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MORALITY AND ETHICS IN THE NOVELS OF WLLIAM FAULKNER

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ABSTRACT

William Faulkner emerges as one of the greatest novelists of the world. He comes in the succession of great novelists like Turgenev, Zola, Balzac, Flaubert, Henry James, and Proust. By common consent, he is one of the major novelists America has ever produced. In respect of narrative technique, systematic handling of plot, originality of approach, imaginative appeal, prophetic vision, and, above all, mellifluous language, and lucid style he stands unrivalled.

Keywords *:* Mellifluous language, lucid, *approach, imaginative appeal* and *prophetic vision etc.*

Introduction :

Faulkner was the son of the South. He was undeniably influenced not only by the South's heritage of defeat but also by the South's predominantly Christian culture. He himself admitted: "My life was passed, my childhood, in a very small Mississippi town and that was part of my background."[1] Faulkner's earliest writings, his poetry and prose published at the University of Mississippi between 1916 and 1924, show no interest in the Negro and very little in his cultural setting. His work during this period reflects a preoccupation with sophisticated Postwar scenes and artificial worlds of nymphs and fauns. It seems that in subject and style Faulkner considered himself more continental than American or Mississippian. Negro is the name denotes dark-skinned, woolly-haired

African people. The American Negroes are quite large in number now. They are mostly descendants of slaves imported from West Africa. But some immigrants came from the British West Indies. They were also slaves in the North and the South until 1863, working as family servants, artisans, and agricultural labourers. The Negro question, however, is still a major problem in U.S.A. The Negroes are, usually, looked down upon in America, although the social recognition of the educated Negro is different in this case.

It seems possible that Faulkner, like other Southern artists of the time, was sensitive to being identified with the South as a specified region of customs and ethics, which might result in charges of provincialism, and he, specifically, contrasted both the Midwest and New York to the South as regions hospitable to the artists. Yet *Soldiers' Pay*, his first novel incorporates the Negro, a distinctly American type into the very fabric of life in Charlestown, Georgia, the 'Southern' fictional setting. The Blacks are present everywhere: on the streets and roads, in the White man's stores, gardens and homes, and in their own shanty towns' houses, school, and church. Throughout *Soldiers' Pay*, vignette of the Negro life function is displayed as the lyrical counterpoint of Faulkner's main tonal composition. The Blacks appear as a kind of musical refrain which reinforces the poetic design of the novel. Moreover, the conclusion of *Soldiers' Pay* depends directly upon the felt presence of the Negro as a community of faith and feeling. In the final chapter, the earthly religious Black stands in the thematic counterpoint to the Post-World War I despair and disillusionment at the centre of the world.

Faulkner's progress from the concerns of his early poetry to those of *Soldier's Pay* may appear, initially, to be a minimal transition, particularly, because contemporary critics have carefully outlined the poetic influences. The sensibility is uniquely American and it is most clearly evident in the use of the Negro in the final chapter. Apparently, during the time between Faulkner's inception of the work and his conclusion, he was gradually to a different estimation of American literature and his changed opinion freed him from imitative reliance upon European models.

Faulkner's use of the Negro characters reveals that *Soldier's Pay* reflects a turning of materials emanating more immediately from Faulkner's own heritage. Given the intensity of his later involvement with his region as a stimulant to his imagination and as raw materials for his fiction, Faulkner's turning to the world he knew best, seems

inevitable. However, one explanation for his change in direction centres in his experience during his 1925 stay in New Orleans and his friendship at that time with Sherwood Anderson. Faulkner's extensive inclusion of Blacks in *Soldier's Pay* as a reflection of the psychological state of Whites and as counter print to the sterility of contemporary life may well stem from the general literary climate of New Orleans during the twentieth, and, especially, from Anderson, whose interest then in Black people as expressive of American seems obsessive.

In considering the immediate literary background of Faulkner's use of the Negro characters, New Orleans marks an important awakening. For Faulkner, New Orleans was a mystery and a promise because just as the South with its myriad tensions and possibilities ultimately helped to shape Faulkner's subject matter, so his New Orleans experiences were formative and consequential in moving him to reconciliation with American literary works. Oliver La Farge, a new Englander and Harvard trained ethnologist sought out the American Indian as his subject. One of his works a novel of Navajo life, *Laughing Boy* (1929), the year in which Faulkner's much talked of the novel *The South and the Fury* was published, won a Pulitzer Prize and has become an American classic. While Anderson's daily pattern may well have attracted Faulkner, it seems more likely that a combination of Anderson's personality, his dedication to the art of writing and his literary conversations prompted Faulkner to try writing, novels with Negro characters and their serial settings although at this time he considered himself a poet.

Significantly, Faulkner recounts more than just his turning to real 'people.' This shift in direction becomes important because his early writing is so obviously concerned with artificial worlds. Faulkner recalls how Anderson advised him to explore his Mississippi homeland as material for his fiction. In retelling the advice, Faulkner captures the cadence and style of Anderson's speech: "You have somewhere to start from: then you begin to learn,' he told me. It don't matter where it was just so you remember it and ain't ashamed of it. Because one place to start from is just as important as any other you're a country boy, all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from. But that's all right too. It's America too, pull it out, as little and unknown as it is, and the whole thing will collapse, like when you prize a brick out of a wall." The lesson

is one of respect for Faulkner's Mississippi homeland, his America that he had avoided in his earlier work.

Soldiers' Pay is a culmination of the first portion of Faulkner's literary career. It is a culmination of both his immediate New Orleans experiences and his early concerns with poetry. Consequently, the novel is a pastiche which moves unevenly in several unreconciled directions. Set in April and May of 1919, *Soldiers' Pay*, initially, treats returning World War I veterans and their adjustments to civilian life. What there is of a plot centres on Donald Mahon, a wounded flyer who returns home to die. Two strangers Joe Gilligan and Margaret Powers sympathize with his condition and accompany him to Charlestown, Georgia, his hometown. But Faulkner has myriad characters and a variety of narrative threads which he struggles to keep in a recognizable relationship to one another, he attempts an intricate, lyrical story pattern which avoids traditional plot disclosures. As a result, there is no single main event, or a series of events that would cause plot complications or tensions to be resolved in the course of the novel. Accordingly, *Soldiers' Pay* is an innovative 'modern' novel developed around the private emotional lives of individual characters.

Faulkner uses the Negro to establish the basic rhythm of life that has been lost to the modern, Post-war world. His Charlestown Black Negroes provide a combination of music and feeling as a backdrop for the action. The sound of their voices is a musical accompaniment which is also the embodiment of feeling. The Black voice is a major part of Anderson's *Dark Laughter*, the novel which occupied so much of Anderson's time during his association with Faulkner. Falkner uses the Negro to provide thematic counterpoint to the sterile lives of his Whites. His Blacks stand as ironic comment on the activities central to the novel, to tone down the tense atmosphere created by Caddy, Jason, and Quentin, and Benjy. Dilsey said "All right. You all can come onto supper."[2] In using Blacks as counterpoint to write, Faulkner emphasizes a drive toward the renewal of innocence and the search for simplicity common to modern man. He uses the Negro old woman servant Dilsey in his novel *The Sound and the Fury*. In the kitchen, Dilsey is making preparation for Benjy's birthday. Knowing that the sight of the fire would soothe him, she opens the store door and sets Benjy right in front of it. She also lights the candles on the birthday cake. Throughout the novel, Dilsey is described as an epitome of simplicity, innocence and credulity- the characteristic tenets of a Negro woman.

Blacks can, according to Anderson, still "get life more clearly."[3] They remain in touch with the primordial longings and feelings, and an ability missing in the confused

mainstream of Post-War life. "They would think as their natures led them to think, feel as their natures led them to feel."[4] Similar to Anderson *in Dark Laughter,* Faulkner assumes the significance of the laughter of Blacks in *Soldiers' Pay.* But the laughter of his Blacks is edged with sadness, instead of the irony. Anderson employs laughter in *Soldiers' Pay*. Most often is the 'soft meaningless laughter' of "slow unemphatic voices cheerful yet somehow filled with the old despair of time and breathe." Faulkner, frequently, repeats the same idea with the slight variations, for example, "the slow unemphasis of their talk and laughter."[5] Or he expands upon the idea, such as, when a pair of Whites who are aware of the incongruous elements of modern life walk through the town and hear "the voices of song in a sorrowful minor… and the slow-reverberations… smote at measured intervals."[6]

The sadness in the laughing voices of Negroes is a notion that persists into *Sartoris*. In that novel, Faulkner uses the sounds and music of Negroes as a counterpoint to the malady of his lost-generation hero Bayard Sartoris. Bayard watches the movement of country Blacks through the town at noon: "negroes slow and aimless as figures of a dark, placid dream, with an animal odor, murmuring, and laughing among themselves; there was in their constantless murmuring something ready with mirth, in their laughter something grave and said."[7] In both of these early novels, Faulkner shows an awareness of the historical condition of the Southern Negro, and he intimates the hidden reality of Negro life.

However, laughter is only one part of Faulkner's use of Negro voices in *Soldiers' Pay*. Unlike Anderson, he does much more with the sounds of Blacks. Charles Nilon has simplified Faulkner's use of Blacks in *Soldiers' Pay*, *Sartoris*, and *Sanctuary* to our functions. "They give verisimilitude to the scenes, illustrate the social thesis, establish tone, atmosphere and place, and provide choric comment on the behaviour of the White characters."[8] But Nilon's generalization, accurate though it may be, does not tell us nearly enough about the Negro in the first novel. Faulkner associates the Negroes with music and feeling in order to establish the rhythm, tone, and mood of *Soldiers' Pay*. He does so in two ways. One is by means of presenting the actual sound, secular or sacred created by the voices of Black people as the emotional context of individual scenes. The other way is by means of presenting Black figures and their activities as metaphor for the essential, harmonious rhythm of life itself.

In using the Negro characters, Faulkner relies primarily on brief pictures of Black people in the background of the central action. The Negro functions either in response to the needs of major figures or in contrast to their vision of life. Here, in an embryonic form, Faulkner makes use of the divided world of the South. He assumes that Blacks are inherently associated with nature and natural processes and, as such, are psychologically simple and childlike. His Blacks, then, are loyal, humble, and docile figures who, in their simplicity, do not reflect the complexity and diversity of rounded, modern human beings. They represent for Faulkner a viable folk culture. One result of his limited vision of Blacks is that Faulkner, frequently, relies on animal imagery, especially, an analogy between "niggers and mules," in order to create a cultural context for his fiction.

In a series of impressionistic passages which creates the atmosphere of the Southern afternoon, Faulkner uses "niggers and mules" to form the scene. The first one describes the square "Wagons tethered to slumbering mules and horses were motionless in the square. They were lapped, surrounded, submerged by the frank odor of unwashed Negroes… their slow, unemphatic voices and careless, ready laughter which has also somehow beneath it something elemental and sorrowful and unresisting lay drowsily upon the noon."[9] The Negroes and their 'slow,' 'elemental' voices are intricately related to the noon. In the second and more lyrical, "niggers and mules" passage, Faulkner reinforces the dreamlike state of the novel: "Niggers and mules. Afternoon lay in a coma in the street, like a woman recently loved. Quiet and warm... Leaves were like a green liquid arrested in mid-flow... leaves were as cut through with scissors from green paper and paste flat on the afternoon: someone dreamed them and then forgot his dream. Niggers and mules. Monotonous wagons drawn by long-eared beasts crawled past. Negroes lumped with sleep, spontaneous upon each wagon and in the wagon bed itself sat other Negroes upon chairs: a pagan catafalque under the afternoon. Rigid, as though carved in Egypt ten thousand years ago. Slow dust rising veiled their passing like Time: the necks of mules limber as rubber nose swaged their heads from side to side, looking behind them always. But the mules were asleep also. "Ketch me sleep, he kill me. But I got mule blood in me: when he sleep, I sleep; when he wake, I wake."[10]

Conclusion :

The curious combination of rough-edged spoken language and an ostensibly literary language is present in almost all his major novels *The Sound and the Fury, Light in August, As I Lay Dying, and Sartoris.* Faulkner was not contained sprinkle a few regionalisms over his prose, to put a few touches of local colour here and there for the near pleasure of being picturesque. The relationship between the spoken and written word is both closure and more subtle. In fact, it is to the creative interplay between colloquial and the literary tradition that Faulkner's style owes its vigour and vitality. His prose, however controlled in its effect is almost always attuned to pulse of living speech. Repetition is never used in addendum. Repetition is used to suggest emotional upsurge like Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. They took utmost care, and were conscious while using a word. With Faulkner, rhetorical figures are not a simple ornament for discourse. They belong to the very tools of his art. Every rhetorical figure is used by Faulkner is functional rather than merely decorative.

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