

FAULKNER'S COMIC VISION



SALLY MCCUTCHEON WELCH

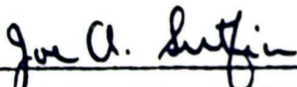
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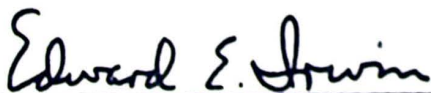


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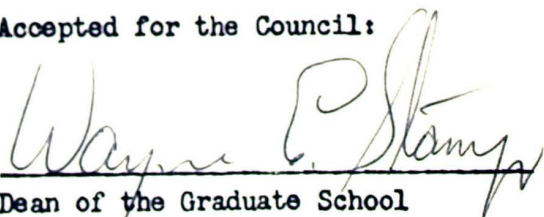


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FAULKNER'S COMIC VISION

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Sally McCutcheon Welch
August 1970

ABSTRACT

Critics frequently note a disparity between what Faulkner has said is the intention of his works and what seems to them the nature of those works. He has stated clearly that an artist should uplift the hearts of man, and that he should provide man with a view of his own immortality. This aim reflects a basically optimistic view, a comic view, of man. However, numerous critics have attempted to demonstrate that his point of view is tragic, based on the presence of innumerable tragic elements in his novels. That these elements are present is undeniable, but a close study shows that the author employs a pattern based on early comic ritual; when read in this light, Faulkner's works unquestionably represent the product of a comic view of man.

Specifically, Faulkner's typical plot involves the ritual pattern of the death of a scapegoat or an old-king figure, followed by the birth of a child or a new-king figure. Structural devices such as seasonal cycles and the Christian rebirth motif embellish this basic plot. Closely allied to plot, setting, and motif are his major themes: the old and new South in conflict, the loss of the wilderness, inherited guilt and its effects, and fertility contrasted with impotency.

Faulkner's major novels combine the elements of fiction in a consistently optimistic pattern, effectively demonstrating his comic vision.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is between Faulkner's works and his professed artistic objective a paradox as yet unreconciled. On the one hand, Faulkner has stated regularly in conversations, lectures, the introductions to his works, and most emphatically in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that the duty of an artist should rest in his ability to be not merely "the record of man," but to be "one of the props, the pillars to help him prevail."¹ This esthetic objective, basically an optimistic one, is in apparent contrast to his works which depict death, deprivation, cruelty, and a continuous struggle for survival. Because of this disparity, many critics disregard Faulkner's comments concerning the objective of his efforts; and, focusing upon the futility expressed in many of Faulkner's characters, they deduce that Faulkner saw humanity as depraved and absurd, that his vision of man is, thus, a tragic one.²

In one sense Faulkner's work is tragic: his novels abound with characters such as Joe Christmas, who is massacred; Quentin Compson, who takes his own life; and Thomas Sutpen, who unscrupulously uses individuals for his personal gain. One may not deny the existence of the grotesque,

¹William Faulkner, "The Nobel Prize Address," The Faulkner Reader (New York, 1954), p. 4.

²See, for example, Charles I. Gleckberg, The Tragic Vision in Twentieth Century Literature (Carbondale, 1965); John Lewis Longley, The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes (Chapel Hill, 1963); Walter Jacob Slatoff, Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner (Ithaca, 1967).

the pathetic, or the inherent evil found in such characters as Popeye or Flem Snopes or Jason Compson. If there is a "tragic vision" it rests in these characters; however, these elements in Faulkner are only a portion of a broader, more affirmative picture of man. Faulkner's view is essentially affirmative, as evidenced by a transcendent comic form in each of his novels.

The precise distinction between tragedy and comedy may never be made. Since Aristotle described the two forms, two thousand years of theorizing have not brought the question any nearer conclusion. However, almost all theories dealing with the two forms agree that comedy is linked with life and tragedy with death.

Both forms grew from a common ritual, which overtly expressed primitive man's need to explain the dualistic world around him, particularly the two most significant phenomena, life (including life-producing elements) and its opposite, death. Because man related these life and death patterns to the seasonal patterns, the planting and harvesting seasons (all curious successions and repetitions of the birth-death-rebirth cycle), these rhythms became a part of his life.³

The first comedies and tragedies were spawned by man's reactions to these life and death patterns; subsequently they developed into rituals linked with the growing seasons and man's own fertility until, eventually, the ritual was associated with the mystical rebirth of man's own spirit. Ironically, both tragedy and comedy employed the same pattern: a death-resurrection ceremony in which there were the killing

³The theory of how man developed the ritual is found in Suzanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (Cambridge, 1960), p. 190.

of the old year, the aged king, and the bringing in of the new king and season. Associated with the killing of the old king was the rite of purging the tribe by expelling a scapegoat who represented the sins of the past year. The scapegoat could be either a priest or an animal as victim to whom were transferred the sins and misfortunes of the tribe. Later, the scapegoat became an ordinary victim who was often a condemned criminal.⁴ This ancient ritual was of triple significance: the killing of an old king or scapegoat insured the continuation of natural plant and animal life, man's own fertility, and the purgation of his sins.

Comedy, then, is simply one step beyond tragedy. The death of the scapegoat or old god is the tragedy. And the continuation--the rebirth, the crowning of the new king--is the comedy, the optimistic assurance of life's continuity.

Faulkner's novels emphasize this comic form in a variety of elements. First, a typical Faulknerian plot follows the pattern of the comic ritual: there is a character who may be identified as the scapegoat or old-king figure, who represents, in death or expiation, the tragic element. However, invariably juxtaposed to this character is a new-king figure, a youth or a child who represents the ritual pattern of rebirth.

Faulkner's novels fall into two distinct groups in their relationship to the early ritual: one group of novels is focused more on the fertility element within the comic ritual. Within these novels

⁴Wylie Sypher, "The Meaning of Comedy," Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Robert Corrigan (San Francisco, 1965), p. 36.

are the scapegoat figures, who are often actually as well as ritually guilty of a crime; women who represent fertility; and the theme of fertility versus impotence.

The second group of novels is written on a historical, symbolic level (principally those involving the history of the Yoknapatawpha community): within these novels are the old-king figures, who in death or old age relinquish life to the new. On a symbolic level these old and new-king figures represent the themes of the old versus the new South--the loss of the aristocracy to a new system of values and the loss of the agrarian South and the wilderness to industry. Accompanying these themes is the theme of guilt and expiation; a guilt born with the old-king figures, who used the institution of slavery to build the old South.

Finally, throughout his works, Faulkner utilizes as vehicles for his themes the seasonal cycles and the Christian rebirth pattern which incorporate the early ritual form. The cyclic nature of his novels and his insistence upon the rebirth pattern are his two most important uses of the comic pattern.

Within the first group of novels, all of which focus on fertility, female figures assume importance. Critics have called these figures earth mothers, life principles, and fertility goddesses because they symbolize perfectly the cyclic nature of the earth. Irving Malin suggests that their nature "is like the flow of the moon and seasons."⁵ Richard Adams points out their relationship to the Demeter myth, noting

⁵Irving Malin, William Faulkner; An Interpretation (Stanford, California, 1957), p. 43.

that the corn goddess figures such as Emma, in the early novel Soldiers' Pay, or Jenny, in Mosquitoes, are figures who contain the same qualities found later in such characters as Dewey Dell Bundren, in As I Lay Dying; Ruby Goodwin, in Sanctuary; Lena Grove, in Light in August; or the young woman in The Wild Palms.⁶ These women, associated with fecundity, are usually contrasted with opposite characters, mostly females who are barren and impotent. For example, Lena Grove is contrasted to the barren Joanna Burden, and Ruby Goodwin to Temple Drake, who is sexual but who lacks the qualities of fertility or strength. The most important consideration is the fact that all these women bear children who represent the rebirth principle, the cyclic nature of the novels. These female characters represent clearly the nature of the comic ritual in their close association with the cycles of life and death in nature and man.

Within the "fertility" novels are scapegoats who are often publically massacred. Joe Christmas is the most obvious example of this figure. In Light in August there is a full representation of the comic ritual: the death of the scapegoat (Christmas), the expiation of sin, and the birth of a child. Because of Christmas's name, given him when he was found on the doorstep of an orphanage on Christmas Eve, and his death, called by Hightower a crucifixion, many critics have associated him with Christ.⁷ However, the closest parallel to Christ found is the cathartic quality of his death, an important element in the comic ritual.

⁶Richard P. Adams, Faulkner: Myth and Motion (Princeton, N.J., 1968), p. 52.

⁷The similarity between Joe Christmas and Christ has been presented in detail by C. Hugh Holman, "The Unity of Faulkner's Light in August," PMLA, 73 (June, 1956), 155-156.

There is an interesting juxtaposition of opposites within the novels which deal with fertility, notably a contrast between life (the fertility figures and their children) and death (the scapegoat figures); the same contrast exists between fertility and barrenness. In addition, all of the novels contain the ritualistic pattern of the death of the scapegoat followed by the birth of a child.

This pattern also provides structuring for the second group of novels in which Faulkner's old-king figures relinquish their reign to the new. Reflected in many of these novels is a theme Irving Howe identifies as the decaying of the old South, delineated in such families as the Compsons, Sartoris, and McCaslins.⁸ Characteristically, these novels employ a cyclic pattern in which a new system of thought supplants the traditional ideas of the aristocracy; thus we have the old patriarch holding to traditional ideas of the aristocracy supplanted by new values represented in the new-king figures. Accompanying this theme of the old king's death is the theme of modernity and its encroachment on tradition, the agrarian South eliminated by industry and man's defilement of the wilderness; this theme is perhaps Faulkner's least optimistic. However, even this appears less pessimistic in its larger context. Viewed in proper perspective, this modernity, fiercely materialistic as it is, becomes the manifest destiny of the Snopeses, whose story unfolds in The Hamlet, The Town, and The Mansion. In the last of these, Flem represents an old-king figure and is killed, leaving the new society free of the evil designs of the Snopeses.

⁸Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York, 1952), pp. 31-115.

The old-king theme is also associated with the idea of guilt. Faulkner links this guilt with acquisition of land from the Indians, and, most significantly, the use of slaves, the harsh impersonal treatment of human beings who were used to build the agrarian South. Punishment remains in the form of a curse on the people and the land. Expiation lies with the new-king figures whose rebellion against the old forms involves a moral and humane treatment of man. Removal of the curse is progressive; unlike the ritual in which the sins of the past are removed with the death of the old king or scapegoat figure, this cycle of absolution occurs through a succession of old and new-king figures.

Both groups of Faulkner's novels utilize these two elements--seasonal change in conjunction with the planting and harvesting cycle and the Christian story of death and rebirth--to implement the comic ritual.⁹

In his first novel, Soldiers' Pay, there is the cyclic dependency upon the seasons, and Millgate notes Faulkner's early praise of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio for "'its corn in the green spring and its slow, hot summer and the rigorous masculine winter that hurts it not but makes it stronger.' He praised it, that is to say, for just that recurrent evocation of the land and the movings which he himself achieved in Soldiers' Pay."¹⁰ Faulkner's early implementation of the seasonal cycles and the planting and harvest seasons becomes even more

⁹James Turner Jackson has made a study of Faulkner's fiction and its relationship to the seasonal and historical cycles: "Delta Cycle," Chimera, 1 (Autumn, 1946), 3-14.

¹⁰Michael Millgate, "The Sound and the Fury," Faulkner: A Collection of Essays, ed. Robert Penn Warren (Inglewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 102.

evident in later novels such as Light in August, The Wild Palms, and Sartoris. The Christian rebirth pattern, which Faulkner combines with the scapegoat ritual, contains the most profound example of the comic ritual in the Western hemisphere. When asked about its application in A Fable, Faulkner told a group of Japanese journalists,

I simply used a formula: a proven formula in our Western culture to tell something which I wanted to tell, but that's no new trend. I simply used an old story which had been proved to our western culture to be a good one that people could understand and believe in order to tell something that I was trying to tell.¹¹

Hyatt Waggoner points out that the Christian motif has been used in all of Faulkner's novels, yet he concludes that Faulkner's work is at the very base a tragic vision. Mr. Waggoner emphasizes that for Faulkner "the crucifixion is central and paradigmatic, but the resurrection might never have occurred."¹² What Mr. Waggoner has failed to see is that for Faulkner the actual resurrection is not found in the scapegoat or old-king figure, but rather in the new king who comes after.

Faulkner's novels utilize the basic elements of the ancient comic ritual, including the sacrificial scapegoats such as Joe Christmas; the basic pattern of the old relinquishing to the new in such novels as Absalom, Absalom! and Sartoris; imagery, themes, and motifs abounding in the cyclic patterns of seasonal growth; man's dependency upon nature; fertility and impotence; guilt and purgation; and, most significantly, the assertion of man's continuation--his immortality.

¹¹William Faulkner, as quoted by James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, Lion in the Garden, Interviews with William Faulkner (New York, 1968), pp. 99-100.

¹²Hyatt Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington, 1959), p. 247.

While lacking the profound jubilation of the early primitive rites, these comic patterns in Faulkner indicate his hope for mankind. The tone of his novels is not often gay; there is always an overcast of doom. But though death is inevitable, Faulkner's optimism is couched in his profound belief in man's immortality.

Since there are two distinct groups of novels which emphasize the elements contained in the early ritual, I have divided this essay accordingly. In the first group, I have placed those books which focus on the fertility element and scapegoat figures: Light in August, Sanctuary, Requiem for a Nun, The Wild Palms, and As I Lay Dying. In the second I have included those novels which deal with the historical aspect of Faulkner's works, his old and new-king figures: The Unvanquished; Sartoris; The Sound and the Fury; Absalom, Absalom!; Go Down, Moses; Intruder in the Dust; The Rievers; and the Snopes Trilogy. Finally, because there is throughout many of Faulkner's works a structural emphasis upon the seasonal pattern and the Christian story, I have included an overall view of these. The book A Fable has been placed in final consideration, since it contains the Christian story in an allegorical pattern.

CHAPTER II

THE FERTILITY RITE

Faulkner's novels that emphasize the fertility element of the early comic ritual share certain characteristics which bind the novels together. The first is the absence in most cases of a relationship to the historical novels which deal with the old-king figures. Though some of these novels are set in Jefferson, little, if any, emphasis is put upon the cyclic evolution from the old to the new South. Almost none of the characters within the "fertility" novels are identified with the old families of Jefferson. These novels are also thematically distinct from the historical ones; i.e., most of these novels contrast fertility and impotence, richly fruitful female characters opposed to females who are barren, for example. These themes are supported by images of barrenness and fecundity. In these novels there is a scapegoat figure who, like the early ritualistic scapegoat, is most often guilty of an actual crime. In all the "fertility" novels the plot structure is identical: a scapegoat figure is killed or displaced from the tribe and in his place a child is born; or, in the case of Dewey Dell Bundren, will be born.

Light in August and Sanctuary provide an interesting juxtaposition of themes. Light in August employs the theme of fertility emphasized by the usage of fecund imagery and setting, while in Sanctuary the opposite occurs in the novel's emphasis upon barren imagery and setting. The same antithesis occurs within a single novel, The Wild Palms, in which two interwoven stories offer essentially the same contrasts as those found between Light in August and Sanctuary.

Because Light in August is the most representative of Faulkner's comic pattern, it serves as prototype of the comic ritual, providing a basic form from which the other novels may be understood.

The complicated plot pattern of Light in August may be simply stated by recounting the actions of two characters, Lena Grove and Joe Christmas. Lena's behavior is motivated by a search for the father of her unborn child, while Christmas's activity is basically concerned with his escape after killing Joanna Burden, an old maid who had been Christmas's mistress.¹ These present actions are interwoven with the past experiences of both Lena and Christmas, and though the characters never meet, their actions correspond structurally; this device underlines such contrasts as Lena's complacency and Christmas's anguish. The lives of the two characters are interwoven by Joe Brown, the father of Lena's child, who is the informer friend of Joe Christmas, and by Gail Hightower, who is present at the death of Christmas and at the birth of Lena's child.

Ironically, Hightower, who is incapable of adjusting to reality, who lives in the past, and who seeks immunity from man, is directly involved in the lives of these two people. His Platonic insularity from the birth and death cycle of man offers an initial key in understanding Faulkner's comic consideration. Hightower's intellectual isolation provides him, more than any other character, the vantage point of objectivity, and it is Hightower who provides the intellectualization of Christmas's sacrifice and the new hope expressed in Lena's child.

¹For an interesting comparison of these parallel journeys see Richard Chase, "The Stone and Crucifixion: Faulkner's Light in August," Kenyon Review, 10 (Autumn, 1948), 42.

Lena Grove, who is the most representative of Faulkner's fertility figures, is an earth mother, a goddess figure bearing a child in the month of August, the season of harvest; her child is born on the morning before Joe Christmas is killed and castrated by Percy Grimm. Her fecundity is contrasted with the barrenness of Joanna Burden, who experiences, in the waning cycle of womanhood, a false pregnancy.

Associated with Christmas are the fertility cycles of women, and his negation of this life principle; early in youth, Christmas vows that the menstrual flow will never happen to his love; and, ironically, Joanna Burden, the last of his paramours, is at the ebb of her sexual life. Like Hightower, Christmas negates the cyclic principles of life. Though Christmas abhors this natural cycle in women, various settings associate him with fertility imagery; before his meeting with Joanna Burden, the earth is his womb; he is enclosed in the fertile darkness of the copse; his arms are crossed in fetal position; "his forehead rested upon them, in his nostrils the damp rich odor of the dark fecund earth."² The peace that Joe Christmas desires is reflected by Lena Grove and her closeness to nature, its cyclic and fertile pattern, but it is also constantly reflected in the imagery patterns surrounding him. Christmas, then, becomes a negation of the life principle; he is a sacrificial figure castrated and killed; the impotent god yielding to the new, Lena's child. Gail Hightower voices clearly the element of fertility and hope found in the child when he says of Joanna Burden,

²William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1959), p. 215. Initial references to each of Faulkner's works will establish the text; subsequent references in all cases will refer to the established text and will be contained within the text of this thesis.

"Poor barren woman. To not have lived only a week longer, until luck returned to this place. Until luck and life returned to these barren and ruined acres." It seems to him that he can see, feel about him the ghosts of rich fields, and the rich fecund black life of the quarters, the mellow shouts, the presence of fecund women, the prolific naked children in the dust before the doors; and the big house again noisy, and with the treble shouts of generations (385).

Though Joanna Burden in her barrenness may be linked with the old, impotent-king figures, it is Joe Christmas's death that brings not simply the ritual promise of fertility, but also a purging of sins and a rebirth of spirit. It is quite appropriate, then, for Christmas to be seen as a Christ figure, yet more essential that he be seen as an element of the ritual cycle. His possible Negro blood is a significant consideration within the purgation theme. Joanna Burden's assertion that the black race is "doomed and cursed forever and a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins" (239), along with the crucifixion implications, seems an evident comment on Christmas's absolving or cathartic death. Joanna Burden's comment which involves crucifixion imagery supports this idea:

And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross.
And it seemed like the white babies were struggling even before
they drew a breath to escape from the shadow that was not only
upon them but beneath them too . . . like their arms were
flung out as if they were nailed to the cross (239).

The suspicion of Christmas's black blood, which for the White South amounted to a solid fact, is a form of atonement for the white race; his white for the Negro. Christmas is sought, massacred, and killed by the collective society of White America personified in the character of Percy Grimm, who has a "sublime and implicit faith in personal courage and blind obedience in a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races, and that American uniforms are superior to all

Christmas is, ironically enough, castrated and murdered by a white man who fails to see that Caucasian blood flows through Christmas's veins. Had Christmas been all black, neither the irony nor the cathartic significance would be apparent. Thus the same form of guilt which Faulkner utilized in relation to his old-king figures is associated with the scapegoat; however, Christmas's death, unlike the old king's death, is a full expiation. Hightower intellectualizes the sacrificial significance of Christmas's death, "in whose crucifixion they too will raise a cross" (348).

Sanctuary and Requiem for a Nun must be considered along with Light in August because of their similar yet contrasting natures. Sanctuary differs from Light in August in the development of contrasting imagery and themes. Both follow the comic pattern: both have scapegoat figures and women representing fertility in their child-bearing, who are contrasted to impotent, barren women.

The scapegoat figure in Sanctuary is Lee Goodwin, innocent of the crime of which he is accused, yet lynched by an irate mob. His wife, Ruby, like Lena Grove in Light in August, has a child symbolic of continuation; and Ruby is contrasted to Temple Drake, who is sensual, yet surrounded by barren imagery.

These similarities imply a mutual structural dependency upon the comic pattern, but Sanctuary offers interesting contrasts to Light in August. In Sanctuary the time is late May, planting season, as contrasted to the harvest season in Light in August. The imagery as well as the tone of Sanctuary suggests barrenness in nature, whereas Light in August abounds with fertility and ripeness.

The old Frenchman's place, the setting for Temple's rape, is ruined, abandoned without a sign of "husbandry plow or tool; in no direction was a planted field."³ In the barn, the scene of the rape, there are only the remnants of once-fertile nature: "rotting hay," "cottonseed hulls," "gnawed corncobs." The sexual act itself is mocked by Popeye, impotent and perverse, and by Temple Drake, a virgin turned nymph. Even her abundant sexual energy lacks femininity or fertility; "when he touched her she sprang like a bow, hurling herself upon him, her mouth gapped and ugly like that of a dying fish as she writhed her loins against him" (232).

Ruby Goodwin, Temple's antithesis because of her fertility and womanly strength, has a child who represents the only element of hope in the novel, though the child is unhealthy with "its bluish eyelids showing a faint crescent of bluish white against its lead-colored cheeks" (116).

The only nature imagery suggesting fertility has an artificial quality such as that found in the description of Narcissa, who lives "a life of serene vegetation like perpetual corn or wheat in a sheltered garden instead of a field" (103).

The majority of the characters are spiritually or physically impotent. Miss Reba is symbolic of sensuality without fertility; Horace Benbow is unsuccessful in his attempt to escape his former life and to help Lee Goodwin. Even the scenes of humor are grotesque, bizarre incidents involving Red's funeral or the Snopes brothers' adventure in Miss Reba's brothel.

³William Faulkner, Sanctuary (New York, 1958), p. 40.

Though structurally confined to the comic pattern, Sanctuary is still, at the most, a barren wasteland where little hope exists and where nature offers only fruitless blooms. Yet, the child symbolizing hope and fertility does live. Nor does Faulkner allow Temple Drake, who causes Lee Goodwin's death by falsely witnessing in court that he was Tommy's murderer, to remain damned. In Requiem for a Nun Temple purges her sins in a confession scene with the Mississippi governor.

Requiem for a Nun is a sequel to Sanctuary involving many of the same characters. Notably, Requiem serves to expand the character of Temple Drake rather than the theme of Sanctuary, and through this extension suggests a more affirmative view of Temple's character than that presented in Sanctuary.

Requiem for a Nun, like Sanctuary and Light in August, has a scapegoat: a Negro, Nancy Mannigoe, who kills Temple's child in order to prevent Temple from escaping the second time into her former state of depravity. Nancy's death offers a form of hope, embodied in Temple's remaining child. Gavin says to Temple in the office of the Mississippi governor, "You came here to affirm the very thing for which Nancy is going to die tomorrow; that little children shall be intact, unanguished, untorn and unterrified."⁴ Though Nancy's death lacks the broad cathartic significance of that of Christmas, this quality is individualized in the person of Temple, who is purged of her former sins.

These three novels offer interesting variations of the comic pattern. The Wild Palms is linked with these works in its dependency

⁴William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun (New York, 1968), p. 211.

upon the contrasting elements of sterility and fertility and through the cyclic pattern of death and birth. The book is divided into two portions, two stories interwoven in alternating chapters.

One story involves the plight of Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Harry Wilbourne, who seek to live a life devoted to love, though Charlotte remains married to another man and has left her two children. The pattern of the couple's journey is seasonal: they travel first to Chicago in the summer, then to a lake cottage in the autumn; in winter they venture to the midwest, and finally, in the spring, to Texas. From there they journey to the Mississippi Gulf where Charlotte dies of complications from an abortion performed by Harry. Charlotte's death, as well as the death of her unborn child, are ironic negations of the spring-rebirth patterns.

However, in the second portion of the novel, "Old Man," another child is born in the spring. This one lives, though the odds seemed against its survival; among other things, the birth takes place on an isolated river bank during a Mississippi River flood. In "Old Man" a tall convict and a young woman (both nameless) make a journey that provides vivid contrasts to Charlotte and Harry's.

Because of the flood, the inmates of a Mississippi work farm are evacuated. When they arrive at their destination, the tall convict and his companion are asked to rescue a woman and a man who have been marooned because of the flood. In the process of the rescue the boat capsizes, leaving only the tall convict to continue the journey. He manages to rescue the woman, who is in the last stage of pregnancy; and after a series of conflicts involving a battle against the river, avoiding gun fire at a port town, helping the woman give birth to the

child, fighting water moccasins, and trapping alligators, the tall convict manages to deposit the woman and child on dry land.

These parallel journeys are contrasted by themes of barrenness and fertility, futility and acceptance. As Lena Grove and Ruby Goodwin were contrasted in their fertility to barren women, the young woman in "Old Man" is contrasted in her successful birth to Charlotte Rittenmeyer, who dies because of an abortion.

As Light in August and Sanctuary offer contrasting setting and imagery, "The Wild Palms" similarly contrasts to "Old Man." R.V. Cassil has noted the omnipresence throughout the "Wild Palms" section of the book of a dark wind, which suggests the futility of the couple's plight: "The wind is both language and referent. It rattles the actual fronds on the wild palms along the shore; it sounds the supra-verbal note of lamentation which is the dominant tone of the book."⁵

At the time of Charlotte's death the imagery surrounding the scene is symbolic of her barren death: "the black beach," "black winds," and the ambulance which rolls "up the rutted, weed-choked land."⁶ The contrast of titles, one suggesting the barren wind filtering through the palms, the other the fertile life-sustaining river, presents an evident juxtaposition of theme. However, the most evident contrast comes in the final portion of "Old Man" when the flood has subsided, offering a picture of continuing fertility:

⁵R.V. Cassil, Introduction to The Wild Palms (New York, 1968), p. xii.

⁶William Faulkner, The Wild Palms (New York, 1939), pp. 280 and 292.

He (the old man) has recovered from his debauch, back in the banks again the old man rippling placidly toward the sea, brown and rich as chocolate between levees whose inner faces were wrinkled as though in a frozen and aghast amazement crowned with the rich green of summer in the willows; beyond them sixty feet below slick mules squatted against the broad pull of middle busters in the richened soil which need only to be shown a cotton seed to sprout and make; there would be symmetric miles of strong stalks by July, purple bloom by August, in September the black fields snowed over, spilled, the middles dragged smooth by the long sacks, the long black limber hands plucking, the hot air filled with the whine of gins . . . (277).

Thus the child in "The Old Man" has the same significance as the one in Light in August; the birth of both ensure fertility and continuance, and though the death of Charlotte does not follow the ritualistic pattern of a scapegoat, her death is of the same significance.

This same pattern is found in As I Lay Dying, in which the death of the scapegoat figure does not occur, but the ritual is emphasized through the characters of Addie Bundren and Darl. We see, as in the case of Charlotte, a contradiction to the life theme. The story of the Bundren family is viewed by critics as symbolic of the rebirth pattern;⁷ the family loses a mother and journeys to bury her, meeting on the way a series of perilous conflicts; when she is finally buried, they return home with a new mother.

The new mother is an aspect of change. Contrasted with the deep and vengeful nature of Addie Bundren, she brings a small element of pleasure to the family, a gramophone. Cash pictures the family spending the long winter months listening to the new records they will purchase from the mail order house, thinking "what a shame Darl couldn't be here to enjoy it."⁸

⁷See Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World, p. 62, and Adams, Faulkner: Myth and Motion, p. 72.

⁸William Faulkner, As I Lay Dying (New York, 1967), p. 250.

Darl is a scapegoat figure; he, like Addie, is vengeful and intellectually sensitive. He plagues both Dewey Dell and Jewel with his knowledge of Dewey Dell's pregnancy and Jewel's illegitimacy. He continually suggests that Jewel's love for his horse supersedes his love for Addie. And it is Jewel and Dewey Dell who get their revenge when Darl is captured and sent to a Jackson mental institution: "it was Dewey Dell that was on him like a wild cat while the other one and Pa and Jewel throwed Darl down and held him lying on his back. . . ." (277).

Darl's character resembles his mother's in his brooding insight. Ironically, because of his intelligence, the burial journey which carries the mother's putrescent corpse to the Jefferson burial ground is absurd and maddening to him, while the other members of the family are able to adjust and accept their plight.

Fertility imagery surrounds both Dewey Dell and Addie; both are associated with the land. Addie says of Anse, "sometimes I would lie by him in the dark, hearing the land that was now of my blood and flesh . . . I believed it was my duty to be alive, to the terrible blood, the red bitter flood boiling through the land. . . . My children were of me alone, of the wild blood boiling along the earth of me and all that lived" (165-167). Dewey Dell's unborn child is conceived in a cotton patch in the "secret shade," and she associates herself with fertility, saying, "I feel like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth" (61). Because of similar imagery, Addie represents an old-king figure relinquishing her reign to Dewey Dell and her unborn child. Dewey Dell's unsuccessful attempt to abort her child, unlike Charlotte in The Wild Palms, supports life and offers a new season of Bundrens.

Pylon is considered a less effective novel than most of Faulkner's major works, yet there is a comic plan; even though the major theme of the novel is that of mechanization and speed (as reflected in the setting, plot, and characters), there is in the death of the pilot, Schumann, a sacrificial note when he chooses to crash his racing plane in a lake rather than endanger the lives of the spectators on the field. There is also a child who is given to Schumann's father after the pilot's death. The idea of continuation rests not only with this child but with another. Laverne, who is Schumann's mistress and the wife of another member of the flying team, is pregnant at the end of the novel.

These novels have in common a structural dependency upon the cycle of life, death and rebirth. In each there is a death which is counterpointed by the birth of a child. The emphasis is placed upon the ability of fruitful women to bear children who are harbingers of new hope and the continuation of the tribe.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD VERSUS THE NEW

Faulkner's aristocratic Yoknapatawpha families present an expansion of the early ritual form involving old and new kings. Attending this ritual pattern is a series of related themes. For example, in most cases the old kings in Faulkner's novels are representative of the old South; their fall symbolically represents the decline of the aristocracy after the Civil War. On the other hand, the new-king figures represent a break with tradition, the formation of values which supersede the old. For the most part, these new values are more humanistic than the old; therefore, the new kings offer a positive picture of the new South.

Secondly, there is a theme of guilt, the presence of a curse on the land and the men who misused it. The old-king figures bear the sins of the old South: slavery and the questionable acquisition of land from the Indians. Each new-king figure's act of breaking with the past is a form of expiation.

Finally, these novels contain a theme which focuses upon the derogatory aspects of the new South: the loss of the wilderness and land to industry and to the mercenary mechanical men who represent evil as much as do those custodians of the old. However, even this theme ends with an optimistic view of the future.

The most representative old and new-king figures are a part of Faulkner's mythical history of Yoknapatawpha County. The stories of the

Sartorises, McCaslins, Compsons, and Sutpens compose a saga of generations from the post-Civil War South to the twentieth century. Viewed in historical perspective, the novels form a cyclic progression from past to present.

Thomas Sutpen, perhaps more dramatically than any other of Faulkner's characters, is representative of the fall of an old king. The delineation of Sutpen parallels the journey of the first white settlers in the central South. Early in youth, Sutpen's consciousness of aristocracy and its attendant opulence, its isolated grandeur (underlying separateness of monarch and plebian), becomes a fatalistic obsession. Sutpen's early contact with aristocracy and its rejection of him is responsible for his dream, which is not simply to construct his own material replica of aristocracy (a mansion with a plantation) but a line of descendants who will immortalize his name. As such, Sutpen becomes representative of the South itself and the myth which surrounds it; what we actually know about his true character are a few isolated facts, translated some fifty years after the Civil War in the Harvard dormitory room of two young men, Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon.

The myth of Thomas Sutpen, like the myth of the South, is a story created with a few facts in the minds of the men who come after. Consequently Sutpen's death is symbolically the decline of the old South. The killing of Sutpen by his hired hand, Wash, with the stroke of a "rusty scythe," is, appropriately, the symbol of the old year, the last harvest. Sutpen is the old king in "that old man's state of impotent and furious undefeat."¹ The new king, however, "the heir and scion," assumes the form of a part Negro idiot who is Sutpen's great-grandson.

¹William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York, 1951), p. 184.

The death of Sutpen and the purgation of all the remaining Sutpens by Clytie (Sutpen's daughter by a slave, who burns the mansion and destroys all its Sutpen inhabitants, with the exception of Jim Bond) does not totally succeed in erasing the past. Cleanth Brooks sees Judith, Sutpen's daughter, as a positive element within the novel, noting that she spends her life helping those whom her father has mistreated. Brooks points out that "Judith did take him (Charles Bond, the part-Negro grandson of Sutpen) into the house when he was stricken with yellow fever," and that "she did die nursing him."² Thus Judith follows the pattern of the new-king figures who reject the past in a gesture of humility. The new king lives on in the figure of Jim Bond, blighted by idiocy and tied by his black blood to the miscegenous activities of his forefathers. But John Lydenburg sees hope in this mingling of Negro and Caucasian blood. He thinks Faulkner's faith in the strength of the primitive virtues is unquestionable: "It is with the Negro that the future resides."³ At the close of Absalom, Absalom! Shreve asserts that Bond will be the progenitor of a new race:

I think in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the Western hemisphere. Of course, it won't be quite in our time and of course, as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do so they won't show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be a Jim Bond: and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. . . . (378).

The new god in Absalom, Absalom!, then, is a form of hope and renewal not simply for the reason Lydenburg suggests, i.e., the Negro's

²Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven, 1953), p. 306.

³John Lydenburg, "Nature Myth in Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" Seven Approaches to Faulkner's "The Bear": Bear, Man and God, ed. F. Utley, L. Bloom and Arthur Kenny (New York, 1964), p. 301. All subsequent references will be abbreviated B.M.A.G.

primitive virtues, but because in the future the human race will be uniform.

In a later book, Go Down, Moses, the new king is again a part-Negro child, born in the twentieth century and heir to the McCaslin family and its heritage, carrying as a theme the same pattern of the old relinquishing to the new. The central character, Ike McCaslin, is not, as was Sutpen, one of the early settlers; rather, he is much like Quentin and Shreve, who piece the past together from a few isolated facts. Ike finds within the fragmented entries of an old family ledger the evidence of outrageous acts perpetrated by his forefathers, including the miscegenation and immorality of his grandfather, Carothers McCaslin.

A critical portion of the book relates the plight of Ike McCaslin: his maturation, manhood, and old age found in three short stories, "The Old People," "The Bear," and "Delta Autumn." The stories form a cyclic pattern of Ike's life. "The Old People" depicts the ritualistic maturation of young Ike, gained in the wilderness under the guidance of Sam Fathers, a part-Negro, part-Indian hunter. The story involves the killing of Ike's first deer and Sam Fathers' blood-initiation ceremony which symbolically binds the youth to the wilderness forever. "The Bear" further develops Ike's experience, including the full development of Ike as a new-king figure. He, as other characters, symbolically breaks with the past through an overt rejection of his grandfather's farm, choosing instead a life as a carpenter.

In "Delta Autumn" Ike's life reaches the final cycle as he returns to the wilderness with his great-nephew, Roth Edmonds. Ike is now the old-king figure who relinquishes his reign to Roth's illegitimate part-

Negro child, symbolically passing the torch, as it were, in the form of a hunting horn, Ike's link to the wilderness, emblematic of his life's pattern.

The story of the Sartoris family is related to the cyclical progression found in Go Down, Moses. John Sartoris, like Carothers McCaslin and Thomas Sutpen, represents the old South, the aristocracy. His son, Bayard Sartoris II, following the pattern of Ike McCaslin, moves from a new to an old-god figure, relinquishing his reign to his grandson, Bayard III, who in turn yields to his son, the last in the succession of Sartorises.

John Sartoris represents a dominant figure in Faulkner's myth. In the first portion of The Unvanquished, Colonel Sartoris is presented as a heroic figure embodying the romantic idealism of the aristocracy. In one section of the novel he manages to capture sixty Yankees, and at another point, when a Yankee patrol surrounds his home, he outwits them and makes a chivalrous getaway. However, Cleanth Brooks notes that this romantic picture of John Sartoris is not sustained. In his encounter with the carpetbaggers, "he reveals himself as the hard, ruthless man who believes that he is quite justified in shooting the carpetbaggers and seizing the ballot box."⁴ In a short story, "There Was a Queen," John Sartoris is shown to be guilty of miscegenation, as Sutpen and McCaslin were.

His death, like Thomas Sutpen's, is violent, an assassination by his political opponent, Ben Redmond. Sartoris's death marks the end of a reign, the fall of the aristocracy in the old South. His son, Bayard

⁴Brooks, p. 77.

II, becomes a symbolic new-king figure when he refuses to avenge his father. In his repudiation of the traditional idea of honor, Bayard represents the new South after the Civil War,⁵ a new king breaking with the past, forming new values.

The novel Sartoris continues the Sartoris legend and repeats the same themes. In this novel, young Bayard returns to his homeland after World War I, seeking a new South, a change in values. His grandfather, Bayard III, becomes here the old-king figure, living in the past haunted by the "palpable presence" of his father, John Sartoris, "who seemed to loom in the room above and about his son."⁶

Young Bayard's return produces a series of changes in the Sartoris mode of living; the most significant of these changes are the "new" inventions, the automobile and the tractor. These material alterations, however, are not the only transitions Bayard seeks, for the most important struggle is not simply for an overt change, but rather for a change in traditional values, a break with the ghosts of the past which dominate his grandfather's life, the old hierarchy of the aristocracy which in the twentieth century was still a part of the South.

Bayard's dismissals of class barriers are his symbolic breaks with the past. On one occasion he drinks with Suratt, a member of the lower class known to white Southerners as "white trash." A more significant break with tradition comes when he visits a family of Negroes.

⁵Edmond Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York, 1964), pp. 76-77.

⁶William Faulkner, Sartoris (New York, 1964), p. 19.

Symbolically, Bayard spends Christmas night in the Negro family's stable. He eats and drinks a form of sacrament with the Negroes, but this act is most importantly a symbolic gesture of humility, representative of the more humanistic values Bayard seeks.

The Negroes drink with him amicably, a little diffidently--two opposed concepts antipathetic by race, blood, nature, and environment, touching for a moment and fused within an illusion--human kind forgetting for a moment its lust and cowardice, and greed for a day (277).

However, Bayard is ineffective as a new king. He is doomed by the past and unable to move competently in the present. Both he and his grandfather die in machines symbolic of the modern world: old Bayard in a car and young Bayard in an airplane. Yet Bayard's death does not terminate the line of Sartoris, for on the day his family receives word of his death, his child is born.

The child represents the only remaining Sartoris, for at this point in the novel, all the Sartoris men have died, even Simon, the Negro servant, who considered himself one of them. The old yields to the new.

The Compson family, who appear in The Sound and the Fury, follow this same pattern. Quentin Compson, like Bayard III, struggles to maintain a balance between past and present ideals; like Bayard, Quentin is inhibited by the past. Obsessed with the traditional values concerning his sister's chastity, and torn with guilt over his own abnormal love for her, he takes his own life. Thus Quentin becomes an old king representing traditional values; and his death as well as those of the other Compsons (the grandmother, Mr. Compson, and Roskus, the old servant) is symbolic of the old.

Caddy Compson, like Judith Sutpen, is active against the old forms. Of all the Compson children, only Caddy shows kindness and love,

evidenced in her treatment of her idiot brother, Benjy. And in breaking with the traditional decorum of the past, she follows the pattern of the other new-king figures. Michael Millgate points out that Caddy's daughter, Quentin, is also a form of hope in the Compson family for "it is Quentin who gives Luster the quarter he so desires, it is Quentin who struggles in the last section to maintain some form of family harmony and order. . . ."7 Both Caddy and her daughter leave the old, seeking lives separated from the past.

Intruder in the Dust is related to the historical novels in theme and character. Modern Jefferson provides the setting; its main character, Lucas Beauchamp, is the Negro grandson of Carothers McCaslin. Chick Mallison, a Jefferson youth, reflects the other new-king figures. Much like Ike McCaslin, who years earlier had a similar battle with the past, Chick's conflict throughout the book is with racial prejudice, a conflict which motivates the basic action of the novel. When Lucas is unjustly accused of a crime, Chick, along with Aleck Sander, a young Negro boy, and Miss Havisham, a middle-aged woman, succeeds in rescuing Lucas from the gallows. In society's condemnation of Lucas, the boy sees an irresolvable impasse between white supremacy and morality. This argument is verbalized by Gavin Stevens, who tediously comments on the modern racial question and social conscience, in many ways hampering the novel's action. The most important consideration is the concept of new values replacing the old in the modern South. Chick Mallison, as do almost all the new-king figures, offers hope and change.

⁷Michael Millgate, "The Sound and the Fury," Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Penn Warren (Inglewood Cliffs, 1966), p. 102.

The Rievers, Faulkner's last novel, has a lighthearted treatment of old themes. Lucius Priest III, the last of the McCaslins, unlike his distant relative, Ike, receives his introduction to manhood, not in the wilderness, but through sex. Lucius grows in understanding of social man's somewhat depraved state. However, the book offers a profound statement of Faulkner's cyclic progression of new kings. Lucius represents not simply the last in the chain of Jefferson heirs, the new kings, but more importantly Faulkner's way of saying "they will not end." The novel concludes with the birth of a child. Because Lucius made the marriage of Boon Hoggenbeck and Corrie (a reformed prostitute) possible, the child is named for Lucius. The last of Faulkner's new kings has his celebration.

In these historical novels exists a cyclic movement from post-Civil War South to the present--the repetition of the comic ritual which was basically the symbolic reproduction of history: the death of the old and the crowning of the new. Faulkner's progression of old and new kings points toward a more humanistic view of man, distinct from the abstract standards of the past.

Related to this pattern of old and new-king figures is the theme of guilt and expiation. As apparent in Light in August, this guilt is related to the Negro and his treatment by the whites early in the history of the South. In the comic ritual, primitive man sought to expiate his sins of the past year through the figure of a scapegoat; in Light in August this ritual pattern is complete. However, within Faulkner's novels dealing with the old and new kings this pattern is more completely resolved.

The old kings who represent the old South are guilty of two crimes: the unjust purchase of land from the Indians, and the use of slaves. The first of the Yoknapatawpha citizens--the Compsons, Sartoris, Sutpens, and McCaslins--are equally responsible. However, Carothers McCaslin, more than any of the other old-king figures, depicts the ruthless treatment of the Negro by committing incest with his own daughter by a slave.

Each new king expiates the sins of the past in his symbolic rejection of tradition. The most significant of these acts are those concerning the treatment of the Negro. Judith Sutpen, Ike McCaslin, Bayard Sartoris II provide the most evident examples. However, the new-king figures in the McCaslin and Sutpen families, both part-Negroes, offer one of the most positive concepts concerning the expiation of this sin. Consider, for example, Ike McCaslin's words to the husband of Fonsiba (a Negro girl related to Ike through the miscegenous act of his grandfather):

Dont you see? This whole land, the whole South is cursed and all of us who derive from it, whoever suckled, white and black both, lie under the curse? Granted that my people brought the curse onto the land: maybe for that reason their descendents alone cannot resist it, not combat it--maybe just endure and outlast until it is lifted. Then your peoples' turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now, not yet, dont you see? (71).

The "turn" then of the Negro proves a part of both novels, Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses. Both the Sutpen and McCaslin families relinquish their reign to part-Negro descendents. The future then rests in these new-king characters who will have their opportunity to help absolve the curse. The cyclic nature of Faulkner's novels, which represents a continual pattern of old and new heirs, symbolizes

their ability to "endure and outlast" the curse. In Intruder in the Dust, for example, we see a twentieth-century youth defending the McCaslin Negro, and that is a decided advance in positive valuing when one remembers Carothers McCaslin's incestuous affair with his part-Negro daughter. Faulkner's absolution of the curse is not, as was the early primitives', isolated in the individual. It remains the original sin of the South which must be absolved through a continual cycle of old and new gods.

This cyclic form relates to a third theme in Faulkner's novels in which there is a focusing upon the new South, the encroachment of modernity on tradition, a reversal in perspective from novels in which each new-king figure represents a positive break with tradition.

From this perspective, the modern South connotes as negative a picture as that of the old aristocracy's harsh treatment of human beings. The theme involves the loss of the wilderness and the agrarian South to the impersonal and mechanistic forces of industry. The new king becomes an element of evil. "The Bear," for example, approaches this theme in full dimension. Again, this pattern of old and new is ritualistic. Francis Utly points out that the bear, Old Ben, has cosmic dimensions, that he symbolically dramatizes the fall of the wilderness.⁸ According to this interpretation Old Ben becomes an old king yielding to the new, which is the industrialization of the forest lands in the form of a logging company. Civilization, specifically industry, is the new king who destroys the natural past.

⁸ Francis Utly, "Pride and Humility," B M A G, 233-248.

However, this form of modernity in its inhuman mechanization is fully recognized in the character of Flem Snopes whose movement from new to old king represents the decline of this form of modernity. Flem Snopes is representative of the new South, a materialistic member of the lower class who moves from poverty to wealth. In the first book of the Snopes trilogy, The Hamlet, Flem's inhuman drive for material wealth takes him first to Frenchman's Bend, where his financial success places him in a position to marry Eula Varner, the local Venus, who is already pregnant. In The Town Flem overwhelms Jefferson, and by using his wife's affair with deSpain, becomes chief stock holder in deSpain's bank. In The Mansion his growth to respectability is complete; here he is sought and murdered by his relative, Mink Snopes. Flem resembles Thomas Sutpen, who rises to his position without questioning the morality of his actions; yet Snopes is a twentieth-century king whose reign is terminated by death. Flem's death is the positive termination of the evils of modernity. His illegitimate daughter, Linda, who is instrumental in his death, is a picture of the new woman divorced from the past, self-sufficient, yet capable of human emotions. The Mansion, Faulkner's next-to-last book, provides an optimistic view of the future; Jefferson is now cleansed of the past and of the evils of the present.

CHAPTER IV

THE REBIRTH STRUCTURE

Throughout all Faulkner's novels structural devices support the comic principle of rebirth. In Faulkner's earliest works, his dependency upon the seasonal cycles demonstrates this fundamental technique. A second such device is his use of the Christian story as a means of emphasizing the pattern of rebirth.

The Unvanquished, for example, ends in the spring with the death of John Sartoris and the negation of the past by his son, Bayard. The seasonal structure emphasizes the significance of Bayard's act. As in the early ritual, Bayard's reign begins in the new season. Sartoris, with its seasonal action, emphasizes an identical technique: Bayard, the new king, comes home in the spring; in winter, old Bayard is killed; Bayard's symbolic renewal occurs on Christmas Eve; Bayard III dies in the spring, and his child, the new king, is born.

In Absalom, Absalom! the destruction of the Sutpen home by Clytie in an attempt to purge the sins of the past takes place in December. Sutpen is killed in August, the season of harvest, at the time his colt and infant daughter are born.

Go Down, Moses presents a similar association between seasons and the old and new-king figures. The stories dealing with the life of Ike McCaslin follow the cyclic nature of the wilderness. The central time in the three stories occurs during hunting season, the harvest of the wilderness. Appropriately, each climactic period of Ike's life takes

place during the hunting season: his rejection of his heritage, his old age, and the relinquishing of his reign to the new. In "The Bear," Ike reflects on the continual rebirth of the wilderness:

Summer, and fall and snow, and wet and sapribe spring in their ordered and immortal sequence, the deathless and immortal phases of the mother who had shaped him, if any had toward the man he almost was. . . .

he had not stopped, he had only paused, quitting the knoll which was no abode of the dead because there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in the earth but of the earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in all their immutable progression and being a myriad one: and Old Ben too, Old Ben too. . . . (326).

Critics often point out the maturation cycle, a primitive birth-death-rebirth pattern, as a part of Ike's development into manhood.

Kenneth Labudde relates Hallowell's anthropological study of bear ceremonialism to the development of Ike McCaslin in "The Bear," pointing out that Ike, as did the early primitive novices, "goes through periods of isolation, suffering, instruction and testing before he enters manhood."¹

The stories dealing with Ike McCaslin in Go Down, Moses contain a variety of rebirth themes. Old Ben, in addition, represents a scape-goat figure. Frazier points out that in many instances of tribal worship the bear becomes a sacrificial figure, worshipped, sought and killed to ensure continual reproductivity.² It is true that the deaths of Old Ben and Sam Fathers serve the ritualistic function of both the culmination

¹Kenneth Labudde, "Cultural Primitivism in Faulkner's 'The Bear,'" ed. Francis Utley, Bear, Man and God, pp. 226-227.

²Sir George Frazier, The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion (New York, 1958), pp. 585-86.

of Ike's maturation and his spiritual rebirth (his rejection of his heritage). R.W.B. Lewis emphasizes that the death of Old Ben is the birth of Ike.³ Ike himself portrays a sacrificial figure in his rejection of his heritage, a parallel which leads many critics to view him as a Christ figure. The book abounds in rebirth patterns, all emphasizing clearly the comic intent of the work.

The seasonal cycles dominate the novels which deal with fertility. Faulkner's vivid contrasts between fertility and barrenness reflect the natural cycles of the seasons and females. The fertility figures illustrate clearly their relationship to the seasonal cycles: Lena Grove has her child in the month of harvest and the novel abounds in ripe, fecund imagery; the young woman in "Old Man" has her child in the spring during a flood which leaves the delta rich for planting.

We see the same significance in Faulkner's application of the Christian story as a structural basis for many of his novels. The Passion Week creates the present time in The Sound and the Fury, serving as a structural device, providing not only a point of reference in a myriad of time shifts but also emphasizing the basic theme of the story. The last section of the novel devoted to the Negro servant, Dilsey, focuses on her visit to church on Easter Sunday. The Easter service exhibits Faulkner's continual application of the rebirth theme.

The scapegoat figure, more than any other element, offers the most significant parallel to the Christian story. Characters such as Joe Christmas or Nancy Mannigoe prove Christ-like in their sacrificial

³R.W.B. Lewis, "The Hero in the New World," B.M.A.G., p. 213.

nature. However, the Christian structure comes vividly to focus in A Fable, which is an allegory of the New Testament, with allusions to Jesus's days prior to his crucifixion. The story takes place during the first World War. A young French corporal attempts to prove the needless waste of lives in war and moves a regiment to mutiny, simply stating their refusal to fight. Even though the German troops fail to take advantage of the French regiment (made up of twelve privates and the corporal) he is, nevertheless, killed for his actions. His body is moved to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Faulkner utilizes the Passion Week allegorically, but it also reinforces the rebirth pattern of nature that responds by "putting forth a few stubborn shoots from the blasted trunks."⁴ The land itself is a means of easing the pains of war and death, as the foster mother of the corporal points out: "he (the corporal) was right: it was the farm, the land which was immune even to the blast and sear of war. . . . The land would not only palliate the grief, the miniscule integer of the farm would affirm that he had not died for nothing" (399).

The book certainly is not Faulkner's most optimistic. Death and brutality fill the pages; yet it remains true to the comic formula, for though the corporal dies, there remains another to take his place, a runner who repeats the actions of the corporal. In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner wrote of the intent of the novel:

It was about Christ in the French army, a corporal with twelve men . . . symbolic and unreal except for 300 wild pages about a three legged race horse in Tennessee. . . . The corporal's

⁴William Faulkner, A Fable (New York, 1954), p. 396.

body is chosen for that of the Unknown Soldier. Christ (or his disciple) lives again in the crowd.⁵

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The Christ figure is the ultimate modern scapegoat, and the Christian formula is a magnification of the comic pattern of death and rebirth, a purging of sins, the hope of immortality. The soldier dies only to be born again and again.

⁵Malcolm Cowley, The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories (New York, 1967), p. 105.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Faulkner's belief that the duty of an artist is not merely to be "the record of man," but to be one of "the props, the pillars to help him prevail," dominates his works. In his novels Faulkner insists upon man's continuation, his immortality. Those who place Faulkner primarily in the category of the tragedy fail to see the emphasis he placed upon life.

It would be easy to point out the author's optimism if only the novels Light in August, or Intruder in the Dust, or The Rievers were cited as examples. However, there is an affirmation of life even in the bleak ones such as Sanctuary, or Absalom, Absalom!, or Go Down, Moses, in which the comic pattern is found.

Because Faulkner infused his novels with the recurring usage of land as a foundation for many of his themes (fertility and the seasonal cycles), we see that he, like the early primitive, found significance in the natural life-death-rebirth patterns. The novels that demonstrate this theme show clearly through their fertility figures this cyclic process in man. These women, though often contrasted to barrenness and death, have the children who offer an element of hope, the assurance of continuation, and the "saving of the tribe from sterility."

In Faulkner's novels there are those who die, but like the deaths in the early ritual, their deaths are significant, not meaningless. Such figures as Joe Christmas and Nancy Mannigoe are sacrificial: Joe

Christmas's death purges the tribe (the South) of its curse, while Nancy's saves Temple Drake from a life of depravity. The deaths of Charlotte Rittenmeyer, Joe Goodwin, and Roger Schumann are countered by the presence of children.

In the novels which deal with the old and new kings there is also hope: the death of the old is followed by the birth of the new with its concomitant pattern of growth toward a more moral position. When Faulkner focuses upon the evils of the new, we find that the new king, in the figure of Flem Snopes, must also relinquish his reign. In the novels dealing with the history of the South, there is a continuing absolution of guilt which the old kings handed to the new.

For Faulkner the comic resides in his continuing insistence upon life, upon life imagery, and upon the new-kings in counterpoint to death, old age, impotence, and guilt. Like the early comic ritual, Faulkner's novels are cyclic rather than tragic, for though the old kings die as do the scapegoats, the story continues; it does not end with death. Therefore, one of the most important factors substantiating Faulkner's comic vision is his Yoknapatawpha history in which characters appear and reappear, die and live again. And though these characters are not often blessed with good fortune and are more often than not surrounded by an overcast of gloom, death, depravation, they nonetheless continue. As Suzanne Langer points out, this is the basic pattern of comedy:

Comedy may be serious . . . the history is usually exhalted comedy--it presents an incident of the undying life of society that meets good and evil fortunes on countless occasions but never concludes its quest.¹

¹Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (New York, 1953), p. 334.

Faulkner's comic vision rests in his works, a vision clearly stated in Stockholm on the tenth of December, 1950: "I decline to accept the end of man."

Country. New

Faulkner's A
State University

"Light in August,"

Chandler

Memories, 1944-

1954.

1951.

1952.

1953.

1954.

1955.

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