his death -" at night in the tent Uncle Willy's eyes would be shining and he would be too excited to stop talking and go to sleep and I don't believe he even remembered that he had not taken a drink since he first thought about buying the airplane" (244). Willy clearly evokes the long forgotten virtue of the simple faith and the realization of dreams. The narrator relates that Uncle Willy has not imbibed in alcohol and the like since he has set out on this adventure. He doesn't need to. For Uncle Willy is entirely free, for the moment, from the Baptist community. The idea of freedom that Faulkner illustrates is not simply a freedom from physical restraint, but more importantly it is the realization of his dreams that is buoyed by an unquestioning faith in the inherent goodness and tangibility of hope. From this perspective it is clear that Willy's ambitions were preserved, ironically, by his "malady." What the Christian community sought to "cure" Uncle Willy of is not his inability to

stop drinking, but rather to stop his childish dreams and ambitions. Uncle Willy's attention is not to outward duty and the semblance of honor, but to the tangibility of hope and the faith of the eternality of the moment. The life-long sentinels, alcohol and morphine, are no longer needed to insulate Willy against the looming scepter of "Good Christian Living." All that Uncle Willy's simple faith requires is the faith of others like him. He asks the narrator "don't you believe I can run it [the airplane]?" To which the narrator responds "Yes. I believe you can do anything" (245). Uncle Willy both affirms Faulkner's belief in the immortality of modern man and reiterates his staunch refusal to acknowledge the value of pomp and social acceptability as a means of self-definition.

William Faulkner's work is described by one scholar as "highly complex, causing much difficulty for the reader" (MSAL 667). Or more specifically it is the "unusual, complicated organization and presentation, along with multiple narrators, extended streams of consciousness and subtle time shifts" (668 MSAL) that Faulkner's readers must contend with. Many would agree that at times it is the sheer effort it takes to comprehend Faulkner's vision that allows for the intimacy and profundity one experiences with his characters. At other times however, Faulkner does not equivocate. His language is simple, direct and entirely comprehensible, as if it were his desire to speak plainly, in the vernacular, what he holds as unimpeachably certain. These instances are few in number, but not surprisingly, they occur in both "Victory" and "Uncle Willy." Both instances reflect the reaction of the narrator to the central character in the respective stories, and in so doing herald the change in humanity's perception of the modern hero.

The final scene in *Victory*, shows the wasted shell of Sergeant Gray whose adherence to “duty” and “honor” have reduced him to selling matches on a street corner. Walkley, a former army buddy of Gray’s, recognizes him and tries to make his acquaintance. Gray, even though he recognizes Walkley, responds “Let me alone you, you son of a bitch! Matches! Matches! Sir!” (Faulkner464). Faulkner articulates not only the isolation of this archaic model of heroism, but he also shows the self delusion and brittle sense of pride which has strangled the soul of Gray. Gray is so intent on selling his matches, clinging desperately to this pathetic ability, that he severs his last remaining tie with other humans. In this case it is the solicitous, Walkley. Walkley’s response to his encounter with Gray-“I think I am going to vomit”(Faulkner 464)- sums up Faulkner’s conclusion of the “edifying” capability of the hero model that is well out of date. This last line in *Victory* draws the tragedy to its end, and it is Faulkner’s sardonic *coup de grace* to a tradition of heroic virtue that no longer applies to the modern world.

By contrast Faulkner again speaks plainly though the narrator in *Uncle Willy*, and likewise, he is clear and precise with his use of language. As the short story is told retrospectively, the reader is engaged immediately with the heroic qualities of Uncle Willy within the first paragraph. The narrator is recalling the adventure that preceded Willy’s death in which he relates “I went because Uncle Willy was the finest man I ever knew, because even women couldn’t beat him, because in spite of them he wound up his life getting fun out of being alive and he died doing the thing that was the most fun of all” (Faulkner 225). This passage illustrates the fundamental effect that differentiates heroes from everyday people. It also denotes the qualities of the modern hero: the

emphasis on being alive, and the defiant refusal to cower in the shadow of imminent death and destruction. One will recall that this episode follows the last of Willy's trips to Keeley, at which time he is made a fugitive for his refusal to live by the conventional standards of the Christian community. What the narrator relates by allusion is the highest ideal of Uncle Willy - "the thing that was the most fun of all" - that being his fulfillment of his dream by piloting an airplane. Also this idea is followed up with the notion that Willy freely chooses his own death. His death was clearly a suicide, but like much of his character, it is difficult to stick any sort of morality to it. In fact, amorality is the substance of modern, literary legends. The narrator repeats his adoration of Willy - "He was the finest man I ever knew"(225)- throughout the text. The passage alone is significant by virtue of its declarative, unambiguous nature. But due to the fact that this story is rather short, this affirmation of Uncle Willy resounds continuously. At every interval in the story where one is, by virtue of societal conditioning, apt to make moral judgments of Willy, Faulkner reiterates this passage.

William Faulkner was both a decorated military man and a notorious social recluse who took several trips to Keeley himself. Lacking a formal education, Faulkner is what one might call a "poet by instinct" rather than a "poet by training." His meticulous observations of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whether it be in the small towns of Mississippi or in the trenches of France, invariably affirmed his interest and faith in humanity. His ability to articulate his vision with all of the nuance and complexity of human existence attest to the sheer mastery of his craft. During a time when many of his contemporaries were content with nihilism and he himself was riddled with personal failures, Faulkner refused to be swayed by the fashionable devaluation of the individual.

By avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentalism as well as the chaos of post modernism, Faulkner sought to rediscover the most basic form of humanism as it exists outside the constraints of morality and societal expectation. With his emphasis on the absolute freedom of the human soul, Faulkner champions a flawed hero who lives for the ecstatic thrill of life that is rarely seen among the most learned and responsible. The lack of constraints affirms Faulkner's optimistic faith that human beings will, given the opportunity, choose the highest good and in doing so will "endure and prevail"(2).

## Chapter II

### The "Life of the Spirit" in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

Thomas Merton writes in *No Man is an Island* that "we can either love God because we hope for something from Him, or we can hope in him knowing that he loves us" (17). Merton points out the two essential ways in which human beings define their relationship with God. More importantly is the reasoning for such statement. Merton is not simply redressing dogmatic religious sentiments. Rather he, like many of his literary contemporaries seeks to rediscover the significance of God, which has been battered by the pervasive disillusionment and despair of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. William Faulkner echoes Merton's own philosophy--"without a life of the spirit, our whole existence becomes unsubstantial and illusory" (44)-- in his novel *Light in August*. Faulkner, like Merton, is primarily concerned with the relationship with God that is based on personal contact instead of codified rules of strict morality. In other words, Faulkner does not rehash the faults of institutionalized religion, but instead focuses on how individuals perceive and define their "life of the spirit" which ultimately determines the reality of their existence. Faulkner's work both validates Merton's assumption concerning the nature of human-divine relations, and more importantly, elevates the simple life to humanity's highest ideal. By using characters which show differing degrees of spirituality and religiosity Faulkner continues to personify Merton's philosophy which states: "it is supreme humility to see that ordinary life, embraced with perfect faith, can be more saintly and more supernatural than a spectacular ascetical career" (Merton 114).

This idea is not a new venture for Faulkner. In fact, much of his literary characterization centers around the "primitive" and "puritan" dichotomy. Uncle Willy and Sergeant Gray typify this technique. The ordinariness of backwoods Mississippi towns reinforce the intrinsic virtue Faulkner finds in the extreme lack of cultivation. Far from being a pejorative, this quality is an embodiment of Faulkner's highest ideal for humanity to "endure and prevail." Hence when Faulkner applies this dichotomy in *Light in August* he is not making his own theological assertions, so much as he is showing the implications that are prefigured by either cultivating a "life of the spirit" or simply living a purely religious life.

In *Light in August*, three characters signify very distinct ways of interpreting the nature of spirituality and religion in human life. Lena Grove, Reverend Gail Hightower, and Percy Grimm represent varying degrees of this philosophical spectrum. Lena Grove's simple, unassuming nature represents Faulkner's highest ideal. But more than that, Lena's implicit faith in the unseen attests to the significance of the realm of the spirit. A mysterious quality surrounds her. At times her unadulterated simplicity is difficult to comprehend. However, it is this elusive quality that alludes to humanity's current detachment from spirituality.

Faulkner depicts another view of spirituality in Reverend Hightower. This figure represents a familiar conundrum involving sincere religious aspirations conflicting with human passions. Hightower is well intentioned, desiring to be just and scrupulously honest. However, Hightower's obsession with his grandfather's Civil War fame ultimately precludes his efforts to live the pious life of a Presbyterian minister. Moreover, the intense longing for the past, with its intoxicating glory of cavalry charges,

prefigures an inability to embody the implicit faith of Lena Grove. Hightower lives for the comfort and solace the past has to offer, instead of living "the life of the spirit." This idea reflects a restless soul wanting to be free, but unable to overcome present fears. Thus Hightower repeatedly chooses to lose himself in another realm which is beyond material reality, but is certainly not the ideal that Lena Grove symbolizes.

Lastly, Percy Grimm represents the tragedy of a human soul damned by adherence to religious morality. Percy Grimm is not only the spiritual antithesis of Lena Grove, but he is also an example of morality and self-determinism that the modern world applauds. In fact Faulkner makes a gender distinction to further his criticism of modern life—"nature is 'she' and Progress is 'he'" (*Sanctuary* 189). In other words, he associates figures like Lena, with the world of God's creation; and figures like Percy are associated with a reality governed by man's laws. Percy is the symbol of "Progress" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who replaces the "life of the spirit" with a life of materialism and specious accomplishments. The ensuing emptiness and meaninglessness of such a life compels Percy to cling desperately to his rigid sense of morality, which begins to take on murderous proportions.

An important theme in both Merton and Faulkner is the distinction of success and accomplishment as it relates to an unassuming spiritual life. Again to quote Merton, "such humility dares to be ordinary, and that is something beyond the reach of spiritual pride. Pride always longs to be unusual, Humility not so" (114). Merton's view of the ideal spiritual life seems to contradict Faulkner's humanistic philosophy. The idea of divine life existing in what is often regarded as uncultivated, or backward, seems to obviate human endeavor altogether. However what unites their viewpoints is the fact

that Merton and Faulkner identify the malignant forces of fear and hatred along with the dubious idea of “progress” as the source of humanity’s predicament. On the one hand, the rapid changes in human life and industry characterizing 20<sup>th</sup> century, could be touted as “progress.” But on the other hand, “progress” is responsible for countless deaths and untold miseries suffered in this modern age. Faulkner understood the duplicitous nature of human “progress.” But more importantly, he shows that “progress” is merely the product of superficial reality and fear. Faulkner often said that “the basest of all things is to be afraid” (*Nobel 2*). Percy Grimm exemplifies how “progress” and duty are essentially born out of fear. More importantly, this quality is at the root of any degree of separation from God. Fear of God leads to fear of one another. This mindset precludes the possibility of an immediate relationship with God and in the end offers no hope for human existence. In this modern age the wholeness and immediate relationship with God which Lena Grove experiences seems more remote than ever. Nevertheless, Faulkner articulates the possibility of such an existence, in order to show that the immortality of the human soul is not purchased through rigorous morality. In *Light in August*, Faulkner prompts the 20<sup>th</sup> century mind to venture beyond the material constraints of “right” and “wrong” in order to grasp an eternal world.

Structurally *Light in August* is held together by one woman, whose journey across the Deep South in the last month of pregnancy both begins and ends the work. Immediately Lena Grove’s simple faith is contrasted sharply with the religious fanaticism that is endemic, but certainly not limited to the South. This idea of morality in opposition to unquestioning faith reshaped Faulkner’s concept of the modern hero, as shown in the previous chapter. In this novel the idea is extended for Lena Grove mirrors

the simple, child-like faith of Uncle Willy, but to a much greater degree. Like Uncle Willy, Lena is regarded as a moral reprobate by the "good Christians" in Jefferson. But again, Lena's faith is all encompassing, and is not limited to codified do's and don't. Hence this superficial approach does not determine the nature of her relation with God. Lena's imperviousness to moral judgment suggests a spiritual life that is intimate and undivided from its creator. Faulkner does not underestimate the role of religion per se, instead he questions whether morality functions to serve God or the individual.

Drawing on his innate ability to articulate the complexities of human characters, Faulkner envisions hope and renewal superceding ossified moral code. Through Lena's character, Faulkner shows human awareness that is neither backward nor unconscious of itself. Rather the wholeness depicted, obviates the yoke of centuries old morality, which functions entirely on divisions in human lives and thought. In Lena's view the world is good, simply because it is, and because God made it so. From this perspective, no intermediary exists between God's world and humanity. Faulkner's purpose is to show that spirituality can, and in some cases, needs to be understood without the restrictions of religion. It is important to note that Faulkner uses religious imagery to compare and contrast the abstract reality of spirit. Peter Swiggert in his work, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels* compares this stylistic tool to Nathaniel Hawthorne. Swiggert finds that Faulkner's "thematic analysis of the guilt-ridden South" (5) is very much akin to the subversive, provocative nature of this particular Romantic writer. Swiggert points out that both novelists escape the consequences of religious authority by allegorizing the main figures in the novels. He explains that one of Faulkner's techniques is to create "characters who have explicit symbolic functions" and then to "magnify their

symbolic importance" (5). This process is followed up by Faulkner's method of characterization which involves the "atmosphere of mystery that surrounds the important figures , who often remain in the dramatic background" (5). Faulkner uses religious metaphor and imagery to distinguish between the spiritual life and the religious life.

Faulkner immediately sets up a contrast between these abstract realities during Lena's stay with the Armstids. Lena has been traveling on foot through Alabama when she meets Mr. Armstid, who takes pity on her and her apparent situation. Faulkner's description of the initial meeting between Lena Grove and Mr. Armstid is full of imagery, suggesting a reality that is not divided into specific elements:

without any semblance of progress in either of them, they draw slowly together as the wagon crawls terrifically toward her in its slow palpable aura of somnolence and red dust in which the steady feet of the mules move dreamlike and punctuate by the sparse jingle of harness and the limber bobbing of jackrabbit ears, the mules still neither asleep nor awake as he halts them. (406)

In this passage, Faulkner creates a sense of phenomenon by unfolding the sequence like a mirage in this distance. The "palpable aura of somnolence" and the "dreamlike" movement of the mules continue to depict another state of human awareness that is both ethereal and tangible. Faulkner does not rely on supernatural elements to illustrate the abstract spiritual life. Instead, the image is created with ordinary details that compliment and parallel Lena's presence.

Faulkner continues to maintain this image of spirituality through description and dialogue between the two. Lena's description—"young, pleasantfaced, candid, friendly,

and alert” (406)- continues to reflect the genuine good and wholeness that “the life of the spirit” engenders. Mr. Armstid (and later Mrs. Armstid) are not described so favorably- “in the halted wagon, Armstid sits, humped, bleached” (407). The point of this contrast is subtle, but unmistakable. Faulkner intimates such details in order to personify a religious existence as well as spiritual life. Mr. Armstid, although he is much more hospitable than his wife, still represents a life constrained by conventional morality. Faulkner notes that “apparently Armstid has never once looked full at her. Yet he has already seen that she wears no wedding ring” (407). These subtle details continue to show a purely religious view of human life, which subsequently determines the nature of human and divine relationship.

Lena’s implicit faith is strong that she is often regarded as an eccentric to those she meets. She is impervious to both fear and doubt. In fact, Lena is absolutely certain that despite her meager belongings –“her thirty-five cents in nickels and dimes and her pair of worn out men’s shoes” (Faulkner 403)- she will be able to provide for her child. Her deceptively simple remark-“the Lord will see to that” (414)- is both baffling and off-putting to those she meets. But it is her faith that is often misunderstood as flippancy by the stalwart religious figures. In fact Mr. Armstid is visibly alarmed when Lena relates that she has traveled from Alabama to Mississippi alone and on foot-“Alabama? In your shape? Where’s your folks?”(407) Lena’s reaction reiterates her unshakable faith and accepting nature for she merely “expels her breath” which “is not a sigh so much as a peaceful expiration, as though of peaceful astonishment. ‘A right good piece, it seems now. I come from Alabama’” (407). Faulkner continually emphasizes certain qualities

about Lena, in this case her "peaceful" bearing, in order to distinguish her spiritual nature from the severity of Armstid's religious nature.

Faulkner's comparison is more obvious when Lena Grove encounters Mrs. Armstid. Here he contrasts the simple humble nature of the spiritual life with religious piety of the "manhard, workhard" (410) Mrs. Armstid. This woman is repeatedly described as "cold, harsh and irascible" (411). In fact, Faulkner likens Mrs. Armstid to one of "those generals who have been defeated in war" (410). From the outset this character evinces a quality that is completely antithetical to Lena's simple trusting nature. Mrs. Armstid has an unbending personality which conforms to the rigors of the dogmatic "good." Faulkner furthers his characterization by showing the impact this rigid morality has on a human being. He relates the "savage finality" (411) with which she prepared dinner, and the "savage screw of gray hair at the base of her skull" behind the "face that might have been carved in sandstone" (411). Faulkner goes on to describe Mrs. Armstid's hospitality which is brusque and only provided out of moral obligation and always with "an expression of cold and impersonal contempt" (414). Mrs. Armstid represents the religious perversion or reversion, that contradicts its own morality. Merton points out that "hope and charity work together as close partners, and both rest in God" (17). With this in mind, Faulkner's characterization of Mrs. Armstid is a scathing indictment of religious life. The lack of any heartfelt desire to aid those in need evinces the religious self-righteousness he so abhorred. But more than that, this contrast alludes to what Faulkner saw as the salient flaw in Christianity, particularly Calvinist teachings, namely the notion of predestination. Mrs. Armstid epitomizes this aspect of religious life in which many act with impunity toward their fellows and still consider themselves

within the bounds of moral doctrine. In fact, Elizabeth Kerr points out that Faulkner was aware that in the South "the God of the Old Testament, not of the New, was the model for the paternalistic society and family in which white men claimed authority" (174). Faulkner's contrast shows that this "Puritan strict code of behavior" (Kerr 174) is at the root of a religious life which has sanctioned countless injustices; most notably the institution of slavery and later segregation. Despite many social reforms enacted on behalf of African-American and Native American people in the South, the spiritual morass still persists. Faulkner asserts that what ails the human soul runs deeper than race, creed or provenance. It is the inability to rise above moral judgments of others and embrace a spiritual reality.

Lena Grove represents humanity's highest spiritual ideal. Her encounter with Mrs. Armstid is one of several comparisons Faulkner uses to illustrate his notion of maintaining the dignity of the individual but not at the expense of the soul. He continues this idea by paralleling Lena Grove with Christ. Faulkner makes reference to her "palm leaf fan" (405) and also her "sheep-like" (411) patience. Also, Lena feels a strong connection with all people, even though she is continually subjected to their judgment. In fact, she insists on being allowed to "get down and walk" (400) from the wagon, in order that "the people who saw her and whom she passed on foot would believe that she lived in the town too" (Faulkner 401). Lena's gregarious nature opposes the "closed societies" (Kerr 178) which characterize the factions of religious people in Jefferson. Unlike Mrs. Armstid, who suffers Lena's presence purely out of her own sense of moral obligation, Lena does not wish to be separated from anyone. In fact, she is almost entirely oblivious to the stir of gossip she causes along the way. Faulkner shows this by giving the reader

insight as to how Lena perceives the her surroundings: "She has been doing that now for almost four weeks. Behind her the four weeks, the evocation of *far* is a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices" (403). Clearly it is Lena's unadulterated faith that allows her to see the world as one, good "right kind" place. Instead of viewing the world in terms of gradations of morality, she sees existence as whole and good, because "the Lord saw to that"(413). Mrs. Armstid, due to her moral indoctrination, is only capable of seeing the world as broken and in moral disarray.

Faulkner furthers this comparison by noting that Lena's countenance is "calm as stone, but not hard. Its doggedness has a soft quality, an inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason and detachment" (412). The emphasis on the "inwardlighted" element, as well as the "calm unreason" evoke familiar religious images of Christ. Moreover, this passage suggests the virtue of the ordinary life, which is often misconstrued as "backward," or at best, "uncultivated" is truly the highest human ideal. This is Faulkner's method of inviting the reader to see more into Lena than simply a guileless woman, who has been abandoned by the father of her child. On the one hand, Lena is perceived as, quite literally, full of sin. On the other hand, her presence, and her quiet, unapologetic regard for her condition, suggests a much more profound degree of spiritual awareness, one that is unmediated by human reason.

Lena's own response to Mrs. Armstid, concerning the purpose of her journey, shows her characteristic lack of fear and guilt. Also it reiterates the nature of her relationship with God –"I reckon a family ought to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord will see to that" (Faulkner 414). Because

Lena's approach to God is without shame, but rather is implicit, and child-like, her symbolic function in the novel is again a means of differentiating the spiritual life from the religious life. Faulkner posits her in direct opposition to the "savage, violent, cold and contemptuous" (415) figure of the elder woman to show the ineffectuality of adhering to the dogmatic moral imperatives, reminiscent of the Old Testament. Lena's true strength is her optimistic faith in "the Lord," and her refusal to place her faith in anything else.

Following this episode, Faulkner continues this comparison by illustrating Mrs. Armstid's unabated fury at Lena's arrival. Her inability to see Lena as anything other than an impertinent, wanton woman, plainly shows the constricting and stultifying nature of a purely religious life. At times Faulkner uses exact descriptions from the previous encounter in order to emphasize certain qualities. He relates that later in the evening Mrs. Armstid is "hunting violently in a drawer" (414) for her egg money. When she finds the bank she "shakes it [the bank] violently" (414). Still dissatisfied, she "jerks off one shoe and strikes the china bank a single shattering blow" (415). Faulkner reinforces her brutal nature, adding also that "her face was harsh, bitter" (414). Mrs. Armstid is so eager to be rid of Lena that she is willing to buy her off with her pitifully small life savings which she puts in "the sack and knotting it and reknitting it three or four times with savage finality" (Faulkner 415). Mrs. Armstid hopes to buy back whatever decency she believes Lena's presence has chased away. Faulkner shows the twisted logic that drives many of "good Christians" in the community. The obvious flaws in Mrs. Armstid's reasoning are evidence of an even greater flaw in human

consciousness. Specifically, the need to feel “right” and justified in one’s actions and morally superior to one’s fellows instead of accepting reality as it simply is.

Mrs. Armstid commands her husband to give Lena the money and “come sunup you hitch up the team and take her away from here. Take her all the way to Jefferson, if you want” (415). Faulkner shows yet another instance where rigid morality does not allow for much needed human connection. At the same time Faulkner, is unsparing in his criticism of these Calvinist tendencies of the Deep South. Elizabeth Kerr points out in her work that Faulkner despised the “theology of hate and authoritarianism which supports closed societies” (178). Mrs. Armstid maintains her own “closed society” by giving Lena money, ostensibly to help her. In fact, her intention is to banish her entirely.

Lena’s relationship with God evinces a complete lack of fear and guilt which instead of distancing her from the imminent good in the world, actually gives her an immediacy or direct link which allows for implicit faith that things will work out, even in her situation. Moreover, Lena gladly takes the money Mrs. Armstid gives her. Lena is neither greedy nor too full of pride to accept it. Her action is based on her belief that the world is simply good and right and that people are thus as well. In fact Faulkner relates- “she [Lena] took it, her face pleased, warm, though not very much surprised” (415). Even when Lena reaches Varner’s store, a place where she will, again, be left alone, she displays the same demeanor-“she reached the earth, in the heavy dusty shoes. She looked up at him, serene, peaceful. ‘It’s been right kind,’ she said” (416). Mr. Armstid is quite baffled by Lena’s countenance. Nevertheless, Mr. Armstid’s assessment of his encounter with Lena alludes to his realization that another reality exists outside of religiosity- “I reckon she [Lena] knows more than even Martha [Mrs. Armstid] does, like

when she told Martha last night about how the Lord will see that what is right will get done" (Faulkner 417).

Reverend Hightower, another key figure in *Light in August*, presents another view of Merton's and Faulkner's meditations on the "life of the spirit." This figure represents in an unusual way perhaps what is the most recognizable aspect of spirituality. He is a man caught in the rigors of dogmatic principle but also keenly aware of the possibility of transcendence. Hightower begins his religious career in Jefferson with a zealotry that is compared to "a horsetrader's glee over an advantageous trade" (Faulkner 442). That is, he is eager and well intentioned in his desire to preach the word of God and lead a good, Christian life. Yet, Hightower does not have the implicit, unquestioning faith of Lena Grove. His adherence to religious dogma, however well intentioned it may be, precludes this possibility. At the same time, he is not murderously unbending in his beliefs, like Percy Grimm. Reverend Hightower is recognizably more human because he is aware of an alternate reality, but is continually seduced by the glorious battles of the past.

Early on in his career, Reverend Hightower is forcibly removed from his position as a Presbyterian minister in Jefferson. One reason is that "his wife went bad on him" (Faulkner 441). Hightower's attempts to help his wife only caused more outrage in the community which led to his removal from the pulpit. Also, Hightower's obsession with the past begins to overrun his sermons- "They told Byron how he [Hightower] seemed to talk that way in the pulpit too, wild too in the pulpit, using religion as though it were a dream. Not a nightmare, but something which went faster than the words in the Book; a sort of cyclone that did not even touch the actual earth" (Faulkner 443).

Hightower's passionate sermons, just like his well meaning attempts to help his wife, are misunderstood by those in the community, thus ensuring his downfall. Hightower, like Lena Grove, is condemned as a moral reprobate and societal outcast. Unlike Lena, Hightower, feels the weight of his own morality bearing down and thus he becomes even more reclusive, Faulkner relates-"I don't reckon anybody's been inside that house in twenty five years" (441). Some in the community speculate that the pariah minister now leads a contemplative life. The irony here is that Hightower's isolated life is misunderstood by the community as a monastic existence.

One might be lead to believe that Hightower has achieved a certain degree of spiritual awareness in his isolation. Sadly, the same vivid tales of his grandfather's ill fated cavalry charge still dominant his life, just as they did his sermons in years prior,- "it was as if he couldn't get religion and that galloping cavalry and his dead grandfather shot from the galloping horse untangled from each other, even in the pulpit" (Faulkner 443). What becomes apparent is that Hightower's inkling of transcendence is really an escape to the past. Faulkner relates Hightower's nightly routine of escaping his lonely life when he "takes his place in the study window just before dark" (441). Hightower looks out his window "as he does not actually see the trees beneath and through which he watches the street, waiting for night fall, the moment of night" (442). Here the disgraced minister anticipates the vivid memories of his grandfather's battles- "*now soon*, he thinks; *soon, now*" (Faulkner's emphasis 442). Unlike Lena Grove, Hightower lives in a virtual dream-world which he visits when "the house, the study, is dark behind him, and he is waiting for that instant when all light is failed out of the sky" (442). Here Faulkner distinguishes between Lena's tangible, yet timeless existence and Hightower's escapism.

In this case, Hightower's strong association with Civil War battles becomes Faulkner's way of showing how misguided human beings are at times in attempting to distinguish finite and infinite realities.

Hightower's foible also mirrors the sense of pervasive disconnectedness and confusion that defines society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, Faulkner alludes to the spiritual bankruptcy or disassociation from eternal possibilities which accompanies a purely material existence. In fact Merton points out that "if our desires reach out for things that have no meaning for the growth of our soul, if they lose themselves in dreams or passions or illusions, we will be false to ourselves and in the end our lives will proclaim that we have lied to ourselves and to other men and to God" (220). Hightower deludes himself into assuming that his nostalgic fervor would suffice as the impetus for living a righteous life, when no such desire really exists. His passion for times past is inextricably intertwined with a desire to live a good Christian life. These seemingly incongruent forces in Hightower's personality attest to Faulkner's mastery of sketching the complexities of human character. The point is not to reconcile these aspects that dominate the preacher's life, but rather to recognize them as part of the multifarious nature of human beings; most especially those who feel separated from God and any enduring sense of purpose in life.

Thomas Merton does not equivocate when he distinguishes the concepts of tradition and convention:

tradition is living and active-- tradition does not form us automatically, we have to work to understand it and convention is simply the ossification of social customs. The activities of conventional people are merely

excuses for *not* acting in a more integrally human way. (Merton's emphasis 151)

If what Lena Grove and Reverend Hightower are seeking falls in the category of tradition, that is, a tradition or idea of the eternally good, then by his very nature, Percy Grimm embodies the idea of convention, or what Merton calls "the death of all traditions as they are of all real life" (150).

Percy Grimm is a U.S. Marshall who is sent out from Jefferson to bring the suspected murderer, Joe Christmas to justice. From the outset Faulkner intimates to the reader that Percy Grimm, who was too young to fight in WWI, is essentially saved by the "new civilian-military act" (732). So empty and desolate is his life prior to this event that "he was like a man who had been for a long time in a swamp, in the dark. It was as though he not only could see no path ahead of him, he knew that there was none" (Faulkner 732). Faulkner is using a typical, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century young man, in order to illustrate a finite existence, which answers implicitly to morality. Percy's emptiness balances the literal fullness of Lena. But also Percy Grimm epitomizes the disillusionment of this time. His vacuous inner life predisposes him to a life of superficiality that reaches frightening levels of violence and treachery. The aimlessness and pervading purposeless of Percy's young life is a sharp contrast to the simple, albeit fruitful and quietly optimistic existence of Lena Grove, who faces countless dangers and risks as she treks across the South, alone and on foot. Her faith in the "right kind folks" (416) is in direct opposition to the cynicism and "wasted years" (732) of Percy's life.

Faulkner relates a curious change in Percy Grimm's life; one that not only reflects a specious sense of purpose but also, in light of Lena's symbolic contrast, shows

the web of societal ideology, which is often misconstrued as the “right” way. The “new civilian-military act” (736) offers a new sense of meaning and purpose to Percy Grimm—“he could now see his life opening before him, uncomplex and inescapable as a barren corridor, completely freed now of ever again having to think or decide, the burden which he now assumed and carries as bright and weightless and martial as his insignatory brass” (Faulkner 732). Faulkner’s sardonic nature plays with the notions of simplicity in this passage. The “uncomplex” nature of Percy’s revelation is not a correlation to Lena’s simple nature. This term connotes simplicity, and a lack of rational thought; but in this context, Faulkner intimates that Percy’s faith in “the system” supercedes any faith in God. Faulkner’s purpose is to show how again human perception is very limited in discerning what is morally “right” or “correct” from what is eternally good—“because the Lord saw to that” (412). Too often “lost” people like Percy Grimm are too easily caught up in the sacrosanct nature of military life. Again Faulkner echoes Merton’s sentiments that “tradition nourishes the life of the spirit; convention merely disguises its inner decay” (151). Percy Grimm, who represents the epitome of the “puritan” mindset, exemplifies the “death of the spirit” when man’s or laws of “the system” categorize man’s existence.

This relates to Faulkner’s view of religion, because it is obvious that he deplors this sort of overriding obedience to man’s laws instead of God’s laws as shown by Percy. Also Faulkner believed that religion, particularly as it was practiced in the South, contributed more to the dissension and strife in the world. The inability to rise above “original sin” ensures a moral hierarchy that fosters broken, perverse relations among all peoples. Elizabeth Kerr rightly assesses that Faulkner’s work confirms that “the

prevailing authoritarian, fundamentalist, Calvinistic dogma of the chief Protestant denominations shores up the entire caste and class system of the South" (176). Faulkner is also quick to add, as shown in the following passage, just how far beyond the South this web of self righteous, religious perversity extends, he continues his description of Grimm who displays:

a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience, and a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men, and that all that would ever be required of him in payment for this belief, this privilege, would be his own life. (733)

One will recall that Faulkner's "puritan" characters invariably have a predatory nature. That is, that these literary figures are so self-righteous and so entirely blind to any other possibility for human existence, save that of their own, that they literally hound those who happen to live outside their notion of "right" living, in order to bring them into conformity. Percy Grimm not only evinces this particular quality, he in fact, epitomizes it. His pursuit of Joe Christmas at the end of the novel is nothing short of diabolical. His ferocious nature evinces qualities of a ravenous animal in pursuit of its prey. Percy ruminates with a prescience that anticipates his object's every move: "he [Grimm] was thinking swiftly, calmly, with that quiet joy: 'he can do two things. He can try for the ditch again, or he can dodge around the house until one of us gets a shot'" (Faulkner 740). Percy's actions parallel, albeit with a much greater degree of viciousness, the conventional churchgoers in Jefferson as he conducts himself with "the

blind and untroubled faith in the rightness and infallibility of his actions" (Faulkner 739). The obvious contrast here is that Percy is literally hunting another human being; while Lena tends to wander all over with no clear idea of who or what she will meet along the way. Again Peter Swiggert's terms apply; for the direct, incisive nature of Percy's "puritan" mind is in direct opposition to the "peaceful" and "serene" nature of Lena's "primitive" nature.

Faulkner describes much of this pursuit by relating the atrocities that occur from Percy Grimm's religious righteousness. Particular details are juxtaposed in order to show the degree of perversity in this character. Faulkner's description of Percy Grimm- "above the blunt cold rake of the automatic, his face had that serene, unearthly luminousness of angels on church windows"(Faulkner 741)- is an unsettling pairing of the terrible consequence of religious fanaticism. Also the details here emphasize the institutionalization of the spiritual life. By evoking the static, frozen nature of "church windows," which follow the "blunt, cold rake of the automatic," Faulkner belies the noble intentions of Percy in order to expose the vicious, blood thirsty man who operates under a guise of duty and moral obligation.

The pursuit ends at Reverend Hightower's house. More than simply the climax of the novel, this episode shows the absolute degeneracy that results from living a life of strict religious convention. After the fugitive Joe Christmas is shot several times, Percy corners him and proceeds to mutilate and then castrate him, saying only-"Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (742). This merciless act in itself is enough to convince the reader of the vicious nature of Grimm, but more importantly, it is through Percy Grimm that Faulkner shows what is rotting the core of human existence. Just as

Lena Grove offers a way of simple faith and a vision of hope, Percy Grimm represents all that has led the human race to the maelstrom that it is in. One could argue that the whole of human history is one of violence and treachery and that one should not expect this era to be any different. But what Faulkner is doing is writing the story of the past and present into this figure. Percy Grimm represents the hopelessness of an archaic religious dogma that according to Merton, "breeds nothing but anxiety and fear" (151) and offers little comfort or hope for the individual.

This convention is built on the idea of Fate, and a predetermined existence that immediately sets up a moral hierarchy. Faulkner literally applies the appellation of Fate to Percy, while he is still pursuing Joe Christmas - "he was going fast too, silent, with the delicate swiftness of an apparition, the implacable undeviation of Juggernaut or Fate" (739). Faulkner's emphasis on "Fate" is also a reference to the dogmatic conventions of the South which govern the lives of its "good Christians." Also this term supports Percy Grimm's unflagging faith in the justice system. In his view, "Fate" is not only the judicial determinant in human life, but also, as the description is applied, "Fate" is essentially Percy himself. Faulkner is showing the devastation that results when humanism is confused with isolated individuality. Merton points out the tragedy that result when one assumes, as Percy does, "we *are* our real selves, and that our choices are really the ones we want to make when, in fact, our acts of free choice are (though morally imputable, no doubt) largely dictated by psychological compulsions"(Merton's emphasis 25). Faulkner emphasizes the perversion of human potential when one assumes the place of their own creator. For Percy Grimm, it is the penal system to which he is faithful and only nominally does he entertain the idea of an abstract reality that is more powerful than

the “Grand Jury”(Faulkner 736). Unlike Lena Grove, Percy’s faith lies in the judicial system, which promulgates its own set of moral law. Prior to the manhunt, Faulkner describes the special Grand Jury as an entity which “somehow the very sound of the two words with their evocation secret and irrevocable and something of a hidden and unsleeping and omnipotent eye watching the doings of men, began to reassure Grimm’s men in their own make believe” (736). Faulkner uses this idea of “make believe” as a way to reinforce the specious religious dogma.

In fact, Faulkner objectifies the relentless pursuit of Joe Christmas by literally describing it in terms of a chess game. In this episode, Faulkner ceases to call Grimm by his own name, but instead calls him simply “the Player” and the countryside of Jefferson becomes “the Board” (741). The point is to show the strange amalgamation of religious fervor, unexamined patriotism and personal indignation as they enmesh and become a systematic ideology that governs solely with its moralistic rules and obligations. The overriding tinge of fabricated reality in this “Game” continues to show how superficial and artificial Percy’s life is. In fact the depth of falsity becomes apparent in his own judgment. Faulkner shows this when Grimm hastily assumes some homosexual relation between Joe Christmas and Reverend Hightower when the latter tries to provide an alibi for the doomed man-“ ‘Jesus Christ!’ Grimm cried, his young voice clear and outraged like that of a young priest. ‘Has every preacher and old maid in Jefferson taken their pants down to the yellowbellied son of a bitch?’” (Faulkner 742). Grimm is driven by his rigid morality, and it is these conventions that dictate both how he views the world which thus determines the nature of his relationship to God. His misjudgment of every figure in this episode shows how his spiritual relationship is so

distant, that he relies entirely on his own limited judgment. Moreover, his obvious racism and homophobia are expressed in a way that projects his view of the world, which he views as abominable and immoral. Because he is so steeped in conventional beliefs, Percy is wholly incapable of any sort of mercy. Even his fellow head hunter, upon seeing Percy's mutilation of Joe Christmas, "gave a choked cry and stumbled back onto the wall and began to vomit"(Faulkner 742). Percy Grimm is undeterred by his own atrocity because he believes that he himself has the moral high ground and is thus obligated to act in such a manner.

Faulkner creates one of the most disturbing literary figures who represents both the blind, nationalistic, tendencies that lead to egregious human atrocity. One must recall that Faulkner was well aware of the consequences of conventionalism, for as he wrote *Light in August*, the world was made aware of the horrific discoveries of German concentration camps.

Faulkner shows, with Percy Grimm, just how the dominant religious doctrine of the South functions to destroy not only human life, but also how it corrupts the soul of the victim and victimizer. Faulkner believed whole heartedly in the value of human soul, and thus was able to see the tragedy of human existence both in those who endure the misery, and also those who mete out human sufferings. Thus his portrayal of Percy Grimm as the quintessential patriot and purveyor of justice of this inherently patriarchal and paternalistic system, is arguably the greatest tragedy. For one will recall that Percy was "lost" in his insignificant young life only to be "found" by this corrupt system which held out the promise of meaning and honor for him. This points again to Faulkner's ideal vision, both in terms of modern protagonists and in a religious view,

which only exists in the ordinariness of life. By abolishing the moribund hierarchy of social and religious order, Faulkner articulates a way to restore the value and dignity to human existence.

It is worth noting that Lena Grove and Percy Grimm never interact in the work. The significance lies in the fact that, symbolically these ways of interpreting human existence cannot coexist. That is, one cannot hope to have the optimistic vision Lena offers while promulgating the moral code that Percy espouses. One cannot have an immediate relationship with the divine wholeness, when one chooses to differentiate the world into the "good" and the "bad". What Faulkner offers is a vision of a world undivided and undifferentiated by rational thought. It is a world in accordance and in stride with the faith and goodness of the Creator, or if you will in accordance with the essence of the divine. Oddly enough, this is precisely what the rational mind tries to extort through religious dogma. Faulkner merely points out the pitfalls that a rational mind, such as Percy Grimm's, is apt to fall into. Herein the "delusion of progress" and the elevation of the human race are the means by which the rational mind attempts to rival the divine. But sadly, as the actions of Percy Grimm show, its only consequence is further alienation from God.

Faulkner shows that, despite the constraints of morality and religion, the possibility for this infinite reality of the "spirit" exists in even the most flawed characters. Faulkner carefully constructs the final scene involving Joe Christmas, who has transgressed every moral boundary. As Christmas is dying from multiple gunshot wounds and castration, Faulkner relates that the blood that rushes from the wounds "seemed to rush like a released breath" (743). This description recalls the "peaceful

expiration" (407) of Lena Grove as she ponders her earthly travels. Christmas, like Lena, begins to experience the infinite reality of the "life of the spirit," of which he has never known. Faulkner shows this by describing the scene with exact details which he has used previously in describing Lena – "he [Joe Christmas] just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness.—For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes" (742). Faulkner relates the inexplicable power of this scene by noting the enduring quality of this reality which "seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (743). This vision of hope and renewal is the "it" that Faulkner refers to in the closing paragraph:

They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatening, but of itself alone, serene, of itself alone triumphant. (743)

Here the carefully chosen details evoke the essential qualities of Lena Grove. The enduring nature of the spiritual realm is not constrained by human configurations of time and space; this realm is "steady, swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon itself" (405).

Reverend Hightower, despite his wayward spiritual leanings, also experiences this very same reality. Faulkner describes a particular scene where the former preacher is sleeping:

there was a quality of profound and complete surrender in it. Not of exhaustion, but surrender, as though he had given over and relinquished

completely that grip upon that blending of pride and hope and vanity and fear, that strength to cling to either defeat for victory, which is the I-Am, and the relinquishment of that which is usually death. (689).

The key to understanding this passage is Faulkner's direct reference to "pride, hope, vanity, and fear," all of which contributed to his situation as an outcast in his community. More importantly, these very aforesaid qualities defined his moralistic faith and thus precluded the possibility of a complete union with God. Only when sleep overtakes him and renders Hightower "defenseless," a quality which recalls Lena's vulnerability traveling alone on the backroads of the Deep South in the final phase of pregnancy, is he able to vaguely grasp an understanding of faith that supercedes morality. Only when he "relinquishes" the "I Am" is he able to share in the eternity of the "life of the spirit." Even Byron Bunch, who observes this scene, is at a loss to articulate this unearthly visage that has come over Hightower, Faulkner relates- "It seemed to him now that to wake the man [Hightower ] from that sleep would be the sorest injury which he had ever done him" (690). Again, the details in this passage correlate with Lena Grove and awaken a sense of another reality.

William Faulkner is often referred to as a modern tragedian. However, the subtle nature of tragedy in his work is often misunderstood or overlooked all together. It is not the decay of the Southern aristocracy, nor the moral ruin ushered in by rapacious bootleggers, or even the social consequences of slavery, that are the basis for Faulkner's sense of human tragedy. Instead Faulkner shows that at the heart of all dissension and strife, humanity's timeless error has been to choose differentiation over wholeness. Peter

Swiggert's categorization of the "primitive" and the "puritan" figures in Faulkner's work illustrates this separation. Sergeant Gray and Percy Grimm are reduced to merely shades of existence because they insist on sacrificing life's fullness and possibility for the fleeting comfort conventional morality affords them. Conversely, Uncle Willy and Lena Grove embody the highest spiritual ideal for humanity; because both characters accept all of life in its entirety. That is, neither Lena nor Willy choose to see the world as good or evil, rather the world simply is and they themselves are thus. For Faulkner, it is the rational, modern mind that banishes humanity from the garden, or from the ultimate state of union with God. Hence, the sense of tragedy lies in the fact that once human beings differentiate from their Creator, they will invariably yoke themselves with needless limitations, their lives become nothing more than self-inflicted misery and chaos. Again Sergeant Gray and Percy Grimm personify this specious reality which is defined solely by outward appearance. Gray's "ribbons in the box," and Grimm's "insignatory brass," emphasize the human tendency to revel in ephemeral notions of superiority and accomplishment, when in fact no such thing exists. This idea of progress is essentially a lie, or as Merton terms it "illusionary," and is propelled by the basest of all human instincts.

Faulkner's sense of tragedy is as subtle as it is unusual; for unlike most tragedians, he offers an equally profound message of hope for humanity. His belief in the integrity of the individual is verified in his Nobel Prize Speech, delivered in Stockholm on December 10, 1950—"I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance" (*Nobel 2*).

Uncle Willy and Lena Grove are this "spirit" to which Faulkner refers. Moreover, they represent the ineffable reality that exists outside the limitations of human thought, but entirely within reach of the simple and the most humble of human beings.

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