MYTH AND MYTH MAKING

Faulkner's novels have a complex structure. They are firmly rooted in the South but they draw inspiration from the entire heritage of human culture and civilization. Faulkner's comments on the title *Light in August*, reproduced by Cleanth Brooks reveal how his mind perceives the link between the past and the present:

In August in Mississippi there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there is a lambence, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not just from today but from back in the old classic times ... from Greece, from Olympus.

This quality of his imagination expresses itself in his novels through constant reference to Greek and Biblical myths. It lifts them from their regional locality to a universal significance. Since myth represents a primordial consciousness of the aspects of human existence, it emphasizes the fixed patterns of human behaviour through the different stages of history. Human society may be in a state of flux, moving from one stage to another, but there is an element of repetitiveness in human behaviour which can best be depicted

through myths. Faulkner has alluded to Biblical and classical myths or used mythical patterns to underscore the tragedy inherent in the overbearing hold of the past on the present.

In addition to that Faulkner has explored the Southern myths about the superiority of the Dixie. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the South invented myths about the origins and values of the planter dominated society, the position of women and the inferior qualities of the Negro race. These myths captured the imagination even of the poorer sections of society and sustained the inherited prejudices and resistance to change. Faulkner even invented myths of his own to evaluate Southern myths and to represent the collective consciousness of the South.

Among the classical and Biblical myths that he has mainly used are the myth of Oedipus, the myth of Fall, the myth of redemption, the myth of scapegoat and Christ's persecution and the myth of earth-mother. These myths have been used either to invest a character with traits that condition the readers' response of fear, hate, sympathy, awe or fascination according to his predetermined attitude to the analogous mythical
figure or impregnate a situation with the referential meaning of a myth. Sometimes the myth is reversed or refrained either for the sake of an ironic comment or to suggest some distortion. Very often different myths are combined to depict the various dimensions of the same character or situation.

The myth of Oedipus has two ingredients: One is Oedipus' pride — his confidence in his own shrewdness — and the other conflict between the father and the son and incestuous desires. "The element of pride, as Cleanth Brooks has pointed out is based on a kind of innocence about the nature of reality. It is the basis of hamartia in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex".² Oedipus thought that by running away from his adoptive parents, he could outwit gods and change his destiny but the very act of running away from his fate led him to it. The other element is the usual component of the Oedipus complex. Faulkner has used the former aspect of the myth of Oedipus to reveal the baneful effects of the Southerner's self assurance that made him resist the course of events, and the latter aspect to show the disastrous impact of the hold of past on the present.

The extent to which myth of Oedipus has been used by Faulkner differs from novel to novel. In *As I lay Dying*, there is just a suggestion of it. The role of father here has been transferred to Addie, who imposes her will on her children even in her death. It brings her most perspicacious son, Darl, into conflict with her. He not only feels that the will is morally wrong but also senses the reason for her attachment to Jewel, which he resents. His relationship with his mother is that of love and hate. He is in tears when his effort to cremate his mother's stinking body fails. After the rescue, Vardaman finds him lying on the coffin under the apple tree:

> The moonlight dappled on him too. On her it was still, but on Darl it dappled up and down. "You needn't to cry", I said. "Jewel got her out. You needn't to cry, Darl".3

The dappled moonlight could as well be an indication of the conflict in his mind. His final breakdown is certainly a consequence of it. The end also marks the failure of his design to change the course of events. Cash is puzzled when Darl laughs crazily, for he can not see "anything to laugh at", but Darl might be

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laughing at the inane human action arising out of vanity.

The Oedipal myth has been most extensively utilized in *The Sound and the Fury* and in *Absalom*, *Absalom*. Quentin's problem is basically his pride and his heritage. His father, like the legendary King Fisher, watches his domains wasted and nurses his injured pride with whiskey. He advises his son also to treat existence as meaningless:

> Quentin, I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it is rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the reducto absurdum of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said.  

To Mr. Compson, time brings about devastating changes and the best way to deal with it is to ignore it. Quentin accepts his father as the source of family tradition and authority, and, like him, considers time as the destroyer of his ideal of purity and beauty, yet he does not like to be a mere spectator like his father. He resents his father's relegation of family duties.

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4 *The Sound and the Fury*, p. 73.
His situation has been very aptly described by Michael Millgate:

... a major cause of Quentin's tragedy, is that just as his mother has failed him as a source of love so his father fails him utterly in all his roles of progenitor, confessor, and counselor. He has become, indeed, Quentin's principal enemy, his cold and even cynical logic persistently undermining the very basis of all those idealistic concepts to which Quentin so passionately holds.

Quentin has a love-hate relationship with his father, but his incestuous longing for his mother is transferred to his sister. As Caddy grows up and gives expression to her natural instincts, his sense of honour, inherited from his father, is outraged. He holds time responsible for it, and, failing to stop it, puts a stop to his own existence.

So forceful is Quentin's obsession with time that it is often cited as an example of Faulkner's own attitude to time and change. A careful consideration of all those characters, who are obsessed with the past, however, would show that Faulkner in no way approves of the attitude of his characters. The obsession with the past and the refusal to change is a 'fatal flaw' in a character otherwise possessing many admirable qualities --- be

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it young Bayard Sartoris, Quentin or Sutpen.

The story of Sutpen, indeed, is replete with mythical references and mythic meaning that reveal that Faulkner in no way upholds stasis, though his characters do. In the words of Patricia Drechsel Tobin:

Faulkner throws the entire weight of Absalom, Absalom! against this paternal arrogance. The book is at the same time a negative critique of the dynastic assumptions of Sutpen and Quentin, and a positive celebration of literature as the corrective to all ambitions of inhuman consistency.6

The quotation from John T. Irwin makes the point more explicit:

What characterizes the life instinct and the death instinct in terms of the compulsion to repeat is that they both seek through repetition to restore an earlier state which has been lost .... Freud asserts that in the light of the repetition compulsion, all instincts, both those of life and death, are regressive. And I think we are justified in adding that the form which this regression takes is the urge to do away with the category of difference.7

Tobin adds:


7John T. Irwin, Doubling and Intcest/Repetition and Revenge, quoted by Patricia Drechsel Tobin in Time and the Novel, p. 125.
Faulkner's novel is forever inscribing difference while his characters are writing sameness.

Sutpen's insistence upon keeping the things same fulfillment of his design to establish a great dynasty is the main cause of his tragic end. It results in the clash between his two sons, ending in the death of one and the exile of the other, and, later on, leading to his own death. He is so obsessed with it that he hardly cares how his actions and thought affect others and shocks Rosa Coldfield by suggesting that she should produce a child for him before he decides to marry her. He is akin to protagonists of Greek tragedy because of his hubris.

Quentin is fascinated by the story of Sutpen because he finds in Sutpen a father figure. The Sutpen story represents for him the hold of the past on the present:

He knew it already, had learned it already without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it.

In reiterating the story, he identifies himself with Henry and Bon. The Oedipal triangle of father/

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9 *Absalom, Absalom!* p. 212.
mother/child is replaced by the brother-avenger/sister/brother-seducer. In challenging Dalton he repeats the role of Henry, while his indulgence in incestuous delusions is a repetition of role of Bon.

When he merges his identity with those of Henry and Bon, Quentin is ratifying life as doomed repetition, past as prophecy, and time as a circle. The Sutpen story teaches him that this kind of vicious enclosure is devastatingly universal: the South after the Civil War turns in on itself, the family shows in its successive generations that all behaviour is a return to a past pattern, each family member is encircled by his own psychological and sexual impotence.10

The Oedipal myth, thus, has been used by Faulkner to make a statement about the destructive regression that takes place when the child (present) is dominated by the father (past) and cannot overcome his incestuous obsession with his mother (traditional honour). It retards the natural emotional growth of the child and makes it difficult for him to adjust to the changes brought about by age. This was the predicament of the South in Faulkner's time, and by using myth he converts it into a universal truth about any society that persists in holding on to the past in an ever changing world.

10Patricia Drechsel Tobin, Time and the Novel; the Genealogical Imperative, p. 121.
The Biblical myths have mostly been employed to expose the hollowness of Southerners' claim to the purity of their ideals and sincerity of their religious commitment. The myth of the Garden of Eden implied in Sutpen's transformation from a simple lad of the mountainous region of Western Virginia into a typical planter counters the Southerners' claim that the South in the ante-bellum period was an area of innocent bliss. In the frontier community of mountains, Sutpen lived in a state of innocence, like Adam in the Garden of his:

"Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say "This is mine" was crazy; ... but they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices .... 11

His very first experience of the planter dominated Southern society sows seeds of corruption in his mind:

That's the way he got it. He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men .... 12

The experience tempts him to become a planter with a big house and slaves, and leads to his fall. His sin

11 Absalom, Absalom! p. 182.
12 Ibid., pp. 185-186.
is inherent in his creative energy. It is the values that he has to adopt as a respectable planter which are responsible for the failure of his design. Again, in keeping with the myth of Fall, his sin does not die with him; it is inherited by succeeding generations. As Brylowsky remarks:

"The house waits to play its final role in the cycle of the myth, the final and ultimate catastrophe, the conflagration that should mark an end to, Sutpen's world .... Sutpen's idiot great grandson haunts the scene at the close and the moral guilt remains, not wiped out by the gothic flames."^{13}

The Southerner's view that the values deteriorated after the Civil War, therefore, does not appear to be well substantiated.

Another Biblical myth, that of redemption, is put to ironic use in *As I lay Dying*. Addie's faith in her illegitimate son, Jewel, and the journey of her body through fire and water is a perfect parody of the journey of soul. When Cora Tull reproaches Addie for being partial to Jewel, Addie replies:

*He is my cross and he will be my salvation. He will save me from the water and from the fire. Even though I have laid down my life, he will save me.*^{14}

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^{14}*The Sound and the Fury & As I lay Dying*, p. 460.
The events after her death follow a pattern that turns Addie's trust into factual reality in the material world. The heroic action on the part of Jewel and Cash, the simplicity of Yardman's feelings, the selfish motives of Anse and Dewey Dell, and the stinking corpse, when viewed in the light of Darl's questioning and horrified outlook, underline the fact that, no matter how heroic an action seems to be, it is futile, even sacrilegious, if it is based only on a meaningless sense of honour. But, Faulkner seems to say, it is done in the South and admired as an act of faith even though, instead of helping a soul to attain a state of bliss, it means carrying a dead, stinking body around.

The myth which is most forcefully applied to bring out injustice, inhumanity and distortion of faith involved in the Southern insistence upon keeping the things as they were, is that of the scape-goat invested with Christ like characteristics. Its best example is the character of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. Many images establish analogies between Joe Christmas and Christ. Myth and theme are inseparable here. Myth not only arises from the theme but also informs it.

Three years of Christ's life correspond in
time to three phases of Joe's relations with Joanna Burden. The last phase of this relationship may be loosely compared to the pre-Easter events; the crucial three days, beginning with Good Friday, in Christ's life. The triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem is paralleled to Joe's triumphal entry in Mottstown and Joe's efforts to escape the mob at Mottstown is also comparable to the events of Christ's life. His birth is also mysterious like Christ's. He is found on a Christmas eve, lying before a boarding house, so he is named Christmas. He has to fight with a pharisaical society through out his life, exposing the social and religious evils, entrenched in the Southern society. Like Christ, who was betrayed by Judas, one of his disciples, Joe Christmas is also betrayed by Lucas Burch whom he had provided shelter. Sometimes the apparent parallelism in fact represents a direct contrast. Whereas Christ cleanses the temple, Joe desecrates it.

"... with the faces gaped for screaming falling away before him, straight to the pulpit and put his hand on the minister .... He stood there in the door, with the light behind him, laughing loud, and then he begun to curse again and we could see him snatch up a bench leg and swing it back."¹⁵

Doc Hines, his grand-father has analogical relations with the Jewish priests who demanded Christ's crucifixion. He imagines himself to be the representative of God on this earth. He says: "It's the Lord God's abomination, and I am the instrument of His will."\(^{16}\) He treats Christmas as a bastard, an embodiment of evil, who is a pollution and an abomination on this holy land and wants to purify his earth by destroying Joe.

"That bastard, Lord", and God said, "He is still walking My earth", and old Doc Hines kept in touch with God and at night he said, "That bastard, Lord", and God said, "He is still walking My earth", and old Doc Hines kept in touch with God and one night he wrestled and he strove and he cried aloud, "That bastard, Lord! I feel! I feel the teeth and the fangs of evil!" and God said, "It's that bastard. Your work is not done yet. He's a pollution and a abomination on My earth".\(^{17}\)

Joe, like Christ, dies at the age of thirty three. There is a faint echo of the suffering of Christ on the cross in the scene of his death:

When they approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\)Light in August, p. 286.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 290.

\(^{18}\)Ibid., p. 349.
After Christ's crucifixion, people did not feel relieved of the evil but were over-burdened with guilt and became conscious of the evil. Likewise Joe's crucifixion also burdens their memory with guilt and shame.

It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. 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 threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant.\(^\text{19}\)

Olga W. Vickery commenting upon Joe Christmas says that ".... Mrs. Hines account of his birth becomes significant, for it reveals that Joe is born into a myth created for him by others. Since Millie's pregnancy is considered an unforgivable sin by Hines, he looks for a scapegoat who will bear the guilt and punishment. By calling her lover a "nigger", he can transform a commonplace seduction into the horror of miscegenation. This is his justification, moral and religious, .... but his actions and statements help to formulate that confused and violent myth which is Joe's particular agony".\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{19}\) *Light in August*, p. 349.

The myth of the scapegoat, in conjunction with the Madonna and Christ figures, is also used in Sanctuary, whose theme, essentially, is the theme of miscarriage of justice in a society warped by prejudices. The scapegoat is Goodwin, who becomes a victim of a purblind society which cannot see beyond its prejudices and unrealistic notions of idealized womanhood. The touch of the Madonna and Christ is provided by Ruby and her child.

The plight of Ruby and her child throws into relief the cruelty that sprouts from the pharisaical and hypocritical attitudes of the Jefferson society, representing a typical Southern situation.

In contrast to the above mentioned myths is the myth of earth-mother which suggests regeneration and continuity of life. This myth is partially associated with all those female characters of Faulkner who are either fecund or protective and display a positive attitude towards life. It has been most vividly applied to Lena Grove in Light in August. The novel opens and closes with Lena Grove on the move. Lena's wandering is in contrast with Joe's wandering. While Joe's movement is circular, starting from Jefferson and ending in
Jefferson, Lena's movement is linear, with Jefferson being merely a momentary stop in her onward progression. Joe comes back to Jefferson to die, Lena stops to give birth. Her regenerative impact enables not only Hightower to regain his self-respect by feeling involved in human existence, but also brings to an end Byron Bunch's alienation. There is also a suggestion of resurrection in Joe's grandmother calling Lena's baby "Joey". The close of the book even presents "Faulkner's version of the Holy Family" with Lena, her baby and Byron going along the road to an unknown destination.

New life, hope and continuous movement thus are the associations which Faulkner builds around Lena. She thus becomes a symbol of change and negates the Southern obsession with the past which turns human beings like Joe Christmas into abstractions and alienates persons like Hightower from the present. Lena's earthy simplicity, naturalness and fecundity seem much superior to the South's abstract morality and puritanical and racial fanaticism.

Besides exploiting Greek and Biblical myths, Faulkner has also explored the pet Southern myths about the correctness of the Southern way of life. Among them is

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the myth of the nobility of the planter class. Faulkner created a typical planter in the character of Sutpen. His energy and obsession with his design cast a spell on those around him and the succeeding generation. To an outsider like Shreve his story may make the South look "better than the theatre", but to a Southerner like Quentin it is a sacred myth enshrining the vision of the grand past. To the reader the myth, when deconstructed, reveals the real nature of the planter class.

Sutpen can claim neither descent from a noble family nor a sophisticated upbringing. He is, like a good number of planters, a man of humble origins who possesses a tremendous energy, a strong determination and an insatiable ambition to become rich. In creating Sutpen's Hundred he reveals the creativity of his class at a time when plantation economy based on slave labour had a relevance. But his inability to change when his way of life becomes anachronistic leads to deterioration and destruction. His attitude towards women and Negroes also belies the Southern claim that in the ante-bellum period women were respected and Negroes were treated benevolently.

The Southern myths about the Negro and women are
exploded also by Faulkner's women and Negro characters with mythical dimensions. The attitude of the Southerner towards women was schismatic:

A schism, a kind of unconscious hypocrisy, embedded itself deeply into the soul of the South. For the whiteman the Negress was the female animalized and the white woman was the female spiritualized.22

Mr. Compson reveals the effect of this spiritualization when he remarks:

'Tears ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?'23

He also thinks that women are cut off from reality:

'Yes. They lead beautiful lives --- women. Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably excommunicated from, all reality.'24

But many of Faulkner's female characters are not pale lilies. They have a mind of their own and behave much more in accordance with their nature than men. Their role is more positive. Judith in Absalom, Absalom! takes charge of the things after catastrophe

22Marvin Backman, quoted by Patricia Dreschel Tobin in Time and the Novel; the Genealogical Imperative, p. 123.
23Absalom, Absalom! p. 9.
24Ibid., p. 158.
overtakes the Sutpen household. She invites Charles Bon's mistress to visit his grave and, after her death, tries to rear her son.

In giving expression to their sexual drives also, Faulkner's female characters register a kind of protest against the imposition of an unnatural role upon them. Addie in As I Lay Dying has an affair with Whitefield because she is disgusted with Anse Bundren's villainous nature. Caddie's provocative behaviour is partly responsible for her rape. Caddy acts much more naturally than Quentin in giving expression to her natural instincts and Caddy's daughter is able to outwit a cunning scoundrel like Jason.

As regards Faulkner's Negroes, they show a better understanding of life than the whites. Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury and Clytie in Absalom, Absalom! are figures of endurance. They can stand the pressure of change much better than others. They have a simple but sound moral approach and can survive because of their ability to face the challenges of the changing world on account of inner strength. Faulkner thinks that whiteman's dislike of the Negro is based on selfish considerations:
There's a class of whitemen that hates the Negro simply because he's afraid that the Negro will beat him at his own job, his own economic level, and he would feel the same toward anything that he believed would beat him at his economic level.  

Mr. Coldfield echoes, Faulkner's sentiments when he remarks that the South's economy was based "not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism."  

Faulkner's myths thus enable us to understand the Southern situation in terms of human experience. If we place Faulkner's novels in historical time, he indeed appears to be concerned, as Sartre has maintained, only with a strong past and weak present with no future." While his contemporaries were concerned about the future mankind after the cataclysm of the 1st World War he seemed to be concerned only with the romantic past of the South. But a consideration of his material would show that the constraints of Faulkner are actually the constraints of his subject matter. The impact of the 1st World War on the South instead creating a sense of civilizational crisis intensified the sense of the incompleteness of change that the Civil War should have

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26 *Absalom, Absalom!* p. 214.  
brought about. Faulkner's story of the soldier returning home - *Sartoris* - becomes more a story of obsession with an idealized heroic past than of the restlessness of a war-weary soldier. With a material which deals with a past which has not become present fully it is naturally not possible to depict future. It, however, does not mean denial of change. By discussing what impedes the translation of the past into present and by focussing on the problems to which the impediment gives rise, Faulkner reveals his concern with the change, and since a linear historical presentation would have trivialized his novels as dated and regional, he adopts the mythical approach to consider the problem of to change or not to change in the context of human existence. "The mythical", as Gunter Blocker maintains, claims no grasp of the future because it excludes it, just as it excludes the notion of past and present ... it deals with destiny."\(^{28}\)