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WILLIAM FAULKNER: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE

SINCE WILLIAM FAULKNER has been generally considered the greatest American novelist of the twentieth century and since love has always been the most universal subject in literature, we may very appropriately ask: what contribution did Faulkner make to the most universal of literary subjects?

If asked to name Faulkner's greatest love story, most readers would probably think first of *The Wild Palms*. As originally published, this book contains two separate stories. The story of Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Harry Wilbourne may be said to deal more with sex than with love, and the story of the tall convict ends with the hero's refusing to accept any responsibility for either love or sex.

Do these facts imply that Faulkner chose to ignore or to flout the most universal of literary subjects? Faulkner's own explicit answer to this question is contained in "The Stockholm Address", delivered on the occasion of his accepting the Nobel Prize in literature for 1950. The writer today, Faulkner stated, must leave "no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Not only is love here listed first among the universal truths; it is repeated and amplified in three of the other five terms, "pity" and "compassion" and "sacrifice", which are merely different aspects of love.

Many commentators have asserted that the statement of principles contained in "The Stockholm Address" bears no resemblance to the author's literary practice. If we examine Faulkner's writings in the light of these universal truths, however, we find that love really is the central subject of all his greatest work. We may go even further and say that all of Faulkner's significant writings constitute merely a series of variations on a single idea: *the importance of love*.

This fact has generally been overlooked, for two reasons. First, because of the romantic tradition in literature, most readers tend to identify love with romantic

courtships and illicit sexual activity, whereas Faulkner conceives of love in terms of pity and compassion and sacrifice and faith and patience and endurance. To him, the greatest love is based not upon sensation but upon the spiritual affinity between man and nature, between man and his fellow man, and among the members of a family. Another reason why readers overlook the significance of love in Faulkner's writing is that its importance is often emphasized indirectly through its absence or perversion. The need for love is the central issue in the most un-lovely of Faulkner's books—such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Sanctuary*—in which we behold the depravity and desperation and horror of human actions divorced from pity and compassion and sacrifice.

The importance of love in the family is well acknowledged by Faulkner in the most complimentary and also most significant dedication he ever wrote to any of his books, the dedication of *Go Down, Moses*:

To Mammy
CAROLINE BARR
Mississippi
[1840-1940]

Who was born in slavery and who
gave to my family a fidelity without
stint or calculation of recompense
and to my childhood an immeasur-
able devotion and love

Faulkner's great lovers are not Harry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer in *The Wild Palms*, but people such as young Isaac McCaslin in "The Bear", Charles Mallison, Jr. in *Intruder in the Dust*, Lena Grove in *Light in August*, the wife of Goodwin in *Sanctuary*, the old Negro Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, and eleven-year-old Lucius Priest in *The Reivers*. These are not glamorous but very modest people who (like Caroline Barr) give their full measure of fidelity and devotion and love, without selfish consideration and without pay. As the Negro Ned McCaslin remarks to Lucius Priest in the concluding chapter of *The Reivers*, they "never done it for money." This is the same point made by Faulkner in the opening remark of "The Stockholm Address", in which he stated that his life's work had been pursued not for glory "and least of all for profit."

With Faulkner, the basic unit of society—and also the area of human activity in which love is most essential—is the family. Faulkner says very little about romantic lovers, but he says a great deal about the importance—the absolute necessity—of love within the family group, the love which binds the family together in a

strong unit and gives each member happiness and a sense of security, the kind of love which makes a home and causes each individual to feel at home in the home. Whereas most novelists and short story writers deal with individual people, Faulkner commonly writes of whole families—the Sutpens, the Snopeses, the Sartorises, the Compsons, and the McCaslins. Usually he depicts these families in a process of decay (or a state of incoherence) caused by the absence of love. This disintegration not only destroys individuals and families but often overflows the family circle and involves the community.

Absalom, Absalom! is the story of the family of Thomas Sutpen, a man who spends the whole of his adult life trying to spell the word *love* with the wrong letters, trying to build a home with the wrong ingredients. He never does discover the right answer, for he never fully understands what he is trying to do.

It is significant that the story of Thomas Sutpen begins with the disintegration of his family, immediately following the death of his mother, when Tom is ten years old. Thereafter, the Sutpen family (lacking the vitalizing and cohering force of a mother and a mother's love) deteriorates into a state of "sloven and inert coherence like a useless collection of flotsam on a flooded river." This process continues until Tom is fourteen, when he suddenly realizes that his home is not a home, that his family is not truly a family but merely a group of relatives living under a common roof, and that he and his sisters and their father are living in a state of "brutehood." Within a few hours of this discovery, the boy makes a triple vow which dominates all his actions during the remainder of his life: he determines to build a fine home, found a respectable family, and live on the level of a human being. To accomplish this three-fold objective, "he believed that all that was necessary was courage and shrewdness and the one he knew he had and the other he believed he could learn." The great truth which Thomas Sutpen did not know as a boy and which he never did learn, though he lived to be an old man, was that his objectives were not achievable through courage and shrewdness alone.

Subsequent events proved unquestionably that Thomas Sutpen had or acquired both courage and shrewdness in great measure. He succeeded in marrying two wives, begetting two sons and three daughters, building the finest house on the largest plantation in northern Mississippi, and amassing two fortunes. But the wives and the children do not constitute families, the house he builds is not a home, and the fortunes he makes do not enable him or his children to live above the level of brutehood. In the end, the children have destroyed themselves and burned the house, Sutpen himself has died like an animal, and his only surviving descendant is a part-Negro idiot howling in the wilderness.

Sutpen never does discover that his error is fundamental and moral and not just "a minor tactical mistake." In his attempt to build a home, found a family, and live humanly, Sutpen has completely ignored the one ingredient most essential in these endeavors. Although he has thought and acted very strictly in terms of courage and shrewdness and even justice, he has never once considered the one element, love, without which all his efforts are doomed to failure. He acquires a wife and children, not because he loves them for themselves but because he considers them merely "adjunctive" to the forwarding of his "design." All his actions are selfish and therefore brutish.

The story of the Sutpen family in *Absalom, Absalom!* is closely related to the story of the Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury*. The only person to whom Thomas Sutpen ever confided his family history was old General Compson, who passed the story on to his grandson Quentin Compson, the narrator of the major part of *Absalom, Absalom!* and the same Quentin Compson who, in *The Sound and the Fury*, commits suicide at the end of his freshman year at Harvard. Quentin's narration of the Sutpen story to his Harvard roommate, Shreve McCannon, comes chronologically in the middle of *The Sound and the Fury*, five months before Quentin's death. Although there is no continuity of plot from one novel to the other, their themes are essentially the same. It is the close thematic parallel between the two stories which causes Quentin to be obsessed with the Sutpen story to the extent of narrating it, in the desperate hope that he may eventually understand it. But Quentin, like Sutpen, is never able to discover exactly what Sutpen's mistake had been. If he could have grasped the universal significance of Sutpen's story, Quentin would have been able also to understand and resolve his own personal problem, and he would not then have felt compelled to commit suicide.

Like Sutpen, Quentin has a "design." As one of Sutpen's ambitions had been to found a family free from the taint of Negro blood, so Quentin has from childhood cherished the idea of his sister's purity and has determined to protect her from any moral taint. Both Quentin's and Sutpen's designs, although formulated ostensibly for unselfish motives, are pursued without love or pity or compassion or sacrifice. As Thomas Sutpen had loved neither his wives nor his children but only the *idea* that these wives and children must be of pure white stock, so Quentin Compson is "incapable of love, accepting the fact that he must value not [his sister] but the virginity of which she was custodian." Quentin's major concern, therefore, is not love but merely "some concept of Compson honor."

The central issue in *The Sound and the Fury*, however, is much deeper and more complex than a brother's egocentric obsession with the idea of his sister's

virginity. This novel is concerned not merely with the relationship between Quentin and Caddy but with the lack of love in the whole Compson family. From this novel and from other of Faulkner's writings, one may deduce the idea that the centre of the family is the mother and that she is the primary source of family love. Mrs. Compson, however, is the exact reverse of everything a mother should be. Instead of taking care of her children and giving them the love and understanding which children normally need, Mrs. Compton is constantly whining in order to attract attention to herself. She is so far from what a mother should be that she has developed self-pity and selfishness into a disease. Throughout the thirty years covered by the novel, she is both physically and psychologically an invalid. She not only spends most of her time in bed but uses her self-inflicted illness as a means of gaining attention from others and as an excuse for upbraiding and annoying all the members of her household.

As a result of this lack of love at its centre, the Compson family disintegrates. Quentin attempts to be a substitute mother to Caddy, but his feeling toward her is not spiritual love but a perverted and thinly disguised selfishness. Jason, instead of loving his sister as a brother should, is constantly blackmailing her for his personal gain. Caddy, thus deprived of family affection, seeks a substitute in the animal urges of the local town boys. When her actions result in the birth of an illegitimate daughter, Caddy does not attempt to perform as best she can the duties of a mother but abandons her child to the same household which had been the cause of her own ruin, while she herself makes a profession of being a free-lance mistress to the various men interested in her physical attractions. Quentin commits suicide. Mr. Compson drinks himself into an early grave. The illegitimate daughter runs away with a "pitchman who was already under sentence for bigamy." When Mrs. Compson dies, Jason commits his idiot brother to that loveless and marriageless institution, an insane asylum, cuts up the family house into apartments, and sells it for use as a boarding house, another loveless and marriageless institution. Having now "freed" himself from "the rotting family" and the "rotting house", Jason does not marry and start a family and a home of his own. Instead, he moves into "a pair of offices up a flight of stairs above the supply store containing his cotton ledgers and samples" and procures not a wife but a semi-private prostitute on a part-time basis. In Jason's life, there will be no marriage, no children, no home, and no love. In short, there will be nothing to distinguish Jason's life from that of animals. Thus, the Compson family, like the Sutpen family, ends in a state of brutehood.

In *Light in August*, Faulkner portrays the fragments of several broken families which have disintegrated or failed to cohere because of lack of love. Lena Grove

is an orphan who, because she felt unwanted in the household of her sister and her brother-in-law, sought love in an illicit affair with a boy who later fled when he learned of her pregnancy. Joe Christmas is an illegitimate child whose grandfather left him on the steps of a foundling home; later Joe is adopted by a harsh Presbyterian Scotsman who can have no children and who knows nothing about love but is obsessed with the idea of justice. Miss Burden is an old maid who lives alone, the last survivor of a family whose male members have been motivated by hatred and selfishness which they have deceived themselves into believing is love and self-sacrifice. The Reverend Gail Hightower, whose mother died when he was eight years old, is a childless widower and ousted minister who has never loved either his wife or the church but has used both marriage and the ministry as a selfish means of living in the town which he has romantically associated with his grandfather. His selfishness causes the destruction of his family, the death of his wife, and his own rejection by both the congregation of his church and the members of the community in which he lives. Only in the last few hours of his life does Hightower make the sacrifice of performing unselfish acts because of love for other people.

In the trilogy composed of *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*, Faulkner portrays the Snopes family. Although there are several variations and a few exceptions within the type, the distinguishing characteristics of the Snopeses are their greed for money and their complete lack of love for each other or for anybody else. They will suffer almost any insult or ignominy to achieve material gain. Ab Snopes, instead of being loyal to either side during the Civil War, steals and sells horses indiscriminately. I. O. Snopes causes his mules to be killed on the railroad in order to collect damages. For a price (part of which is the Old Frenchman's Place), Flem Snopes marries his employer's pregnant daughter and accepts her illegitimate child as his own. At the end of *The Hamlet*, Flem has tricked V. K. Ratliff and Henry Armstid into buying from him the Old Frenchman's Place, in the belief that the land contains buried treasure, and Armstid goes insane while furiously digging in the soil for the money which exists only in his deranged imagination.

Flem has now squeezed all the material gain he can get out of the little "hamlet" of Frenchman's Bend and is now ready to move on to bigger gains in the nearby "town" of Jefferson. As he and Eula and her daughter depart, they have the appearance of a family. But they do not constitute a family, for Flem is not only not the father of the illegitimate daughter: he is incapable of being either a father or a husband. The oft-repeated implication is that Flem is incapacitated by both sterility and impotence, two physical handicaps which, according to Faulkner, often accompany spiritual deficiency and the inability to love.

In *The Town*, Flem rises to economic prominence and power by capitalizing upon the illicit love affair between his wife and a local politician. It is through this trafficking upon his wife's affections that Flem acquires the largest house in Jefferson. As is true in the Sutpen story, however, a large house does not constitute a home. At the end of *The Town*, Eula kills herself because of lack of love. When Ratliff remarks, "Maybe she was bored", Gavin Stevens, one of the men who had failed Eula in love, replies: "Yes, she was bored. She loved, had a capacity to love, for love, to give and accept love. Only she tried twice and failed twice to find somebody not just strong enough to deserve, earn it, match it, but even brave enough to accept. Yes, of course she was bored."

In *The Mansion*, Flem continues living in the great house, sometimes accompanied by his wife's illegitimate daughter, who cares as little for him as he does for her. There, in the evenings, she sits alone in one room while he sits alone in another room, doing nothing but going through the mechanical motion of chewing. He no longer chews tobacco or even gum; he merely chews on "a little ball of air." There he is sitting, staring vacantly into space and chewing on nothing, when his cousin Mink Snopes returns, after thirty-eight years in the state prison, to kill him. When Mink enters the room, carrying in his hand a cheap revolver, Flem does not even bother to defend himself or try to escape. He merely turns around in his chair, momentarily stops chewing, and watches indifferently while Mink cocks the revolver, snaps it without firing, and laboriously cocks it again for another try. Before the hammer falls the second time, Flem has again begun the ineffectual motion of chewing nothing.

To describe Flem's condition when he is killed at the conclusion of *The Mansion*, one can do no better than repeat Gavin Stevens' remark following Eula's suicide at the end of *The Town*: "Bored. Of course [he] was bored." And his boredom, like hers, had resulted from the lack of love. But Flem's predicament had been, in at least one respect, even worse than Eula's. Although she had not found anybody strong enough to deserve or return or even accept her love, she had had a capacity to give and to accept love. But Flem had been spiritually, as well as physically, impotent: he had been incapable either of giving or of receiving love.

The family which the reviewers and the scholars often consider the diametrical opposite of the Snopeses is that of the Sartoris. They are commonly thought to embody Faulkner's personal sentiments and ideals because Colonel John Sartoris is modeled on Faulkner's grandfather and his grandson Bayard is modeled to some extent on William Faulkner and/or his brother John. Most of the Sartoris men, however, are guilty of the same crime as the Snopeses—selfishness. The difference is

that the Sartoris selfishness has a bent for bravado rather than materialism. Through their extreme daring and exhibitionism, they endeavor to achieve a reputation for being heroic. However, since the two most fundamental elements of heroism are discretion and the willingness to sacrifice selfish interests, the Sartoris men generally are not truly heroic: they are merely foolhardy individuals intoxicated with their own egotism. Through their foolish pursuit of self-interest, the Sartorises (like the Snopeses) bring destruction to themselves, misery to their families, and misfortune to all others with whom they are associated.

Faulkner's nearest approach to a personification of complete depravity and absolute lovelessness is the characterization of Popeye in *Sanctuary*. As a piece of mechanism, Popeye is nearly perfect, but he is completely incapable not only of love, but even of sex. He violates Temple Drake with a corn cob, kills the harmless idiot who is trying to protect her, has an innocent man convicted for these crimes, abducts Temple into a house of prostitution and debauches her, procures for her a lover in order to watch them perform the sexual act, and later kills the lover. When finally sentenced to die—not for any of these crimes but for another crime which he did not commit—Popeye is so disgusted and bored with his loveless existence that, like Flem Snopes, he goes to his death without making any defence.

When this life of crime is nearing its end, we learn the cause of Popeye's depravity: there was no love at his begetting. His father was a man completely devoid of principle or scruple. A professional strike-breaker, he would "ride with one as soon as another", and he would also "just as soon be married to one as another, the same way." Popeye's mother was the daughter of the keeper of a boarding house, a recurrent Faulknerian symbol of lovelessness. Popeye was conceived out of wedlock, and the father deserted the mother before the child was born. By the time Popeye was five, he was "already a kind of day pupil at an institution." When a wealthy lady attempted to show him some affection by buying him a new suit and giving a children's party for him, Popeye repaid her kindness by killing her two pet birds. They were "lovebirds", and he cut them up alive with a pair of scissors. Three months later, he cut up a kitten in the same manner and was sent to a home for incorrigible children. Thus began the paltry, puny life of Popeye, who, because of lack of love, could "never be a man, properly speaking."

If there is one idea which Faulkner may be said to adhere to consistently above all others, it is this: without love, no one can ever be a human being, properly speaking. With Faulkner, the opposite of love is not hate: it is *doom*, a key-word which appears frequently throughout his writings. In the remark already quoted from "The Stockholm Address", he says that any story lacking the old universal truths—

love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice—is ephemeral and *doomed*. He even uses “Doom” as a nickname for Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw Indian who, through murder and cunning, became chief of his tribe, seized the tribal lands as his personal property, and then sold, bartered, gambled away, and otherwise “dispossessed” himself of the tribal “birthright” (the *homeland*), knowing that he did not personally own it but being “ruthless enough to pretend that it had been his to convey.” Foreseeing the destructive consequences of his actions, Ikkemotubbe, “himself a man of wit and imagination as well as a shrewd judge of character, including his own”, nicknamed himself Doom. For doom, Faulkner implies, is the certain fate of any man who, ignoring love, pursues selfish ends. In Faulkner’s writings, the lovers are never losers, and the non-lovers are always losers—even when they win.

At the conclusion of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve McCannon makes to Quentin Compson the following prophecy concerning Thomas Sutpen’s only surviving heir, the part-Negro Jim Bond, who had taken refuge in the wilderness and could be heard howling there at night like an animal:

Do you want to know what I think? . . . I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won’t quite be 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 Jim Bond.

In this prophecy, Shreve may appear to be stating only the idea that the Negroes and the whites will eventually fuse into one race. But through and behind Shreve’s words, Faulkner is suggesting a much more profound thought and a far less pleasing prospect. Faulkner is prophesying that Western man—if he does not re-learn the old verities (especially love and pity and compassion and sacrifice)—is doomed to return ultimately to the state of brutehood. Whether the survivors are black or white or mixed will really make no significant difference: that which they call Jim Bond, by any other name, will howl the same.