THE SOUTH IN FAULKNER'S NOVELS:
MYTH AND HISTORY

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MYTH AND HISTORY

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CHAPTER I

THE CRITICS ON FAULKNER'S USE OF HISTORY

Southern "history" is a mixture of fact and fiction. Historical truth and romantic myth about the South and its people are so intermingled that historians have found it difficult to separate the two. There are myths which picture the frontier as a wilderness paradise inhabited by noble savages and American Adams. Moreover, for over a hundred years, Americans living in both the South and the North have cherished a picture of the Old South as the Golden Age of American history. According to the myth, the Old South was a land of expansive and magnificent plantations, large enough for illimitable fields of white cotton. Southern gentlemen and ladies lived a leisurely life in stately white, Grecian-styled homes, surrounded by opulent gardens always in bloom. Scores of contented, well-cared-for Negro slaves worked in the fields during the day and sang and danced in the evening. Everyone was happy--the old planter, the young cavalier, the plantation beauty, house servants, and field slaves.  

remote backwoods areas were a few "po" white trash families, who refused to work and spent most of their time in drinking and idleness. The myth establishes a picture of a tri-partite Southern society—aristocrat, poor white, and slave. Recent historians, such as Frank Owsley and Clement Eaton, have proven through extensive research that Southern society before the war was far more complex than popular tradition has asserted. It is apparent that some truths have been omitted, such as the presence of a mass of yeoman farmers and townspeople and the continual threat of slave runaways or rebellions, since not all slaves were happy. Furthermore, the tradition has exaggerated certain features of the old life which were attractive but which existed only in very limited areas and not throughout the whole South, as the myth indicates. Yet, many Americans have been reluctant to discard customary beliefs even when historical evidence points to their falsity.

Such a mixture of myth and history has been the basis for hundreds of novels, beginning in 1835 with John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow*

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2 Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Chicago, 1949).


4 Gaines, p. 143.

5 Ibid., pp. 143-144.
Barn. 6 Set in Virginia, the novel provides a picture of the aristocracy of the Old South and their way of life. There is the huge estate, Swallow Barn, with its magnificent mansion, "an aristocratical old edifice." 7 Frank Meriwether is the country gentleman--cheerful, easy-tempered, portly, contemplative, generous, and benign. There are also the young cavalier, Ned Hazard; the beautiful belle, Belle Tracy; and a multitude of grateful and happy slaves, such as Carey, the Negro minstrel, and Lucy, the old mammy. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, written in protest against the Southern system of slavery, makes use of the plantation myth. The South as it is pictured in this novel is still a land of huge plantations. There are benevolent masters like St. Clare, who is a bit too careless and kindly. There are lovely ladies like Marie St. Clare and kindly mistresses like Mrs. Shelby. Aunt Chloe is the typical faithful mammy and Uncle Tom the trustworthy slave who is truly concerned about his master's welfare. These traditional elements are mingled with tearful scenes of slave families separated by sales and scenes of white cruelty, dealt out by such men as Simon Legree.

6 Ibid., p. 18.

7 John Pendleton Kennedy, Swallow Barn (New York, 1906), p. 27.
Since 1870, many novelists from both North and South have looked longingly back to the golden days before the Civil War and to the heroic actions of those who fought in the war which destroyed that idyllic life. In many cases, Southern life has been even more idealized than it was before the war. The scale of life has been exaggerated so that mansions are larger, gentlemen more perfect, ladies more beautiful, slaves more devoted, parties more elaborate, and dress more colorful.  

Joel Chandler Harris, in *Uncle Remus*, uses the traditional Negro storyteller with all his humor and homely wisdom to give a picture of plantation life. In *In Ole Virginia*, Thomas Nelson Page emphasizes the splendid and joyful life and the cordial relations between the races in the Old South.  

Margaret Mitchell uses the tradition in *Gone With the Wind* to paint an idyllic view of the South before the War and to point up the heroism of Southerners during the War.

Though every novelist who writes about the South must take into account the strange mixture of Southern history and myth which has become popular legend, he may accept that tradition as it has been expounded in the past, or he may seek to reorder or re-examine the facts in order to create his own "myth" of the South. The most important contemporary novelist of the South, William Faulkner, has created his own myth out of the tradition and the historical facts of his

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8 Gaines, p. 64.  
9 Ibid., pp. 74-75.
region. His Yoknapatawpha County may be viewed as a picture of the South in general; Yoknapatawpha's history and myths seem almost identical with those of all the South. An examination of Faulkner's novels about Yoknapatawpha can, therefore, reveal much about Faulkner's use of history and his attitude toward the whole South.

Faulkner scholars have attempted to explain his use of Southern history in several ways. John B. Cullen sees Jefferson as "Oxford transmuted." He picks out actual events, people, and places which Faulkner uses for his novels. For example, Cullen states that Faulkner hunted for years in the Mississippi Delta region when it was virtually a wilderness. His hunting stories are based on stories he heard at camp. Old Ben, the extraordinary bear of Go Down, Moses, is based on tales he heard about Old Reel Foot. Lion, the fierce dog used to capture Old Ben, is modelled upon an unusually large dog used in the hunts for several years. V. K. Ratliffe (originally called Suratt by Faulkner) is probably modelled upon June Suratt, a sewing machine salesman known for his joking and sharp trading. Joe Christmas, the Negro murderer in Light in August, is based on the real Nelse Patton,

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12 Ibid., pp. 73-74.
who murdered Mrs. Mattie McMillan with a razor. But, according to Cullen, Faulkner allows his imagination to work upon the facts so that the actual is changed to fit his fictional world. For example, the statue of a Confederate soldier which Faulkner located in Jefferson's square actually stands on the campus of the University of Mississippi. Benjy Compson, the idiot of The Sound and the Fury, is based on a doctor's son whose mind never developed. The actual man, however, was not castrated, and his sisters, unlike Caddy Compson, were all ladies. His younger brother, who was in the hardware business, played around but never married. The Snopeses are exaggerations; they are composites of all the worst traits of the people Faulkner knew. By example after example, Cullen points out the details of Lafayette County history which Faulkner has used in his stories about Yoknapatawpha County.

Ward L. Miner takes an approach which is similar to that of Cullen but broader. Miner gives a geographical description of Lafayette County, the prototype for Yoknapatawpha County, then gives an account of Jefferson's history from its settling by the Indians around the year

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13 Ibid., pp. 89-93.  
14 Ibid., p. 65.  
15 Ibid., pp. 79-80.  
16 Ibid., p. 99.  
1540 to recent days. These geographical details and historical events are paralleled and contrasted with Faulkner's legend. But Miner feels that Faulkner relies heavily on the oral history of his region. Faulkner's account is more real than actuality because it is true to the spirit of the people, if not true in fact. Furthermore, Miner points out that Faulkner's view of Southern history involves a sense of moral values. For Faulkner, there is a flaw in the origin of Yoknapatawpha County; early settlers attempted to evaluate nature and their fellow men in terms of money value so that materialistic interests became more important than the planter's code of justice and honor. The South lost the Civil War because it was morally weak.

George Marion O'Donnell sees Faulkner as "a traditional man in a modern South" which is anti-traditional. According to O'Donnell, Faulkner's novels are a series of myths built around a conflict between the old customs and moral values and the anti-traditional, amoral modern world, whose spokesmen act only out of self-interest. This clash may be defined as a Sartoris-Snopes conflict, although the actual names may vary from novel to novel. In *The Unvanquished*, for example,

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18 Ibid., pp. 110-111.
19 Ibid., pp. 133-134.
21 Ibid., p. 23.
Miss Rosa Millard, who represents the traditional or Sartoris element, opposes Ab Snopes. In this struggle, Miss Rosa loses when she is murdered, but her death is revenged by her grandson, Bayard Sartoris. Furthermore, the Snopeses become essentially allies of the invading Northern armies against whom the Sartorises (and all Southern gentlemen) are fighting. In *Sartoris*, the conflict is between young Bayard Sartoris and the Snopeses in the 1920's. Bayard is aware of his family tradition of violent death in noble action, but, because he lives in a "Snopes world" and fights in a "Snopes war" (World War I) rather than a war in which individual heroism is possible, he feels cheated and reacts with meaningless violence and a recklessness which eventually brings his death in an airplane he knows will crash. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin Compson represents the remnant of the traditional, Sartoris world. Jason Compson has abandoned his heritage for the values of Snopesism. The rest of the Compsons seek to escape reality—Mr. Compson in philosophy, Mrs. Compson in drugs, Uncle Maury in drink, and Benjy in his idiocy.

Malcolm Cowley, like O'Donnell, believes that Faulkner sees the Old South as essentially more moral than the New South. Cowley

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22 Ibid., pp. 23-26.

interprets Faulkner's work as a legend of the South. The Old South was settled by aristocrats like the Sartorises and by new men like Thomas Sutpen who sought to establish a permanent social order to pass to their sons. The planters' code was virtuous in many ways, but the whole system rested on slavery, which was a curse upon the Old Order. In part, as a result of this flaw, the Civil War was fought and lost. After the Civil War, the old aristocrats first had to fight Northern carpet-baggers and then former Southern landless whites, represented in Faulkner's novels by the Snopes clan, who corrupted the South. Contemporary Southern society in Faulkner's novels is marked by moral confusion and social decay. The descendants of the aristocrats of the Old Order seek defeat or death, lose their nerve, or succumb to the values of Snopesism. For Cowley, Faulkner is essentially "an epic or bardic poet in prose, a creator of myths that he weaves together into a legend of the South."  

Robert Penn Warren expands on the work done by O'Donnell and Cowley. For Warren, the "legend" that Faulkner has created is more than a saga of the South; it is a picture of our own general problem. "Moral confusion" is not confined to the South but is a

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24 Ibid., pp. 102-105.  
common problem. The Old Order was cursed by slavery, but it did allow the traditional gentleman to set up codes and concepts of virtue which gave him a chance to be human. The new order is a world without human values, a victim of mechanism.  

William Van O'Connor criticizes the approach taken by O'Donnell, Cowley, and Warren. O'Connor feels that neither the Snopes versus Sartoris formula nor the traditional past versus the amoral present formula works. He finds two major problems in the Cowley-O'Donnell-Warren thesis. First, no novel shows the representatives of the Old Order trying to set up a moral order. Sutpen's only interest, for example, is to establish himself financially and leave an heir. Second, there are no significant carpetbaggers in any of Faulkner's novels against which the old aristocrats must fight. The Snopes clan does not develop its exploiting talents until the twentieth century. Furthermore, some of the landless whites in Faulkner's novels are among his most moral and admirable characters. According to O'Connor, Faulkner did not begin writing with a scheme of history worked out. His attitude toward the Old South varies from novel to novel. In Sartoris, he defends the South; his attitude is generally romantic, and he is preoccupied with the bravery and gallantry of the

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27 Ibid., pp. 112-113.

South's defenders. In *The Unvanquished*, Faulkner becomes more and more critical of the South; he grows aware that bravery may become rash heroics and honor an excuse for violence.  

In *Absalom, Absalom*, Faulkner uses Sutpen to represent "the essence of the history of the South." Many lives, both black and white, are destroyed by the inability of the white aristocracy "to break through the terrible taboo that separates black from white."  

Melvin Backman also disagrees with O'Donnell's thesis that Faulkner's novels are centered around a Sartoris-Snopes conflict. Such a division, Backman believes, is too clear-cut. It ignores Sutpen and his kind, the new rich, self-made aristocrat who ruled the South. Actually, all the founders of the ruling clans of Yoknapatawpha, except Sartoris, were "new men" and not of aristocratic origin. They were men "on the make," a violent generation caught up in ambition and self-interest. These men made themselves a part of the privileged aristocracy. They ruled the South and they should be assigned responsibility for its fall. Furthermore, the Sartoris-Snopes division does

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not take into account the great majority of the people of the Old South, who were farmers and neither planters nor poor whites.

Warren Beck rejects the idea that Faulkner idealizes the Old South. According to Beck, Faulkner's work suggests that the sin of slavery was so great that only the complete destruction of society built on that institution and a return to primitivism could expiate that sin. So unjust was the aristocracy of the Old South that the only legacy it could leave its descendants was degeneration, disillusionment, and ruthlessness. The history of the South is a tragic story of deterioration from John Sartoris to Thomas Sutpen to the Post-bellum Sartorises to the Compsons to the Snopeses to Jim Bond. The pattern of Southern history is degeneration.

Charles H. Nilon states that Faulkner's novels articulate the idea that one can understand the present through a knowledge of the past and that present evils grow from past evils. There are two significant evils from the past which continue to beset the present: (1) the desire of some to own and possess the land, which God intended all men to

34 Ibid., p. 597.
36 Ibid., pp. 91-94.
share, and (2) the exploitation of the Negro to work the land so that the white aristocracy might live in wealth and ease. The two evils play an active role in the destruction of the Indians, the decline of the aristocrats, and the prospering and decline of the Snopeses, but the Negro endured. Finally, Nilon points out that Faulkner believes the South is aware of these evils, although it has been powerless to correct them, but the South must and will rid itself of them. 38

Irving Howe 39 sees Faulkner's novels as a reflection of the experience of a people provoked into a war which they fought heroically and lost. They lived in squalor, misery, and hopelessness after the war and finally lost power to a new breed of men. 40 Howe says that Faulkner pictures the decay of the South through the disintegration of families or clans. The Yoknapatawpha cycle is a chronicle of the rise and fall of families, each representing a particular pattern of conduct. The response that each clan makes to modern life represents one of several possible courses that descendants of the Southern aristocracy could make after the Civil War. The Sartorises represent a tendency to recklessness and self-destruction. The Compsons exhibit extreme disintegration. Isaac McCaslin seeks expiation for the evils of his

38 Ibid., pp. 1-4.
40 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
ancestors. In his feeling about the South, says Howe, Faulkner displays almost every conceivable attitude. At times, he seems to accept the Southern myth; at other times, he attempts to test it; and sometimes he even opposes it. His work displays a tension between pride in the Southern tradition, which he admires, and repugnance at the memory of slavery, which he denounces. Generally, his novels move away from the romanticism of Bayard Sartoris in The Unvanquished to a more realistic attitude toward the evils of the Old Order as seen by Isaac McCaslin in Go Down, Moses or the negative approach to the Old Order seen in the portrayal of Thomas Sutpen in Absalom. Absalom. Actually, according to Howe, Faulkner sees the aristocrat of the Old South as a combination of Sartoris courage, tradition, and chivalry and Sutpen will, energy, and ruthlessness.

Peter Swiggart sees Faulkner tracing the fall of the South to a psychological rather than a moral flaw. The psychological flaw of the South was a Puritan inclination to pit reason against natural impulse. Swiggart associates Puritanism with the use of reason and an inclination

41 Ibid., pp. 8-9.  
42 Ibid., pp. 32-33.  
43 Ibid., p. 74.  
to social action. Primitivism is associated with freedom from Puritan rationality and social involvement. Faulkner dramatizes the conflict between Puritanism and primitivism by the use of contrasting character types. Characters like Quentin Compson or Joe Christmas, who represent Puritanistic tendencies, are contrasted with primitive types: idiots, women, and children. The Puritan characters usually are destroyed because they are motivated by "socially-oriented ideals which have become corrupted by personal will and prove disastrous."\(^{46}\)

Most of the critical work done to date has approached Faulkner's use of Southern history and myth by attempting to outline a broad pattern of history extending from the Old Order, which Faulkner both admired and denounced, to the modern South, characterized by mechanism and decay. Some critics believe Faulkner views Southern history in terms of a series of conflicts or contrasts: Sartoris versus Snopes, traditional versus antitraditional, and Puritan reason versus primitive impulse.

The purpose of this paper is to view Faulkner's use of history from a different perspective by examining in detail the myths and historical facts with which Faulkner dealt. First, several of the prevailing myths about the Old South and the Civil War will be examined. Second, the actual historical facts will be compared and contrasted with

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\(^{46}\) Ibid., pp. 16-17.
legendary tradition. Third, and most important, several of Faulkner's works will be examined to show how he uses both the myths and historical facts to create his own "legend" of the South. Finally, Faulkner's view of the New South will be examined. Faulkner seems to feel that adherence to certain aspects of the Old Order and obsessions with past glories have affected the descendants of the Old Order negatively. Several descendants of the old aristocracy in Faulkner's novels will be examined to discover how they have been affected by the Old Order.

Chapter II will deal with certain myths about the wilderness: (1) the "noble savage" ideal, (2) the "ferocious savage," (3) the ennobling effect of nature upon those in close relation to it. Chapter III will deal with several myths about the white society of the Old South, such as the aristocratic, country gentlemen, the gracious and charming ladies, and the tri-partite structure of the Old South with its non-existent middle class and shiftless poor whites. Chapter IV will deal with the legend of the "Lost Cause" and the effects, as Faulkner sees them, of the Old Order and the tradition of the "Lost Cause" on the descendants of the old aristocracy. Chapter V will be concerned with customary beliefs about the Negro in the Old South and with the effect of the past, both fiction and actuality, on the Negro in the twentieth century.
The following editions of Faulkner's works have been used for the purposes of this paper: the Chatto and Windus edition of *The Unvanquished*; the Random House editions of *Sartoris*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *Collected Stories of William Faulkner*; and Modern Library editions of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom*, and *Intruder in the Dust*.

Finally, several books have been particularly useful in studying the myth and history of the South. Albert Keiser's *The Indian in American Literature* traces the portrayal of the Indian as noble savage and ferocious warrior in American literature. Lucy Hazard's *The Frontier in American Literature* has several chapters dealing with the Southern frontier and romanticism and with the hunter and trapper in American literature. Francis Pendleton Gaines' *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition* deals with some of the myths about the Old South's gracious plantation life and the Negro, as seen in literature about the South, and contrasts these myths with actual historical fact. Shields McIlwaine, in *The Southern Poor White, From Lubberland to Tobacco Road*, discusses the uses of the poor white in American literature, beginning with William

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Byrd's "History of the Dividing Line." Robert A. Lively, in Fiction Fights the Civil War, discusses the use of the legend of the Old South and the Civil War by both Northern and Southern novelists, showing general trends in attitude toward the material used. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy are editors of Images of the Negro in American Literature, which traces the portrayal of the Negro in American literature from colonial times to the twentieth century.

In the field of Southern history, W. J. Cash's The Mind of the South is one of the most important books. It traces certain elements of Southern culture, such as romantic idealism and a tendency to violence, from colonial times to the twentieth century. William R. Taylor's Cavalier and Yankee discusses the development of the view that there is a division in American culture and society caused by early patterns of settlement. According to the tradition, the North was settled by Roundheads and the South by Cavaliers. Hence, the North developed a leveling, utilitarian society, and the South developed a society based on

49 Shields McIlwaine, The Southern Poor White, From Lubberland to Tobacco Road (Norman, Oklahoma, 1939).

50 Robert A. Lively, Fiction Fights the Civil War (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1957).

51 Seymour Gross and John Edward Hardy, Images of the Negro in American Literature (Chicago, 1966).

the English country gentleman ideal. Rollin G. Osterweis, in *Romanticism and Nationalism in the Old South*, discusses the "cult of chivalry," a major aspect of the romantic movement in the South, and its relationship to Southern nationalism.  

Frank L. Owsley, in *The Plain Folk of the Old South*, uses carefully detailed evidence from ante-bellum records to disprove the theory that the Old South was a society composed of only three classes—planters, poor whites, and slaves. He discusses the significance of the yeoman farmers, who made up the bulk of Southern society. In *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South*, Carl Bridenbaugh develops the thesis that there was no conscious South before 1776 but several "souths." His chapters on the "Chesapeake society" and the "Carolina society" elucidate some of the historical truths behind the myths about the glamour of Southern plantation life. The chapter on the "backcountry" is helpful for explaining conditions in the Southern wilderness.  

Clement Eaton, in *The Growth of Southern Civilization*, discusses the complex social structure and thought of the South from 1790 to 1860, examining such elements as the country gentleman ideal, the problems

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of the slave system, the creoles, the middle class, and town life.

Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* analyzes the institution of slavery as it existed in the Old South, disproving the "happy Negro" myth of Southern tradition.\(^{55}\) Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society are particularly helpful for information on the culture of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians, who inhabited Mississippi in its early days.

CHAPTER II

THE AMERICAN EDEN

One of the dreams of Western man, long before the discovery of America, was the idea of a lost paradise, a Golden Age in which there were peace and abundance without toil. With the discovery of a New World, many Europeans felt that their yearnings could now become a reality. Out of the hope for an Eden-like existence in a new land, still un tarnished by the restlessness and greed of "civilized" men, came myths about those who lived in this wilderness paradise: the "noble savage," the "ferocious savage," and the "American Adam."

As the "noble savage," the American Indian was the ideal "child of nature," simple and virtuous, whose lack of shame at his nakedness indicated that he had not been tainted by original sin as Europeans had been. This ideal Indian became a part of the tradition early in American literary history. His first appearance in poetic form came in the work of Philip Freneau. In "The American Village," for

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2 Ibid., p. 192.

example, before the white man "Conspir'd to rob them of their native soil," the Indians were blessed with freedom and characterized by a "gen'rous soul [which] inspir'd the honest breast." According to "The Pictures of Columbus," America was a land of "sweet sylvan scenes of innocence and ease" before Europeans invaded it. There were no tyrants to "enact hard laws to crush freedom" and "No gloomy jails to shut up wretched men." In this peaceful land was perfect freedom where only God and nature reigned. So, the Indians lived a happy peaceful, rural life before the invaders came, but the white man's arrival meant the end of that blissful life.

The French-American Crèvecœur sometimes idealizes the American native in his Letters from an American Farmer and in Voyage Dans la Haute Pennsylvanie et dans l'état de New York. Included in this book about his travels in Pennsylvania and New York are a number of fanciful narratives about the Indians of that area. Among them is a sketch of a venerable old Indian, Agouehghon, who lives a solitary life in the wilderness after the death of his wife and children. This old warrior recalls happier days when he was "strong

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5 Ibid.
and vigorous, brave and daring, chief of a great tribe, and renowned among the Nishynorbay nations." 7 Letters from an American Farmer ends with Crèvecoeur's resolve to go with his family to live with the Indians who "live without care, sleep without inquietude, take life as it comes, bearing all its asperities with unparallelled patience, and die without any kind of apprehension for what they have done, or for what they expect to meet with hereafter. . . . They most certainly are much more closely connected with nature than we are; they are her immediate children, the inhabitants of the woods are her undefiled offspring." 8

But perhaps the most important "noble savage" in literature is James Fenimore Cooper's Chingachgook, the Delaware chief of the Leatherstocking Saga. In his prime, he is a tall and stalwart warrior with a broad, muscular chest, "full-formed limbs, and a grave countenance." 9 He is extraordinarily brave, ready when only a young warrior to slip into a Huron camp to rescue his woman. 10 Yet his


10 James Fenimore Cooper, The Deerslayer (New York, 1912), pp. 283-293.
courage is balanced by his caution; he is not quick to take unnecessary
risks. Other indications of his superior manhood are his great
cunning, his astounding skill in the woods, and his remarkably accurate
aim with either rifle or bow and arrow. He is unceasingly loyal to his
friends, never deserting a comrade who needs him, regardless of the
danger involved. This unique man is the last of an old and honorable
nation of Indians, which has been destroyed by the crafty and ignoble
Hurons and an advancing white civilization. Chingachgook himself is
affected by contact with white culture. To the invaders he loses his
birthright, the land of his fathers. He watches the destruction of the
wilderness, symbolized by the cutting down of the forest in The
Pioneers, and the growth of towns on the hunting grounds which his
tribe once owned. In The Pioneers, Chingachgook, now called Indian
John after his conversion to Christianity, is no longer noble but is a
comic, drunken old Indian who has compromised with civilized
society by accepting its religion and drinking its whiskey. But at his
death in the forest fire, Chingachgook renounces Christianity and
returns to the old ways of his forefathers, looking forward to going to
the happy hunting ground to which his ancestors have gone. His final
request is for an Indian burial with his bow, tomahawk, and pipe

11 Ibid., pp. 335-336.
12 Ibid., p. 352.
The death of Chingachgook marks the end of a noble race and a way of life, just as the fire is the end of the wilderness.

A second Indian type which has become important in American literature is the "ferocious savage," who is treacherous, cruel, and fiendish. He is a man who can never be trusted, whose intentions are always dishonorable. He is really more an animal than he is a man. Even Crèvecœur, who idealizes the Indian of the woods as a child of nature, makes reference to less noble Indians who torture prisoners and engage in drunken and "cannibalistic orgies." Cooper employs this ignoble savage as a contrast to his ideal, Chingachgook and his Delaware tribesmen—the honorable Delaware versus the treacherous, cruel, and fiendish Huron (or Mingo). In The Deerslayer, the Hurons, led by Rivenoak, scalp one man while he is still alive and leave him to die a slow, agonizing death. In another scene they torture Leatherstocking by tormenting him with tomahawks, knives, and rifles. Magua, of The Last of the Mohicans, is even worse than Rivenoak. In a fit of anger he murders a white infant before its mother's eyes by

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14 Crèvecœur, Eighteenth Century Travels in Pennsylvania and New York, p. 73.

15 Cooper, The Deerslayer, p. 364.

16 Ibid., pp. 515-527.
dashing its head against a rock, then sinks his tomahawk into the mother's skull. 17 Robert Montgomery Bird's Wenonga of *Nick of the Woods* is as perverse as Magua. "Me kill all white-man! Me Wenonga: me drink white man blood! me no heart!" 18 he boasts, as he and his tribesmen taunt and torture their white captives.

Closely associated with the "noble savage" ideal is the myth of the "American Adam," the white frontiersman who might be called the heroic innocent in buckskin. He is a solitary kinless man, who seems to have sprung from nowhere, living alone in a wilderness so vast that it seems boundless. To be free and happy, he must always stay ahead of advancing civilized society. A resourceful and skilled woodsman, able to deal with any situation, he must rely on his own judgment and skill in order to survive. Morally, he is the superior of any man—honest, faithful, dependable, humble—an Adam before the Fall, living in his Garden of Eden. 19

Again, Cooper supplies us with the best example of this mythological character type in the figure of Natty Bumppo (known also as Deerslayer, Hawkeye, Pathfinder, and Leatherstocking). White-born, 

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17 Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, pp. 207-208.


but reared and "educated" among the Delawares, Bumppo is enough removed from both races to be an objective observer of each. He can see worth in any man, regardless of color, but is aware that men possess differing gifts which he calls 'red men's gifts and white men's gifts.'

Unmarried and kinless, Natty is free to follow the wilderness as advancing civilization pushes him further and further westward. He has no desire to own property but believes that the woods and wild animals are intended for all men to use wisely and not wastefully.

As a hunter, Natty is unbelievably skillful; he has a keen eye and an aim so accurate that he can shoot off a turkey's head from a hundred yards away or kill a pigeon on the wing or a loon as it dives for a fish.

He is wise in the ways of the woods and in his judgment of men, but his wisdom is intuitive rather than intellectual, for he is illiterate. Natty is not only a magnificent hunter but also a fearless warrior, when making war is necessary; he never kills another man unnecessarily or unfairly. This attitude is illustrated by his "initiation" experience in The Deerslayer when he kills his first man, an Indian who has attacked him. He waits for his adversary to reload his rifle, not shooting at him because to do so would be to take unfair advantage.

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20 Cooper, The Deerslayer, p. 37.
22 Ibid., pp. 199, 252.
However, when the savage tries again to kill him, Natty is forced to protect himself. The dying Indian "baptizes" Natty with a new name, Hawkeye. Natty's attitude about the killing of other men is set in direct contrast to that of less noble whites, such as Hurry Harry or Hutter of The Deerslayer, who crave killing and hunt for opportunities to get Indian scalps. Natty is the moral superior of men like Harry and Hutter in other ways too; he is always sincere, truthful, honorable, dependable, and humble. But Natty is the last of the noble frontiersmen; his death symbolizes the passing of the frontier. And, although the passing is inevitable, it is viewed with nostalgie regret.

The Mississippi wilderness was far from being a Garden of Eden. The Indians who inhabited this area were generally of the Muskogean family. The two most powerful tribes, at the time that the Cotton Kingdom began to spread into Mississippi, were the Choctaws, who inhabited southeastern and central Mississippi and the Yazoo Delta area, and the Chickasaws, who occupied the area north of the Choctaws. Both of these large and powerful tribes were often at war with one another. Historians differ in analyzing their characteristics. According to

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23 Cooper, The Deerslayer, pp. 107-118.
24 Ibid., pp. 74-79, 96.
Bernard Romans, who visited both tribes in the eighteenth century, "the Chickasaws were a haughty, insolent, fierce, and cruel race, filthy in their discourse, corrupt in their morals, well-made, powerful and lazy, excellent hunters, expert swimmers, and good warriors." 26 The Choctaws were an agricultural people, industrious and peaceful. 27

In his History of the North American Indians, Adair says the Chickasaws were "noble, brave, cheerful and constant," 28 whereas the Choctaws were "libidinous, crafty, fickle, and dishonest." 29 The tribes had differing customs. For example, the Chickasaws buried their dead as soon after death as possible. The dead were buried in a sitting position with all their possessions. 30 The Choctaws placed their dead on platforms and allowed the body to decay. Then the flesh was picked from the bones and buried or burned; the bones were taken to the bone


27 Ibid.


29 Ibid.

30 Harry Warren, "Chickasaw Traditions, Customs, Etc.," Publication of the Mississippi Historical Society, VIII (1904), edited by Franklin L. Riley (Oxford, 1904), 551-552.
house. 31  Despite their differences, both tribes were affected similarly by the spread of the Cotton Kingdom into Mississippi, which began early in the nineteenth century. 32  By 1820, both Chickasaws and Choctaws were farming and grazing cattle, 33 and many owned Negro slaves.

However, around 1830, under the terms of treaties with the Federal Government, most of the Indians were removed west of the Mississippi. The carrying out of the terms of the treaties was mishandled by government agents, so thousands of Indians were actually robbed of their lands and forced to move West. A few Choctaws remained in Mississippi. Most of these Indians lived in poverty as squatters on Federal land. A few well-to-do Choctaws owned land and slaves. 34


32 There was cotton growing in Mississippi as early as 1804. Mississippi became a state in 1817. Largest migrations were in 1819 and from 1830-1837. See Clement Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860 (New York, 1961), pp. 31, 34, 35.

33 Wissler, p. 149.

The white men who flowed into Mississippi were a mixed multitude. First came Indian traders, hunters and trappers. These were followed by herders, farmers, and professionals, not to mention those who fled west, such as debtors or criminals. Certainly, they were not all noble. De Tocqueville's observations of frontiersmen in his travels give us a picture quite different from the ideal "American Adam." According to de Tocqueville, the western pioneer was essentially no different from the city or town dweller (or farmer) on the Eastern coast, since he had only recently come from civilization. He merely carried his civilized ways with him. Frontiersmen were hospitable only because it was necessary to be so on the frontier and not because they were more noble. De Tocqueville saw Americans as a nation of conquerors, interested only in becoming rich. The following character sketch he cites as typical:

[He] is cold, tenacious and relentless in argument; he attaches himself to the ground and snatches from savage life all that can be got out of it. He is in continual contest against it, and daily despoils it of some of its attributes. Bit by bit he carries into the wilds his laws, his habits, and his customs, and if he could, he would introduce everything down to the smallest refinements of advanced civilisation [sic].

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37 Ibid., p. 366.
Certainly, wilderness life was not easy. Work was difficult and sometimes unrewarding; discouraged farmers found it easier to hunt and raise a little corn for subsistence than to labor long hard hours in the field. Life was lonely and sometimes frightening because of isolation. Medical care was difficult to get, and bad health was common. Lawlessness was widespread because it was difficult to enforce any kind of law so far away from heavily-settled areas. Life on the frontier was apt to be more violent than ideal.

William Faulkner's wilderness as he describes it at the beginning of Go Down, Moses is in many ways similar to the wilderness Eden of the old mythology. The woods seem timeless and unchanging; and when Isaac McCaslin is still only a young boy, he is conscious of "the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document." To the child of ten, the woods seem vast and dense and impenetrable; and, once the hunters penetrate this abundant and beautiful wilderness, there is real solitude. Here and there on the edge of the woods are farms and fields, signs of man's puny efforts to gnaw away at the wilderness; but the ancient forest seems too massive, too invincible, to be conquered.

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38 Bridenbaugh, pp. 175-178.
41 Ibid., pp. 177, 193, 194, 202.
So, like Cooper's forest, Faulkner's big woods give a sense of vastness, timelessness, and power and offer a man real solitude away from the noise of civilized life. Like the old paradise, Faulkner's wilderness is a great teacher. Those who live in it learn courage and fear, love, endurance, dignity, pride, and humility. They begin to cherish justice, liberty, and life. In association with the wilderness as teacher, a man is taught to be alert, aware of life and of danger. It is in the woods that the young Ike recognizes fear for the first time, in the smell of the dogs who have scented Old Ben and in the metallic taste of his own saliva. From the little fyce who attacks Old Ben he learns courage.  

"If Sam Fathers had been his mentor and the backyard rabbits and squirrels his kindergarten, then the wilderness the old bear ran was his college and the old male bear itself, so long unwifed and childless as to have become its own ungendered progenitor, was his alma mater."  

But the wilderness is doomed, for civilization is constantly gnawing at its edges. Men like old Carothers McCaslin cut down the forest and attempt to possess the land; the hunting grounds slowly disappear. Civilization is rapacious; men seize the land and say, "It's mine." They cut down the forest to till the land; they waste and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 204, 211.
\end{itemize}
exploit the goodness of nature. The receding forest of "The Bear" and "Delta Autumn" is reminiscent of the disappearing of the forest in Cooper's *The Pioneers*. Roth's killing of the doe in "Delta Autumn" is similar to the wanton killing of the pigeons or the fish-seining episode of *The Pioneers*. It seems significant that Old Ben, as symbol of the forest itself, does not collapse or crumble when he is killed; he falls "as a tree falls." His death foreshadows the cutting down of the forest, the end of the wilderness and the hunt.

But, Faulkner's wilderness is not altogether like that of Cooper. For Faulkner, the forest is almost a living being; it seems to be a palpable, breathing god. Much of the language used to describe the woods suggests that it has human qualities: "profound, sentient, gigantic, and brooding." Through several almost phantom-like animals, which suggest a supernatural presence, this "living" wilderness manifests itself. The Buck appears "walking, tremendous, unhurried... moving with that winged and effortless ease with which deer move... wild and unafraid," and Sam Fathers salutes him, "Oleh, Chief... Grandfather." Only the "initiated," men like

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45 Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*, p. 175.

46 Ibid., p. 184.

47 Ibid.
Sam Fathers, Cass Edmonds, or Ike, can see the buck, who seems to represent the spirit of the wilderness. The Snake is another manifestation of that spirit—"the old one, the ancient and accursed about the earth, fatal and solitary"—a reminder of the beauty and the danger of the wilderness. Finally, there is Old Ben, himself, who "did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling. . . . It didn't walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion as he had watched a fish, a huge old bass, sink back into the dark depths of its pool and vanish without even a movement of its fins."

For Faulkner, the hunt is more than an opportunity to display courage and skill or to kill game for food. It is an annual ritual of purification with old Sam Fathers as priest. It involves a kind of ecstatic communion with nature through which the best qualities of the hunters and the hunted are displayed. It is in the hunt that Ike becomes a man. But the hunt lasts for only two weeks, and then the hunters must return to civilized life. Faulkner's wilderness is, in fact, only a two-week retreat and not a way of life as it had been in Cooper's day. For Cooper, there is still a vast wilderness on west of settled areas; but for Faulkner, writing over a century later, most of the wilderness is already gone. What seemed eventually inevitable for Cooper is a

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48 Ibid., p. 329.  
49 Ibid., p. 209.
fact for Faulkner; so Faulkner views the disappearing wilderness with more nostalgia.

Sam Fathers appears as the "noble savage" in Faulkner's myth. According to Go Down, Moses, he is the son of Chief Ikkemotubbe, so the blood of chiefs runs in his veins. 50 As the last of his race, he is a solitary old man, unmarried and childless. Like Chingachgook, he has lost his birthright, the land of his forefathers, to an advancing and greedy white civilization. His father, old Ikkemotubbe, sold Sam as a slave along with his tribe's land to Carothers McCaslin. Propertyless, Sam has no desire to possess the land but merely to live and hunt on it freely as his ancestors had done. As a hunter, he is extraordinarily skillful in the woods. He knows the habits of wildlife well enough to know that a deer who does not hear the dogs behind him will circle back to his bedding place about sundown, and Sam can indicate the path he will follow. 51 He knows when the buck and Old Ben are near, although no one else can see them. As mentor to Ike, he teaches the boy to shoot (and when not to shoot), to track, to find his way in the wilderness, and to stand quietly waiting. The knowledge he gives to Ike is intuitive, gained from experience, rather than intellectual learning. Because of his close association with the wilderness, Sam possesses many of the


51 Faulkner, Go Down, Moses, pp. 179-180.
character traits traditionally belonging to the ideal Indian; he is brave, stoic, independent, affectionate and loyal. So independent is he that he refuses McCaslin's offer of a wagon or a mule when he leaves for the woods. He prefers to walk. In the wilderness, he relies totally on what he can get for himself from nature. His affectionate loyalty to his friends is no more effectively pointed out than in the scene following Jobaker's death in "The Old People." Jobaker, a full-blooded Chickasaw, has lived alone in the woods; nobody but Sam dares even to approach his cabin:

Then Jobaker died. That is, nobody had seen him in some time. Then one morning Sam was missing, nobody, not even the boy, knew when nor where, until that night when some negroes hunting in the creek bottom saw the sudden burst of flame and approached. It was Jobaker's hut, but before they got anywhere near it, someone shot at them from the shadows beyond it. It was Sam who fired, but nobody ever found Jobaker's grave.

Sam's own death resembles closely that of Chingachgook. Just as Chingachgook's death came in a forest fire which symbolized the end of the wilderness and the Indian hunting grounds, so Sam Father's death comes at the killing of Old Ben, which means the end of the old times and of the hunt which is his way of life. Neither Indian desires to live when it is obvious that he will soon have to exist in a civilized society as white men do. Both request and receive Indian burials, symbolic of

52 Ibid., p. 175.
53 Ibid., p. 172.
their renunciation of white religion and culture and their return to the beliefs of their Indian forefathers.

But, Sam is not in all ways like the "noble savage" of past literature. He is a mixed breed and not a full-blooded Indian. His mother was a quadroon slave woman, purchased by Ikkemotubbe in New Orleans; so the blood of three races runs in Sam Fathers. In earlier literature, some of the most despicable Indians were half-breeds. Because of his mixed blood, he is not tall, proud, agile, sinewy like noble savages before him; he is squat and flabby-looking with hair like a horse's mane. Young Ike remembers "the Indian face above the nigger clothes." Sam Fathers lives most of his life as a Negro in slave huts and not in the wilderness. When he is two, he and his mother are sold to Carothers McCaslin; he grows up in the McCaslin slave quarters. After the Civil War, he remains in the Negro cabins until he goes to the woods when he is past sixty. But, he does not farm acres allotted to him or do field work for wages. He lives with Negroes, dresses and talks like them, goes to their church, but he does not act like a Negro; he lacks the black attitude of servility. But he is forever marked "nigger" by Southern society and is conscious of the former bondage of some of his kin. Sam can never be called a true "child of

54 Ibid., p. 166. 
55 Ibid., p. 173. 
56 Ibid., pp. 166-170.
nature" because most of his life is spent in white society and not in a primitive wilderness.

Finally, Sam Fathers seems more than noble, more than a man. There is a supernatural quality about him just as there is about Old Ben, the buck, and the snake. He is not just another hunter but the priest of a ritual hunt, an annual purification rite kept by the hunters and Old Ben. He does not just live in the wilderness; he is part of the wilderness--untameable and undying:

[Ike] 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 earth but free in earth and not in earth but of 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 their immutable progression and, being myriad, one: and Old Ben too, Old Ben, too; they would give him his paw back: then the long challenge and the long chase, no heart to be driven and outraged, no flesh to be mauled and bled. 57

With Sam Fathers to represent the ideal, Faulkner's other Indians seem far from noble. But neither are they ferocious like Magua or Black Vulture; they are simply corrupt or weak. Boon Hogganbeck, who appears in the hunting stories of Go Down, Moses, is, like Sam, a mixed breed. He is, however, Chickasaw and white and not Negro, so his kin have not known slavery. Because he is not Negro, he is

57 Ibid., pp. 328-329.
socially superior to Sam in the racially-oriented class structure of the South. But, especially in the wilderness, he seems much less noble and skillful, much less worthy of recognition as a man, than Sam. He is illiterate, like Sam, but he lacks Sam's intuitive knowledge of the woods, and he is a notoriously poor shot. His bravery cannot be questioned, for he attacks Old Ben with only a knife when the Bear claws the dog, Lion. Boon's loyalty and affection for friends is well illustrated in the care he gives Lion and Sam before their death and in the suggestion that he has killed Sam at Sam's request after the death of Old Ben and the end of the hunt. But, he is lazy and unreliable, dependent upon Major de Spain and the McCaslins for support. Like many ignoble savages of early literature, he has compromised with white culture. His killing of Old Ben is an act of courage and an indication of the past nobility of his Indian ancestors. But it also symbolizes the destruction of the wilderness; as the killer of Old Ben, Boon has aided white civilization in destroying the wilderness. His addiction to whiskey is another indication of civilization's corrupting influence on him. Finally, in the last scene of "The Bear," Boon is seen striking the trunk of a tree full of squirrels with his broken rifle and yelling, "Get out of here! Don't touch them! Don't touch a one of them! They're mine." Boon has accepted the fundamental principle of

58 Ibid., p. 241.
white society, the concept of possession or ownership which is responsible for the destruction of the wilderness. He has become a part of a greedy and rapacious white society.

In his Indian short stories, Faulkner makes use of the historical fact that the Chickasaws did own slaves, but he uses this fact to show how the white idea of ownership, particularly the owning and exploiting of fellow human beings, corrupted Indian society. The Indians have become indolent because of the presence of Negro slaves who do all the work; furthermore, there are so many Negroes that the Indians do not have enough work to keep them busy, so the slaves have actually become a burden:

In the old days there were no quarters, no Negroes. A man's time was his own then. He had time. Now he must spend most of it finding work for them who prefer sweating to do.59

The laziness of the Indians is epitomized in Moketubbe, who is a full-blooded Indian chief but not noble. He has become so fat and lazy that he must be carried on a litter. Furthermore, he has no desire to perform his traditional duty of pursuing his father's personal slave, who must be buried with the dead chief. The fact that the Negro must be buried with Issetibeha illustrates just how thoroughly the slave is accepted as a possession and not as a human by his Indian owners.

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Just as the chief's best clothes, his weapons, and his pipe are buried with him, so must his slave, a treasured possession, go with him too.

The most despicable of Faulkner's Indians is Ikkemotubbe (Doom). Again, he is a full-blooded, but ignoble, Indian chief. He is greedy and unscrupulous enough to use poison and threats to become Chief (or "the Man"). He is the real father of Sam Fathers, although he never admits it; and he is unfeeling enough to sell his own mistress and child to Carothers McCaslin. Furthermore, as chief, he sells his tribe's land to McCaslin, although the land really belongs to the whole tribe and not to him. He has become so corrupted by the white man's desire to possess that he is no longer a "child of nature" but an unscrupulous compromiser with white culture.

Faulkner admires Sam Fathers because he is in harmony with nature. His other Indians are not noble because they have been corrupted by a white culture which is based on the idea of ownership. Before the white man came, the Indians shared a common hunting ground and put tribal loyalty before individual desire; but white culture stresses individual property rights, and Southern white society goes so far as to see other humans as property. In accepting white ways, the Indian has lost his identity as a child of nature.

61 Faulkner, Go Down, Moses, p. 166.
Ike McCaslin is Faulkner’s closest parallel to "The American Adam." He is white-born but has been tutored in the wilderness by an Indian, Sam Fathers, just as Natty Bumppo was "educated" by the Delawares. However, unlike Natty, Ike does receive formal schooling and so is not illiterate. At the age of thirteen, Ike is initiated into manhood and the group of hunters through an experience which is reminiscent of Natty’s "initiation" in The Deerslayer. After he has slain his first buck, Ike is "baptized" by Sam, who rubs the boy’s forehead with the blood of the buck.\(^{62}\) This experience marks Ike as a man, a hunter who has killed a buck, just as Natty’s similar experience marks him as a man, one who has killed an enemy warrior and is worthy of the name Hawkeye. In his attitude toward the woods and in his skill as a hunter, Ike fits the old pattern. He has an intuitive knowledge of the wilderness learned through experience from his mentor, Sam Fathers. Even as a young boy, his eye is keen enough that he can distinguish Old Ben’s tracks from those of any other bear—"and not only the crooked one. He could see any one of the three sound prints and distinguish it at once from any other, and not only because of its size."\(^{63}\) At this early age, he can find his way through the densest woods without even the aid of a compass. At eighteen he is able to locate the graves of Lion and Sam by using only the sun. When he is just sixteen, his skill

is already recognized by the other hunters. On the day that Old Ben is killed, General Compson, one of the oldest of the hunters, insists that Ike ride into the hunt on Katie, the one-eyed mule who will not spook at anything: "I want Ike to ride Katie. He's already a better woodsman than you or me either and in another ten years he'll be as good as Walter." 64 His attitude toward the wilderness resembles that of Natty Bumppo. The wilderness is God's creation, intended to be held "mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood, and all the fee He asked was pity and humility and sufferance and endurance and the sweat of his face for bread." 65 The land is not intended for division into oblongs and squares for ownership by individual men and their descendants; it is meant for all men to use but not to exploit. Ike recognizes, however, that the wilderness is doomed. In "Delta Autumn" when he returns for the last time to what is left of the woods, he recognizes that the wilderness is almost gone; he is the last of the old hunters. Roth and his friends are not initiates; they do not belong to the fraternity of hunters who participated in the ritual hunt; they are products of civilized society and not of the hunt. Ike's approaching death coincides with the passing of the wilderness.

In two ways, Ike appears to differ from the traditional white hero of the wilderness. First, he is heir to a vast amount of land, whereas

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64 Ibid., p. 237.  
65 Ibid., p. 257.
his literary antecedents have been propertyless. But, because Ike believes that the land never belonged to Carothers McCaslin or to Ikkemotubbe and because he believes that Carothers compounded his guilt by exploiting other humans to produce wealth from the land he claimed to own, Ike repudiates his inheritance. So, he is essentially propertyless, although he does accept a monthly allowance from his cousin. Second, Ike is married, but because he refuses to accept his inheritance, his wife denies herself to him. Therefore, as in reality he has no wife, he leaves no heirs. He is as solitary and kinless as Natty Bumppo before him.

But there is one very significant difference between Ike and the myth of the "American Adam." Ike is really not innocent. His wilderness experience is not totally effective because he cannot completely rid himself of the "taint" of his heritage. The wilderness experience has proven that society's means of judging a man's worth are erroneous. In the wilderness, men like Sam Fathers, who are only "niggers" in society, are recognized as equals or superiors. A man is judged by his skill and not his wealth or color. In Southern society, men like Carothers McCaslin have exploited other men for gain, simply on the basis of skin color; a man is judged by wealth and color and not by real worth or skill. Ike has attempted to renounce this principle held by society by giving up his inheritance, but he cannot completely
escape the inherited "curse," which separates black from white. His incomplete break with the past is indicated by his horror at the mere suggestion of Roth's marriage to his part-Negro mistress. When the woman visits Ike in the wilderness, he tells her, "Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for you--for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a black man." Furthermore, his repudiation of his inheritance is ineffectual in another way. His experience in the wilderness has taught him that the structure of Southern society is wrong, but it has not aided him in changing that society. The wilderness has become a retreat from the problems which Ike needs to confront. Natty Bumppo was a man of action who met his problems head on with unique intuitive ability. Ike merely retreats from his problems, but he never really escapes.

If Ike McCaslin represents Faulkner's near-ideal white man, then other white men associated with the wilderness seem ignoble when compared to him. Carothers McCaslin, for example, Ike's grandfather and the founder of the McCaslin dynasty, is unscrupulous. Essentially an earthy man of courage, strength, and determination, he is infected

66 Ibid., p. 363.

67 For an interesting elaboration of this idea see Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner, revised edition (Louisiana, 1964), pp. 132-134.
with the desire to own land, to become wealthy, and to achieve social prominence. He buys his land from Ikkemotubbe, who has no right to sell it, and cuts down the wilderness in order to grow cotton. Tainted by greed, he loses some of his love for the land and his closeness to nature. In order to exploit the land, he forces other humans to plow and plant it for him while he lives in relative ease. He believes that his laborers are his possessions too, and as property they may be exploited as he wishes. Not only does he use one of his slaves, Eunice, as a mistress, but he also uses their daughter in the same way, so that he is involved in both miscegenation and incest. McCaslin's obsession with the idea of ownership has caused him to try to own and exploit the land and his fellow humans. He is out of harmony with nature, with other men, and with God.

Carother's sons, Buck and Buddy, are also less noble than Ike. They recognize the injustice of slavery and attempt to work out a system by which their slaves may earn freedom, but they continue to have slaves. As long as they participate in the continued exploitation of the Negro and as long as they attempt to hold the land and the Negro as property, they are tainted and cannot really be innocent. In "Was" they participate in a kind of ritual hunt, just as Ike does, but it is not an ennobling, purifying hunt like the hunt for Old Ben. Their hunt involves the tracking down of a runaway slave, Tomey's Turl, who is also their half-brother.
This chase symbolizes the degeneration brought about by the idea of ownership and the separation of "civilized" men from nature.

Finally, Roth Edmonds has no important experience with the wilderness. He has no real love for the woods or the game. Hunting represents for him nothing more than an outing; it has no spiritual meaning. His killing of the doe, in contrast to Ike's killing of a buck, symbolizes his degeneration. Not having been initiated as Ike has been, he has not learned the moral values which the wilderness teaches. Therefore, he is "moral" only when he is forced to be so because of the threat of punishment when the law is broken. The killing of the doe is unlawful, but no one is around to punish him. Like Carothers, he is the thoughtless exploiter not only of the land but of other humans. He takes a part-Negro mistress, whom he repudiates, re-enacting the sin of old McCaslin. So, Roth has not learned the moral lessons which nature can teach; he is not a man of nature but of civilization.

As Faulkner looks back to the wilderness, he re-examines the old myths about those who lived in it. Faulkner's real interest in his wilderness stories does not seem to be in expounding either the myths or the historical facts about early life on the frontier. Rather, he seems to be interested in discovering what went wrong, why man as we know him is not noble or just or honorable. His answer appears to lie in man's desire to possess and exploit the land and in his willingness
to enrich himself by enslaving other men, who have as much right to the land as he.
CHAPTER III

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE OLD SOUTH

As the wilderness began to disappear, the hope for an ideal existence in an American paradise passed with it, and a new dream arose, a vision of a golden age in the Old South modelled upon medieval civilization as it was pictured by Sir Walter Scott in his Waverley novels. The myth of Southern feudalism appeared in novel form for the first time in May of 1832 when John Pendleton Kennedy's Swallow Barn was published. Although, from a literary standpoint, the book cannot be considered a masterpiece, it has singular significance, since it set the pattern for novels about the ante-bellum South--a pattern which has persisted until the present. 1 It is a view of the South which Faulkner knew and with which he had to deal. In a chapter entitled "Traces of the Feudal System," Kennedy sets the stage for the growth of the country gentleman ideal in Virginia. The state, according to Kennedy, because of its fine climate and fertile soil, attracted English aristocrats of respectability and wealth who grew more vigorous and

imaginative in the warmth of that climate. Such men and their descendants learned to live apart, surrounded by bondsmen and dependents, in large homes where much time could be spent in comfort and leisure.²

The novel provides a picture of the inhabitants of this aristocratic state and their way of life. Swallow Barn is the name of a huge estate which extends some three or four miles along the river. The house itself is "an aristocratical old edifice" which "looks down upon a shady pocket or nook, formed by an indentation of the shore, from a gentle acclivity thinly sprinkled with oaks whose magnificent branches afford habitation to sundry friendly colonies of squirrels and wood-peckers."³ It is "time-honored," "more than a century old," with thick brick walls, a door of "an ancient piece of walnut," and a narrow porch with "massive columns."⁴ The impression given is of a huge, strong, ancient family home (it seems older than we know is possible) handed down from generation to generation--almost the romantic old castle of the days when King Arthur's knights fought for the lady fair. The life of the genteel occupants of this mansion is leisurely. There is time for hunting, dancing, courting, reading, conversing, and feasting. No one seems to have pressing work to do or extreme worries.

³ Ibid., p. 27.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 27-28.
The owner, Frank Meriwether, is a cheerful and portly gentleman who dresses fashionably in a blue broadcloth coat and a ruffled shirt. His house is open to all who come his way, and everyone is treated with generosity and courtesy. To ladies, he is particularly attentive, almost courtly. He manages his servants with considerate kindness. Although he believes slavery is morally wrong, he feels that freeing the slaves would cause a worse evil since the Negroes have become dependent and cannot care for themselves. He is an ardent agriculturalist, disliking mercantilistic pursuits and city life and preferring country life and the raising of blooded horses. He has accepted several political offices which have been forced upon him because he feels public service is his gentlemanly duty. In short, Meriwether is an ideal aristocrat, the lord of his manor, the spiritual father of his slaves, and the civic servant of his region.

Ned Hazard, the next heir to Swallow Barn, is much more flamboyant than his uncle, much more vigorous and assertive. He is the Cavalier gentleman, the adventurer in love with the lovely lady. Educated at Princeton from which he was expelled for dueling, he continues to be reckless and romantic, following the Southern code of honor which demands that one defend his family name and that of his friends. When he is in the woods, he makes up songs about his lady, Belle Tracy. He fights a young bully who attacks the honor of Belle's
father and pursues and catches her lost hawk. He is the dashing young Cavalier in pursuit of adventure and love—a nineteenth century Sir Lancelot.

The mistress of the plantation, Lucretia, remains largely in the background as a rather indistinct figure. She acts as hostess to guests, manager of household routine and business, and nurse, instructor, and advisor to the slaves. She remains a pure and honored lady above the course of the men's business affairs. Belle Tracy, the Southern belle of the novel, lives on a neighboring plantation. In her flowing hoop skirts, this coy lady is courted by several eligible young aristocrats who do all in their power to win her favor, but she remains aloof, demanding that they court her properly. She consciously strives for social charm—poise, ease of conversation, and accomplishment in singing, dancing, and music. Attempting to copy the activities of the ladies in the romantic English novels she reads, she tries to re-establish the sport of falconry by keeping a pet hawk which she dresses in "finery." She has her own minstrel, Hafen Blok, who plays his fiddle beneath her window. Belle is the Southern charmer whose affections must be earned by a young gentleman.

According to the tradition which Kennedy helped to establish, there are only two classes below this aristocratic ruling class—poor white and Negro slaves. The Old South as it is pictured in the myth had
only two classes of whites, rich and poor. There is no middle-class; there are no small farmers, tradesmen, shopkeepers, or craftsmen. The South is completely dominated by a gentlemanly society. The few poor whites, descendants of convict servants, redemptioners, and debtors of old Virginia and Georgia, have been pushed off into the pine barrens, sand hills, and mountains by the advancing planter civilization. These illiterate, shiftless, drunken, irresponsible, vicious men and their families live in squalid huts overflowing with filthy children. They live on what they can get by hunting or fishing or by growing such crops as corn, sweet potatoes, greens, and pumpkins. Almost all of them are thin, misshapen, and sallow from poor diet and disease. Describing the poor whites he observed in North Carolina in the early eighteenth century, William Byrd pictures the laziness of the men:

Surely there is no place on earth where the inhabitants live with less labor than in North Carolina. . . . The men, for their parts, just like the Indians, impose all the work upon the poor women. They make their wives rise out of their beds early in the morning, at the same time that they lie and snore till the sun has risen one-third of his course and dispersed all the unwholesome damps. Then, after stretching and yawning for half an hour, they light their pipes, and, under the protection of a cloud of smoke, venture

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5 W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York, 1941), pp. ix-x.

6 Frank L. Owsley, Plain Folk of the Old South (Chicago, 1949), pp. 1-2.
out into the open air; though if it happen to be never so little cold they quickly return shivering into the chimney corner. When the weather is mild, they stand leaning with both their arms upon the cornfield fence and gravely consider whether they best go and take a small heat at the hoe but generally find reasons to put it off till another time.

Frederick Olmsted, writing in the nineteenth century, describes poor white homes:

Cabins, of this class, would always be flanked by two or three Negro huts. The cabins of the poor whites, much the largest in number, were of a meaner sort--being mere square pens of logs, roofed over, provided with a chimney, and usually with a shed of boards, supported by rough posts, before the door.

Olmsted also observes that poor whites often refuse to do work ordinarily done by slaves. The presence of slave labor makes it possible for poor whites to maintain some social status, for all whites are a part of the ruling class; no white man does "nigger" work.

This picture of a two-class white society ruling an inferior class of black slaves is the traditional, mythical vision of the Old South--a land of large estates, magnificent mansions, courtly gentlemen, and


9 Ibid., pp. 87-88.

10 Owsley, pp. 2-3.
charming ladies. Many of the novelists who write about the Old South concentrate, as Kennedy does, on the aristocracy and ignore the presence of the poor white.\footnote{Shields McIlwaine, The Southern Poor White: From Lubberland to Tobacco Road (Norman, Oklahoma, 1939), p. 19.} But hundreds of country gentlemen and Southern belles have been created. There are St. Clare of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Marse Chan and Marse George of In Ole Virginia, and Gerald O'Hara of Gone With the Wind, to name only a few gentlemen. Miss Charlotte of In Ole Virginia and Melanie Hamilton of Gone With the Wind carry on the belle tradition. Although it has been enriched from time to time by later writers who have elaborated upon the pattern set by Kennedy, the details of the myth have remained essentially the same.\footnote{Gaines, p. 62.}

In reality, the structure of the Old South was much more complex than the tradition indicates. There were planters who owned thousands of acres and many slaves, others who owned around a thousand acres and forty or fifty slaves, and still others who owned only five hundred acres and ten or fifteen slaves. Then there were large farmers owning two hundred to a thousand acres, another middle group owning one to two hundred acres, and small farmers with less than one hundred acres. Below these property-owners were the landless renters, squatters, and farm laborers. It is true that there were some wealthy planters, but
the real core of the social structure was a massive body of plain folk who were neither very rich nor very poor, who were not a part of the plantation structure. The farm, not the plantation, was the most common agricultural unit. In Mississippi in 1860, less than nine percent of the landowners owned five hundred or more acres of improved land and one fifth of the heads of families owned no improved land. Furthermore, there was a growing number of tradesmen, businessmen, mechanics, and the like, who were also a part of the middle class. These plain folk were hard working, kind, friendly, and hospitable, willing to help friends and neighbors when needed. It is false to assume that a tri-partite social structure existed. Furthermore, class lines were not rigid. It was common for aggressive, hardworking farmers to become plantation owners, and most of the industrial leaders of the New South came from the yeoman class.

The plantation ideal did dominate Southern life; to own a plantation was the ambition of numerous young men, and those who were content in smaller farming or business pursuits did not doubt that they could

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13 Owsley, p. 7.
15 Owsley, pp. 131-132.
become planters if they desired. But to raise a plantation out of the wilderness required years of hard work, a fact which the aristocratic myth fails to acknowledge; it merely assumes the finished product. Furthermore, the size of the plantations has been exaggerated.

The majority of slave holders owned from fifty to three hundred acres, and seventy-five percent of the landowning non-slave holders possessed less than two hundred acres. Houses in the early days of the plantation were built of logs; mansions came later, but there was never a large number of them. Life was lonely and isolated and not a succession of hunts, parties, and dinners. Planters were hospitable because they lived in isolated areas. In Mississippi, the plantation system did not develop until the period between 1820 and 1860. Oxford was still a trading post in 1835, and in 1860 frontier elements still existed.

The aristocracy was a self-made one. It is obvious that no real, hereditary aristocracy could be established in Mississippi in a period

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18 Gaines, pp. 147-148.

19 Owsley, p. 8.

20 Eaton, pp. 121, 124.

21 Gaines, p. 171.

of only forty years. The criterion for the gentleman was not birth but wealth. Most plantation lords came from the middle and lower classes; they earned their status by hard work, sheer strength, and ruthlessness. They had little time for leisure. In these men, regionalism became provincialism and pride became self-praise. Overemphasis on honor often led to violence. There was no widespread cultural achievement among such men, for their real interest was to cultivate social rather than intellectual talents. Southern ladies were honored by their society, but they were also its victims. In a society where white men had easy access to Negro women, white women could be raised to a pedestal where their purity could not be touched and where they could at least pretend blindness to their husbands' promiscuity. Strict codes of conduct and manners of dress were designed to preserve virtue. Women were taught that ladies do not exhibit passion or sexual desire. Furthermore, women were

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26 Cash, pp. 43-45, 76, 97.

economically dependent on their husbands and were denied cultural and intellectual accomplishment while being encouraged to develop social graces. In reality, the life of Southern women was very restricted.  

The poor whites were not all descendants of indentured servants, redemptioners, and convicts. Many of them had the same origins as their planter neighbors; in fact, poor whites were often blood kin to the more fortunate planters nearby. Generally these lesser men lacked ambition. However, it should be noted that many so-called lazy poor whites were not really poor. Many of them raised herds of cattle and hogs in the woods where passers-by could not see them. Hence, travelers assumed laziness. But for lazy men, game was abundant for food while the wilderness still existed; later when the forest was gone, they lived on corn pone and pork. A large number of them suffered from nutritional diseases such as pellagra, hookworm, and malaria. Moreover, in a warm climate, simple cabins were sufficient. Many kinds of work were considered "nigger" work--work no white man, no matter how poor, should do. So, with much leisure and little work, the poorer white men had time for amusements by which

29 Cash, p. 27.  
30 Owsley, pp. 34-36.  
they sought the distinction which they otherwise could not obtain in a society where wealth was all-important:

To stand on his head in a bar, to toss down a pint of raw whiskey at a gulp, to fiddle and dance all night, to bite off the nose or gouge out the eye of a favorite enemy, to fight harder and love harder than the next man, to be known eventually far and wide as a hell of a fellow--such would be his focus. To lie on his back for days and weeks, storing power as the air he breathed stores power under the sun of August, and then to explode, as that air explodes in a thunderstorm, in a violent outburst of emotion--in such fashion would he make life not only tolerable but infinitely sweet. 32

William Faulkner's novels and stories about the Ante-bellum South, like the tradition handed down to him, are concerned almost entirely with planter families and the plantation system. The Unvanquished and Sartoris tell the legend of the Sartoris family, modelled upon Faulkner's own family history. The McCaslin family story is told in Go Down, Moses, and the Sutpen family history is analyzed in Absalom, Absalom. These works display very little interest in the poor white and almost no concern for the middle class of the Old South. Faulkner seemingly accepts the tradition which portrays the Old South as a tripartite society. But the presence of the middle and lower classes is felt in the background, particularly in Absalom, Absalom. It is the townspeople who observe Sutpen's rise to the planter class. The reader

32 Ibid., pp. 51-52.
feels the presence of these plain folk in Mr. Compson's account and interpretation of the Sutpen family history, for that history is rehearsed as it was seen by the people of the community who watched Sutpen and speculated about his activities. It is the townspeople who suspect that Sutpen is dangerous or lawless, because they do not know his family or background. They do not know where he gets his money; they do not understand the strange language his slaves speak. They are the ones who ride out to watch him as he works to build his plantation, and they refuse to come to his wedding and pelt the wedding party with clods of dirt and rotten vegetables. Finally, it is the common people who accept Sutpen as an aristocrat once his wealth is accumulated, his plantation built, and his family established; and they elect him to the position of Colonel during the Civil War. The poor white, in the character of Wash Jones and his family, plays a significant role in this novel. Wash Jones helps to care for the Sutpen women during the Civil War and later kills Thomas Sutpen after the planter insults Wash's granddaughter, Milly. It does not seem reasonable to assume that Faulkner intends to ignore the presence of middle or lower classes in the Old South. Rather, he seems to be concerned with examining a tradition which concentrates upon an ideal aristocracy.

As a Southerner, part of an old "aristocratic" Mississippi family, Faulkner was raised with the legend of Southern glory before the Civil
War, but he is also aware of historical facts which differ from what he has been taught. His compulsion to know the truth about his heritage demands that he explore the tradition which pays little attention to whites outside the planter class. He cannot escape completely the pride he feels in the past of his family and region—the courage, the gallantry, the indomitable will, the patience, the endurance, the splendor, the love of the land. Yet, as he probes the ideal, he finds it lacking. He sees injustice, violence, arrogance, extravagance, and a willingness to exploit other humans for selfish gain. His admiration of the men of the Old Order can be seen in the larger-than-life characters of such people as Carothers McCaslin or Thomas Sutpen, who build plantations out of the wilderness. But Faulkner's disappointment in the ante-bellum structure is also evident. By the use of Gothic elements in Absalom, Absalom, Faulkner points up the extravagance of the Old South. In the ruthlessness of Thomas Sutpen, who repudiates his wife and child in order to gain respect by owning land and slaves, Faulkner illustrates the injustice and lack of human feeling of those

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34 Howe, pp. 72-73.
bent on rising to the planter class. In his picturing of both the white and black members of the McCaslin family, who are unable to accept one another on equal terms and relate as man to man, Faulkner shows the result of the concept of ownership—the curse of slavery. John Sartoris's killing of the hillman and the two carpetbaggers illustrates the excessive violence which grows out of an extreme concern with honor.

Life on the plantation, as Faulkner pictures it, is not leisurely. There are no balls, no magnificent dinners, no chivalric courtships. Instead there are such scenes as Sutpen working naked in the mud beside his nude slaves to build his plantation. Or there are the earthy, backwoods planters, Buck and Buddy McCaslin, who seek to escape the curse of slavery by moving out of the mansion and allowing the slaves to move into it. So Buck and Buddy live in a log cabin with a house full of dogs and a caged fox. The courtships in Faulkner's novels are far from proper. Sophonsiba pursues Uncle Buck until finally one night as a guest in her home he climbs into what he thinks is an empty bed only to find that Miss Sophonsiba is there too. Of course, the only proper thing for a gentleman to do under such circumstances is to marry the lady, but Uncle Buck is saved temporarily when Uncle Buddy wins a game of poker on which Buck's future has been gambled.  

Sutpen merely walks into church one day and chooses a young merchant's daughter who can provide him a respectable marriage. John Sartoris is forced by the ladies of Jefferson to marry Drusilla Hawk after she has ridden with him as a soldier during the Civil War.

Some interest is shown by Faulkner's characters in what might be called chivalric pursuits. As illustrated in the previous chapter, hunting played a major role in wilderness life. But, in some of Faulkner's stories about the South just prior to the Civil War, the hunt is no longer the purifying ritual it once was. Buck and Buddy's dogs chase a runaway fox escaped from his cage around the cabin in a very funny scene; and, still humorously, Buck and Buddy have to chase down Tomey's Turl, whom they know has gone to visit his girl on the Beauchamp plantation. (Sophonsiba gives Uncle Buck her red ribbon before the chase--an obvious romantic touch, reminiscent of the days when ladies gave gifts to their favorite knights before the tournament.)

In Absalom, Absalom, the hunt is followed by bloody gouging fights between Sutpen and his slaves. Faulkner's plantation life is composed more of hard work, violence, and earthiness than it is of parties, dinners, happy courtships, and gentlemanly hunts.

38 Faulkner, Go Down, Moses, pp. 15-16.
Both the romantic ideal and the less than ideal, but more historical, "gentleman" can be found in Faulkner's work. The Sartoris family generally represents the more romantic, traditional view of the Southern aristocracy; at least, in his use of this family Faulkner comes closer to the myth than with any other family in his works. As with Frank Meriwether in the earlier novel by Kennedy, no mention is made of how John Sartoris acquired his land or his wealth nor of how he came to be established in Mississippi. Only the finished product of the Sartoris plantation is shown, and there is some feeling of an established aristocracy. John Sartoris himself is a "larger-than-life" man of extraordinary courage. His library indicates some cultural interest, although it is interesting to note that much of his reading is from romantic literature—*A History of Werewolf Men in England, Ireland and Scotland and Including Wales* and all the novels of Sir Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper—-a gentlemanly but non-intellectual collection of books. Like Meriwether, he has a sense of civic responsibility. Believing that rule of the South must not pass to unqualified carpetbaggers, he sees that they are not elected by killing them, although as a gentleman he does allow them to shoot first. However, his defense of what he sees as honorable often leads to violence. The same tendency can be seen in his son, Bayard, who defends the family

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honor by tracking down and killing his grandmother's murderer, cutting off the man's right hand to put on Granny's grave. But later Bayard makes the difficult decision not to avenge his father's death; he has had enough of killing. As the action of The Unvanquished progresses from chapter to chapter, John Sartoris, as seen through his son's eyes, becomes less and less the romantic ideal and more and more an impetuous man who uses honor as an excuse for violence.

The rest of Faulkner's "gentlemen" are "new-made men" and not established aristocrats by birth. They seem to be closer to the historical fact than John Sartoris. The Compson family origins can be traced to a Glasgow printer's son who fled first to Carolina and then to Kentucky. The McCaslin family seems strong and earthy. Carothers McCaslin buys his land from Ikkemotubbe and builds his plantation. He clears the "wilderness of wild beasts and wilder men," and he translates "it into something to bequeath to his children, worthy of bequeathment for his descendants' ease and security and pride and to perpetuate his name and accomplishments." Only by hard work, determination, endurance, and the exploitation of slave labor can he establish his plantation. His wealth is not inherited but earned. He is

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40 Miller, p. 207.


42 Faulkner, Go Down, Moses, p. 256.

43 Ibid.
not a cultured man as his entries in the ledgers reveal—written in "old Carothers' bold cramped hand far less legible than his sons' even and not much better in spelling, who while capitalizing almost every noun and verb, made no effort to punctuate or construct whatever." McCaslin has the old aristocratic vice of sexual immorality, but the real horror of the situation in which slave women become only property to be used by their master is seen in the relationship between Carothers and his own daughter Tomey, by whom he has a son. Carothers lacks the noble birth, culture, and manners of the country gentleman. His sons, Buck and Buddy, who live in a log cabin which they have built themselves without slave labor, lack the elegance of Frank Meriwether. They do not dress as gentlemen; Uncle Buck wears a tie only when he goes somewhere so he will not be mistaken for his brother. These two men are uncultured and uneducated; their ledger entries look as though they had "been written by the same perfectly normal ten-year-old boy." They have no interest in ladies and lack the courtly social grace with which the ideal gentleman treats a lady. Their attitude toward their slaves is benevolent. Each night, the slaves are herded into the big house and the front door is nailed shut. The twins know that even before the nail is driven in, all the Negroes are out the back.

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 269.}\]  
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 7.}\]  
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 263.}\]
door; but they never look to see, and the Negroes are always back in the house before morning. Furthermore, Buck and Buddy free many of their slaves and work out a system by which the others may earn their freedom. Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy seem more like humorous, earthy backwoodsmen than country squires.

Thomas Sutpen is Faulkner's most brutal (but perhaps his most realistic) picture of the Southern planter. He is not nobly born but is the son of an ex-convict father and an immigrant Scotch mother. After his mother's death, he and his family move from the mountains of West Virginia to the Virginia lowlands, and Thomas learns about the plantation and Southern caste system for the first time. On an errand to a plantation home, he is turned away from the front door by a Negro slave who tells him that his kind must use the back door. Aware now of his inferior position in the Southern class structure, Sutpen works his way to Haiti, becomes an overseer on a plantation, and marries the planter's daughter whom he repudiates after the birth of their son when he discovers she is part Negro. With twenty slaves, Sutpen migrates to Yoknapatawpha County, where he purchases one hundred miles of bottom land. He works with his slaves to tear a plantation out of the wilderness and maintains control over them by

fighting with them to prove he is stronger than they and not by his kindness to them. When he arrives in Jefferson, Sutpen lacks the elegant clothes of the gentleman of romantic literature. He has only one suit, which he saves to wear when he goes to town. He is uneducated, having had only a few months of formal education. He makes himself a "gentleman," building an elegant home, marrying a respectable wife, and learning the manners suitable for a man of wealth. But all these achievements provide only a thin veneer to cover his real crudeness:

Yes, he was underbred. It showed . . . in all his formal contacts with people. He was like John L. Sullivan having taught himself painfully and tediously to do the schotische, having drilled himself and drilled himself in secret until he now believed it no longer necessary to count the music's beat, say. He may have believed that your grandfather or Judge Benbow might have done it a little more effortlessly than he, but he would not have believed that anyone could have beat him in knowing when to do it and how.

Sutpen has courage, strength, determination, and endurance; but in his striving to work out his design, to gain equality with those who have scorned him in his youth, he becomes ruthless and inhumane. When Sutpen decides to achieve aristocratic stature through land, slaves, houses, and wealth, he rejects the democratic individualism of his

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49 Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, p. 46.
backwoods heritage for a code which denies that the Negro is human and judges a man's value by wealth alone. From that time on, his life is controlled by his design. His repudiation of his first wife and son, his marriage to Ellen, his participation in the War, his attempts to gain an heir—all are the result of the working out of his plan. As a representative of the planter class, Sutpen symbolizes for Faulkner a ruling class bent on dominating white and Negro alike in order to gain wealth and prestige; he does not represent the gentlemanly ideal.

Faulkner's gentlemen rarely fit the old image drawn by Kennedy and others, for they are "new men" and not settled and time-honored aristocrats. They have the Sartoris courage, sense of tradition, and chivalry; but they also possess the will, new energy, and dynamic ruthlessness of Sutpen. They have a love for the land but have been tainted by the desire to own it and to possess other men to work it. Most of Faulkner's aristocrats are unlike the gentlemen of earlier fiction.

The closest representation of the young Cavalier in Faulkner's ante-bellum novels is Charles Bon of Absalom, Absalom. He is the real heir to Sutpen's estate because he is the oldest son, but he is not recognized by Sutpen as his son. Like many such heroes before him,

51 Brooks, pp. 188-190. 
52 Howe, p. 74.
there is some mystery about his background:

... a young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy and with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents—a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time. . . .

He is the flamboyant, fancy dresser of the old tradition—cultured and worldly. Like his earlier counterparts, he has a quadroon mistress. Furthermore, he has a gentlemanly sense of honor, which he has defended several times by dueling. He is a fine horseman and a good marksman. And, most important in the old tradition, he is courting a beautiful Southern belle, the daughter of a wealthy planter. But, Bon differs in several significant ways from the ideal cavalier of Southern literature. The most important difference is in his social position. His family background is ambiguous, and he is never acknowledged by his father. More important, there are implications that his mother is part Negro. In Southern society, a Negro is not allowed to hold social position nor to own land. Furthermore, Bon's lady-love is also his half-sister. His courting of her lacks the sentimentality of courtships in the Kennedy tradition. His relationship with Judith seems more a calculated plan to force his father to call him "son" than it is a matter of love. In his working out of a design, Bon

\[53\] Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, p. 74.

\[54\] Ibid., p. 113.
seems much like his father, and, just as Sutpen's efforts to carry out his design eventually bring his death, Bon's determination to force his father to recognize him is responsible for Bon's death.

Henry Sutpen, Sutpen's only recognized son and the heir to his estate, should be the cavalier of Absalom, Absalom. Like the traditional young gentleman, he is concerned with his family's honor. It is his concern that his sister's honor be preserved that causes him to kill Charles Bon; he cannot allow his sister to marry a Negro. But in manner and dress he is a "country bumpkin" and not a cultured man of the world. When he goes to Memphis, his first trip away from home, he wears "countrified clothes." After he meets Bon, he copies the more suave young man's dress and manners. Henry is unacquainted with such worldly vices as keeping quadroon mistresses and dueling and is repelled by them. A Southern provincial rather than a brilliant man of the world, he is caught by the old Southern curse--the idea of racial inequality.

Most of Faulkner's Southern ladies of the antebellum period, like his gentlemen, lack the ideal qualities of the romantic myth. Granny Millard (The Unvanquished and "My Grandmother Millard and General Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Harrykin Creek") comes closest to the "ideal" matron image, although Granny often is presented humorously.

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55 Ibid., p. 97.
rather than seriously. Like Lucretia Meriwether, she acts as manager of the domestic affairs of the plantation. In an amusing scene in which Bayard and Ringo, still young boys, hide under her huge skirts after having shot at a Yankee soldier, Granny, always the hospitable hostess, offers the colonel a glass of cool milk, an act which in the colonel's words goes "beyond mere politeness and into sheer bravado." It seems that Granny possesses some of the rash heroism that characterizes many of the Sartoris males. As the "lady of the house" Granny is especially interested in saving the family silver from Yankee plunderers. "My Grandmother Millard" gives an amusing account of Granny's elaborate plans for burying the family treasure and the nightly practice sessions in which the chest is buried and dug up again. In The Unvanquished, Granny pursues the Yankees north until she gets back the box of family valuables that the Yankees have stolen. Another function of "the lady" was to preserve and enforce the Southern code of morality in the home (although she overlooked her husband's immorality). Granny acts as moral instructor by washing out Ringo and Bayard's mouths with soap and making them kneel and ask God's forgiveness when they curse or lie. She even washes out her own mouth after she tells the Yankee Colonel that she has no grandson in order to protect Bayard. Furthermore, she admits her part in stealing United States Army horses

56 Faulkner, The Unvanquished, p. 38.
and reselling them to the Yankees, but she justifies her dishonesty as intended to help others poorer than the Sartorises and not to help her family alone. To her what she is doing is honorable really, for it restores to those who have been despoiled by Northern armies some of the wealth that has been taken from them. So she is taking care of the family charities, a job performed by many Southern ladies of romantic literature. But it cannot be denied that her "horse business" is not a ladylike pursuit.

Ellen Sutpen, another of Faulkner's matrons, plays the role of the Southern lady; but, like her husband, she only learns the dress and manners of the aristocracy. Her origins are middle class, but she rises to the upper class because of her husband's wealth. Her assumption of what she believes are the characteristics of a lady makes her appear silly and frivolous rather than noble:

... escaped at last into a world of pure illusion in which, safe from any harm, she moved, lived, from attitude to attitude against her background of chatelaine to the largest, wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortunate. When she shopped... she unbent without even getting out of the carriage, gracious and assured and talking the most complete nonsense, speaking her bright set meaningless phrases out of the part which she had written for herself.

Her vanity is obvious in her weekly visits to town when she travels from store to store without ever getting out of the carriage:

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57 Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, p. 69.
Ellen bade merchant and clerk fetch out to her the cloth and the meager fripperies and baubles which they carried and which they knew even better than she that she would not buy but instead would merely finger and handle and disarrange and then reject, all in that flow of bright pettish volubility. Not contemptuous, not even childlike imposition upon the sufferance or good manners or sheer helplessness of the men, the merchants and clerks. . . .

But, despite all the wealth, honor, elegance, and pretension, Ellen is not happy. She is unable to bear sorrow and trouble and turns on her deathbed to her sister Rosa, a girl younger even than Ellen's own children, and asks her to protect the rest of the family. Ellen is corrupted by her husband or more precisely, by the same sin as that of her husband. She, too, is obsessed with the carrying out of the design to gain wealth, power, and prestige and to hand on what has been accomplished to a long line of descendants. For this reason, she is determined to secure for her daughter Judith a "proper" husband and to plan a "proper" wedding; but her plans are disrupted, just as her way of life is destroyed, by the Civil War.

Sophonsiba Beauchamp McCaslin (Go Down, Moses) may be considered one of Faulkner's Southern belles. In many ways she resembles Belle Tracy of Swallow Barn, although she is not presented as a serious character. Like Belle, she consciously strives to be like the ladies she has read about in Walter Scott's novels. She is concerned

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58 Ibid., p. 73.  
59 Ibid., p. 72.
with her family ancestry and heraldry. She insists that Hubert, her
brother, is really the unrecognized Earl of Warwick and calls the
plantation Warwick.\textsuperscript{60} Just as the ladies of Scott's novels gave tokens
to their favorite knights preceding the tournament, Miss Sophonsiba
sends Uncle Buck the red ribbon she wears around her neck before the
hunt for Tomey's Turl begins. She attempts to assume the dress and
manners of a nobly-born lady, but she lacks both beauty and charm:

\[\ldots\] presently there was a jangling and swishing noise
and they began to smell the perfume, and Miss Sophonsiba came
down the stairs. [Southern belles are often pictured swishing
down a long flight of stairs.] Her hair was croached under a
lace cap; she had on her Sunday dress and beads and a red
ribbon around her throat and a little nigger girl carrying her
fan. \ldots\textsuperscript{61}

But Miss Sophonsiba's appearance is marred by a roan tooth. Further-
more, unlike Belle Tracy, Sophonsiba is the pursuer and not the
pursued. Her schemes to capture Uncle Buck as a husband cannot
be reconciled with the image of the coy young miss whose affections
must be earned before she will consent to marriage.

Judith Sutpen has the beauty that Sophonsiba lacks. In her lavish
costumes, she is courted by a handsome young Southern gentleman.
Unlike her mother, Judith has a strength which enables her to bear
suffering; she labors through the hard days of want during and after the

\textsuperscript{60}\textit{Faulkner, Go Down, Moses}, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{61}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.
Civil War, waits patiently for her lover whom she knows may never return, pledging to marry no one else, and accepts his death without tears. Unlike the Southern lady of tradition, she does not faint or sob when confronted with great sorrow or shock. However, her emotional strength at times appears to be coldness and hardness. It is Judith who, as a child, can watch her father's bloody fights with his slaves without flinching. But, despite her strength, Judith's life is wasted, destroyed by the "curse" which causes her brother to murder her lover.

Drusilla Hawk (The Unvanquished) rejects completely the traditional role of Southern women. She keeps her hair cut short and, unless she is forced to wear dresses, prefers to wear men's pants. She is a good horsewoman--"the best woman rider in the country," but she lacks social grace and refinement. She much prefers riding with the men to taking part in ladies' activities. She has the kind of courage and determination which is epitomized by her threat to shoot her horse rather than allow the Yankee plunderers to take it, and Drusilla joins John Sartoris to fight the Yankees in actual combat. After the war, she works side by side with the men to rebuild the plantation. She has a man's concern for the honor of her region, which must be defended against Yankee invaders. However, she has no interest in being esteemed only because she is a woman. In fact, she does

not worry, as the other "ladies" do, about position, manners, or respectability. Mrs. Haversham, Mrs. Compson, and the other ladies of Jefferson are indignant when they discover not only that Drusilla has ridden with John Sartoris and his men during the war but that she has lived in the same cabin with him on the Sartoris land while he has struggled to rebuild what had been destroyed. The ladies of Jefferson still put great stress on surface respectability, on what it is proper for a lady to do, even though the society which emphasized respectability has been destroyed. Drusilla actually seems to enjoy her newfound freedom; she certainly does not mourn for her past life which she feels was "dull" and stupid:

... it's fine now; you don't have to worry now about the house and the silver, because they get burned up and carried away; and you don't have to worry about the Negroes, because they tramp the roads all night waiting for a chance to drown in homemade Jordan; and you don't have to worry about getting children to bathe and feed and change. . . .

Instead of being ladylike, unemotional and uninvolved with problems outside the home, Drusilla has a manly interest in the welfare of her region and appears to enjoy the excitement of the war. To her, ladylike respectability seems inane when one's homeland has been invaded and despoiled. Furthermore, she is embittered by the death of her fiance'.

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63 Ibid., pp. 122-123.
in battle and the burning of her family plantation by the Yankees, and her active role in the war may be her way of getting revenge.

In general, Faulkner admires Southern women for their integrity and strength, but they seldom appear as ideal women. He pokes fun at their extravagance and pretentious manners and criticizes their unreal approach to life which over-emphasizes respectability. Most of his women are "new-made" aristocrats like their husbands and have acquired only the outward dress and manners and not the spiritual nobility of real ladies.

Although their presence and influence are felt in Faulkner's ante-bellum novels, his middle-class characters do not appear in full force until after the Civil War, when the "aristocrats" are degenerating. Hence, very few individual middle-class characters can be singled out for analysis in a study of Faulkner's ante-bellum whites. The Coldfields of Absalom, Absalom represent his most thorough picture of the middle-class in the Old South.

Goodhue Coldfield exemplifies the sturdy, Calvinistic plain folk of the Old Order. He is a modest storekeeper who, until the Civil War begins, keeps his store carefully and lives frugally. He is also a steward in the Methodist Church, well known for his "absolute and undeviating and even Puritan uprightness in a country and time of
lawless opportunity." He does not drink, smoke, or hunt. The only
time he deviates from his strict moral code is when he allows Sutpen
to use a bill of lading illegally, but he never accepts any of the profits
Sutpen makes in this devious business. As the Civil War approaches,
he opposes secession; and, when the War begins, he locks himself up
in his attic where he eventually starves to death. Coldfield seems in
many ways typical of the actual common people of ante-bellum
Mississippi. Like them, he is basically hardworking and religious.
(Church activities, such as worship, revivals, and singing schools,
were central in the life of the plain folk of the Old South). But his
refusal to support the War effort is probably atypical of his class, for,
as has previously been indicated, the plain folk were dominated by the
plantation ideal. The planter image was the ambition of many young
men, and the great masses of middle-class people never doubted their
ability to become wealthy planters if they desired.

Cleanth Brooks suggests that Coldfield's refusal to help the
Confederacy stems from his Puritanical aversion to material waste.  
Perhaps, as Faulkner himself suggests, it grows out of his guilt feelings
over his dealings with Sutpen.  Aware of the devious means by which
the planter class established itself, Coldfield's conscience will not allow

65 Brooks, p. 190.
66 Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, pp. 259-260.
him to support a war to save the system. But whatever his reasons for not becoming involved, Coldfield is isolated from the community.

The aunt who lives with the Coldfields appears in many ways to be the middle-class counterpart of the "ladies" in *The Unvanquished*. She is interested in social respectability and probably represents the attitudes of many of the ladies of her class. When Sutpen arrives in Jefferson, the aunt, like the rest of Jefferson, is suspicious of him because he has no discernible background. Later, when his wealth is accepted, she is glad for her niece to marry him; it is an honor for a common girl to be courted by a wealthy planter. It is essential to the aunt that the wedding be done properly and that it be well attended. When the marriage is rejected by the townspeople, who refuse to come to the wedding, the aunt is disillusioned. Feeling that her family is no longer accepted as respectable, she elopes with a horse-and-mule trader.

Rosa, Goodhue's youngest daughter, is influenced by her father's morality and her aunt's sense of respectability. She is a dutiful daughter, running the store alone and secretly feeding her hidden father for three years before he dies. Just as her father's life was ruined by his dealings with Sutpen, Rosa's own association with him destroys her life. He suggests to her that she become his mistress. If she bears him the son he desires, he will marry her. Insulted, Rosa leaves the Sutpen mansion and moves back to town where the townspeople care for her by leaving food on her doorstep. Rosa keeps her dignity and pride, accepting their
food but pretending not to. She becomes an embittered and lonely old maid.

If the Coldfields are in any way representative for Faulkner of the middle-class, then they too have been indirectly tainted by the system. Highly moralistic, they have difficulty reconciling their moral codes with the shady dealings of the aristocrats.

Faulkner's poor whites resemble in many ways the poor whites of both reality and tradition. Thomas Sutpen's family is a fairly accurate example of the hill people of the Old South. Living in log cabins, the men hunt or simply lie around while the women do all the work. But, for Faulkner, there is something admirable in these people—their sense of social equality. They have no concept of "mine" and "yours," but all use the land as they need it. In this frontier-like society, men are judged by skill and not wealth. These hill people are essentially innocent; it is only when they leave the mountains and become associated with the plantation system that they are tainted with the desire to possess land, power, and prestige.

Wash Jones, who lives in a cabin in the marshes on Sutpen's land, is Faulkner's portrait of the poor white who lives close to the plantations and has been tainted by the curse. Like the poor white of Southern myth, he lives an idle life in poverty and filth, existing only on the generosity of Sutpen. To him, Sutpen is the ideal gentleman. He is the living
symbol of what Wash would like to become. Wash identifies with Sutpen because they are both white; his white skin within a Negro slave system gives him a status which he would not otherwise have. He believes himself Sutpen's equal, although it is obvious that Sutpen does not feel the same way: Wash is never allowed to enter the Sutpen mansion. When Sutpen rides off to protect the status quo, Wash supplies food to Sutpen's family; but he is still not allowed to enter the house. After the War, the two men are more equal since Sutpen has lost his wealth and must depend on Jones for help in rebuilding the plantation. When Wash finally realizes the disdain Sutpen has for him and his family, he recognizes the falsity of the whole social structure which is built on money and not on individual worth, and he kills Sutpen.

Milly, Wash's granddaughter, is poorly fed and dressed. She is flattered by the attention of the wealthy Sutpen who is interested only in using her to get a male heir. When she bears him a daughter, he insults her. In her poverty, ignorance, and helplessness, Milly is a pitiful character—the symbol of white womanhood outside the social system. The ladies of Southern society are honored and respected for their purity; other women are simply used.

Faulkner's poor whites seem to be cursed by the system just as the planters and middle class are. Like the poor white of tradition, they have been pushed off onto poor land by the planters where they live in
filth and poverty. They do not work because the only work they can do is "nigger" work; and they must not allow themselves to be associated with "niggers" because their white skin is all that raises them above the laborers on the plantations. Their innocence, as Faulkner pictures it in the hill folk of Sutpen's childhood, has been destroyed by contact with a system based on wealth--the greed of men to possess the land rather than use it and the arrogance of men who because of their wealth lose their sense of equality and raise themselves above other men.

Faulkner has probed the ideal, the myth of the gentlemanly society of the Old South established by Kennedy and others, and he has found it lacking. Although he admires the courage, strength, determination, and sense of honor of the Old Order, he sees that it was tainted by the same curse which destroyed the wilderness--the desire to possess the land which led to the exploitation of black human beings and separated Negro from white.
CHAPTER IV

THE NOBLE LOST CAUSE AND
ITS GALLANT HEROES

During the decade of the 1850's, Southerners came increasingly to believe that their sacred rights were being assailed by a greedy North bent on destroying the society of the South.

Men like John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis conceived of the union as a voluntary confederation of states and the Constitution as a compact among independent states which retained all powers not specifically granted to the central government. But, as the North steadily increased in population, it gained control of the government which it strengthened and passed duties and tariffs favorable to the industrial North and harmful to the agricultural South. Continued agitation by Northern abolitionists to restrict the extension of slavery into the new territories threatened to augment even more the number of non-slave states and increase the probability that slavery would be abolished. To Southerners, the abolition of slavery meant encroachment upon sacred property rights guaranteed by the Constitution. So, as political power became more centralized and the North gained in
strength, Southerners felt themselves being forced out of the union. Lincoln's call to arms in 1861 convinced the South that it must defend itself from Northern invasion. Confederates reasoned that they were going to war to protect the homeland. As they looked back after the War, they were certain that they fought for the honor of their region, just as the gentleman had always fought duels to defend his personal honor. The War seemed merely an outgrowth of the emphasis on honor in the Old South which represented devotion to principle even in the face of certain defeat. As the myth of the Lost Cause developed after the War, defeat became more honorable than victory, for, Southerners reasoned, only coarse, commercial-minded people could ever be victorious in war.

The representative of this semi-barbaric invader in Southern tradition is the Yankee, a man supposedly descended from English


2 Robert A. Lively, Fiction Fights the Civil War (Chapel Hill, 1957), pp. 96-97.

Roundhead (Anglo-Saxon) ancestors rather than from the more cultured Cavaliers (Normans) from which the Southern gentleman came. A part of a utilitarian society, the Yankee is mercenary and uncouth. He is well known as a shrewd (and even dishonest) bargainer in crass commercial dealings. He is a predatory man whose main interest, outside of making money, is to destroy the refined society to the south of him. His hypocrisy is beyond compare, for, while attacking the South's peculiar institution, the Yankee keeps millions of factory workers in a condition much worse than slavery. And, most horrifying of all, the Yankee has no proper regard for property, women, or children but commits all sorts of atrocities as he marches across the Southland.

He is really a coward, willing to starve women and children in order to win the war. In short, the Yankee is the lowest, vilest, most dishonorable man that God ever created.

The Southern hero, in contrast, is a special kind of man. A well-dressed gentleman with elegant manners, who sits astride a horse with ease and a carefree attitude, he is perhaps best typified by Jeb Stuart:

He wore gauntlets of white buckskin, and rode in a gray shell jacket, double-breasted, buttoned back to show a close gray vest. His sword, a light French

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sabre. . . was belted over a cavalry sash of golden silk with tasselled ends. His ray horseman's cloak was lined with scarlet. . . His soft, fawn-colored hat was looped up on the right with a golden star, and adorned with a curling ostrich feather.

Toward the end of the war, the Rebel's tattered gray rags are a symbol of noble defeat. As a soldier, he is a combination of Stuart, Forrest, and Pickett. At the head of his company, he charges, with sword held high, into the mouth of the cannon, like Pelham in John Cooke's *Surrey of Eagle's Nest*:

... he could not stay in the rear with his guns: he burned to be in the charge.

As he turned away, a regiment swept by, right down upon the enemy, and Pelham's sabre flashed from its scabbard.

At that moment his appearance was superb. His cheeks were burning; his blue eyes darted lightnings; from his lips, wreathed with a smile of joy, rang "Forward!" as he cheered on the men.

For an instant he was standing erect in his stirrups, his sabre flashing in his grasp; for a moment his proud voice rang like a clarion which sounds the charge--then I saw him hurled from the saddle, under the trampling hoofs of the horses.

... He lay with his smiling face turned upwards, his eyes closed.

A shell had burst above him; a fragment struck him upon the head--he was gone.

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These noble men ride fearlessly, even happily, to death for "God and Womanhood and Holy Right; not one has ever died for anything so crass and unbeautiful as the preservation of slavery."9

In reality, the Lost Cause was not nearly so noble as Southerners like to imagine. Although it was to some extent a fight in defense of honor, it was really an exaggerated extension of the code of honor. It was an attempt to grace with semi-poetic method a war fought to preserve the right to own and sell other humans as slaves; but once something is labeled "honorable," whether it is or not, it must be defended.10 The South's real interest in the War seemed to be to maintain its own peculiar institution, the system of slavery which gave status to every white man. Charles Beard suggests that the South fought for economic survival, since the slave system was the base on which the Southern economy rested; abolition would mean economic disaster.11 Political blunders, Southern nationalism and romanticism, as well as conspiracies, have been cited as causes of the conflict.12 One thing is evident; Southerners fought for reasons other than regional honor.

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9 Cash, p. 130.  
10 Giles, p. 27.  
The war itself was not a series of brilliant charges by noble Rebels. There was widespread scarcity of food and supplies. As the myth suggests, there was much destruction of property, looting, and killing of stock. Gangs of lawless white men roamed the countryside during the last years of the war. Negroes, set free by the Yankees, followed Northern troops or wandered aimlessly.\(^\text{13}\) Oxford, Mississippi, served as a hospital center during the War. In 1864, all businesses on Oxford's square except one were burned by Union troops. Irregular Confederate regiments carried on guerilla warfare around the town in the last years of the war. One regiment was commanded by Faulkner's grandfather, Colonel William C. Falkner. During the last months of the War, morale was extremely low throughout the South.\(^\text{14}\)

Southern heroes were not all gentlemanly aristocrats but made up a varied group. The number of illiterate rebel soldiers was considerable, but most of the troops were neither educated nor illiterate; they reflected the yeoman society to which the majority of Southern soldiers belonged.\(^\text{15}\)


\(^{15}\) Wiley, pp. 322-330, 337.
They certainly were neither all brave nor honorable. After the first year and a half of the War, the number of volunteers dropped off considerably, and in April, 1862, the first of several conscription acts was passed. Under the provisions of this act, a man could escape the draft by paying a substitute to go in his place. Such a practice increased the proportion of poor men in the Confederate ranks.

There were braggarts, snobs, brutes, and loafers as well as a few men with exceptional devotion to duty. But most Rebels were ordinary, middle-class men from a rural society, sturdy and independent but unpolished. They grew weary of the war, and some deserted, but most were good soldiers who fought with determination and perseverance but not without occasional panic. The Stuarts, Picketts, and Forrests were the exceptions and not the rule.

William Faulkner makes little use of the war itself as subject matter for his novels. Descriptions of heroic actions in battle are minor in importance; in fact, such exploits are often told almost humorously. They certainly do not possess the overtones of nobility which the courageous acts of Rebel soldiers have traditionally. The Unvanquished contains no serious battle scenes, and the few skirmishes pictured are comic. The novel seems more concerned with the ways in which Granny Millard, Bayard, and Ringo are affected by the War than.

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16 Williams, pp. 603-604. 17 Wiley, pp. 344-347.
it is with the details of the War action itself. There are a few realistic
details about life during the War, such as scarcity of food, destruction
of property and tearing up of railroads; Negroes fleeing to northern
lines or wandering aimlessly; and gangs of lawless men roaming the
countryside. Absalom, Absalom, contains only a few views of the
war, but they are not magnificent battle scenes. They picture the
ragged, demoralized Rebel army in retreat. Even these scenes are
more concerned with the struggle between Bon and Henry than they are
with the War. For a while the War seems to offer a way of getting out
of their dilemma because it may mean the death of one of them.

Yet, the War is the central focus of all Faulkner's work. His
real interest is neither in the action of the War nor in the exploits of
its heroes but in its causes and effects. He asks why the War came,
and he finds several answers. First, he sees it as the culmination of the
South's extreme emphasis on honor, an emphasis which breeds violence.
In The Unvanquished, Bayard Sartoris gradually comes to see that his
father's code of honor, while admirable, may also be an excuse for
violence. He himself is caught up in the passion of defending family
honor when Granny Millard is murdered, and he succumbs to his passion

18 Douglas T. Miller, "Faulkner and the Civil War: Myth and
19 Ibid., p. 200.
by tracking down and killing her murderer, whose body he nails to a door. In much the same way, the Civil War may be seen as an exaggerated extension of the code of honor; defense of regional honor becomes an excuse for war.  

Secondly, Faulkner sees the War as a means of preserving the well-worked-out social structure of the South. Sutpen's design in Absalom, Absalom may be viewed as a microcosm of that of the entire South. As such, it illustrates the extent to which Southerners intent on establishing a self-perpetuating, privileged class were willing to go to insure that their descendants inherit wealth, property, and social prestige. Sutpen goes to war because his design is being threatened. By courage, will, and shrewdness he has established himself as a member of the planter class. It is his personal wealth and prestige and that of his descendants that he now defends, not the honor of a region. So, the Civil War may be viewed as the means by which the South attempted to preserve the status quo to protect the wealth and power of the planter class.

Go Down, Moses suggests that the Civil War was God's way of punishing the South and expiating the curse. The title of the book is 

20Ibid., p. 206. 

reminiscent of the Old Testament stories in which God punished Israel, his children, so that from their suffering might come the reconciliation of God and man. It was only after the Hebrews endured slavery and suffering under the Egyptians that God created the nation Israel as a people and, through Moses, gave them his commandments. According to Biblical theology, God attempted to lead his people back to himself when they strayed by allowing them to suffer; so they were conquered by the Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans. From suffering comes new life; out of suffering, God creates His people who are to be a light to all the world to reconcile man to God and man to man. The "curse" of the South, as Faulkner calls it, involves the separation of men from one another and from God. It is God's intention that all men should be equal. Therefore, when anyone elevates himself into a position of power and social prominence by possessing the land for himself and by exploiting other men, he sets himself against the will of God. By such an act of rebellion, a man denies his brotherhood with other men and breaks his proper relationship with them. The Southern "curse" is symbolized ultimately in the institution of slavery by which one man claims ownership of another and denies the equality of all men. So as God disciplined the Hebrews whom He loved, He also disciplined the South, which He loved. It is as though the South were a kind of new Israel through which God intends to lift the old "curse" that separates
men. But in order to serve God's purposes, the South must learn humility, patience, pity, and endurance. So the Civil War came as the Babylonian conquerors had come centuries before—because God loved a people so much that He hoped to restore them to their rightful place as His children and use them to restore others.

Faulkner spends little time on Civil War heroes. The Sartorises represent his most traditional Rebels. The first Bayard (not the Old Bayard of _The Unvanquished_ and _Sartoris_ or the Young Bayard of _Sartoris_) seems quite typical of the gallant cavalier of Southern legend. He rides with the famed Jeb Stuart with whom only the best men may ride, and he is one of Stuart's bravest men. A captured Yankee taunts Stuart by saying, "At least General Stuart did not capture our anchovies. . . . Perhaps he will send Lee for them in person."\(^{22}\) So Sartoris rides back after the anchovies. "He rode yelling, 'Yaaaiiiih, Yaaaiiiih, come on, boys!' right up the knoll and jumped his horse over the breakfast table and rode it into the wrecked commissary tent, and a cook who was hidden under the mess stuck his arm out and shot Bayard in the back with a derringer."\(^{23}\) This is a bold deed, but even Jeb Stuart, who is well known for his own boldness, says of Sartoris that "he was a good officer and a fine cavalryman, but that he was too

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 17.
reckless."  His brother John says, "Bayard was wild." Bayard's deed displays a certain amount of real courage, and it is an action performed out of loyalty to principle, but it is also a rash exploit which invites death unnecessarily.

John Sartoris himself is given to impulsive action. He is presented generally as a heroic figure, particularly in the early portions of The Unvanquished, which occur when the narrator, his son Bayard, is a boy. John Sartoris is seen first as the returning soldier and hero--larger than life yet tired and dirty. He lacks the gay flare of Jeb Stuart in his dress, but he has the air of the seasoned warrior:

We watched them--the big gaunt horse . . . and father damp too from the ford, his boots dark and dust-caked too, the skirts of his weathered grey coat shades darker than the breast and back and sleeves where the tarnished buttons and the frayed braid of his field-officer's rank glinted dully, the sabre hanging loose yet rigid at his side as if it were too heavy to jounce or perhaps were attached to the living thigh itself and took no more motion from the horse than he did.

He was not big; it was just the things he did, that we knew he was doing, had been doing in Virginia and Tennessee, that made him seem big to us.  

Later, he resembles his brother Bayard and Jeb Stuart when he dashes gallantly down a hill to capture sixty Yankees almost single-handedly.

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24 Ibid., p. 18.  
25 Ibid.  
Another time he escapes capture by jumping his horse through the back wall of the stable just as Yankees rush in the door. 27 But Sartoris is not always the noble hero. He guns down two carpetbaggers. On another occasion, he shoots too quickly and kills a hillman who may have been attempting to rob him. His heroics during the war seem brave but rash. After the war his impulsive defense of honor leads to violence. The violent Southern atmosphere which he has helped to breed brings about his death even though he himself has renounced violence; unarmed, he is shot down in the street by a former friend whom he has defeated in an election. Most of the Sartorises display a compulsion to invite death by rash, impulsive heroics and violent action in defense of what they call honor, but they also have the gallantry and flair of the traditional Southern hero.

The rest of Faulkner's military men do not fit the old myth. Thomas Sutpen is evidently a good soldier. He earns a citation of valor which General Lee himself signs, 28 and he is a magnificent figure of a man on his great white horse. But he is not fighting for the honor of his region or his women; he is not concerned with a noble cause. His interest is in preserving and furthering his design. When Ellen dies,

he is so concerned that she be buried properly as a planter's wife should be that he manages to order and get through the blockade two huge marble tombstones, which are driven in a wagon behind his troops for a year. There are no scenes in which Sutpen rides gallantly at the front of his regiment to battle. After the War, he returns to rebuild his plantation and retrieve his design by getting a male heir. He devotes all his energy to his plan, refusing to join in the violence by which people like John Sartoris and General Compson seek to control the Negroes and carpetbaggers. Charles Bon and Henry are pictured only in retreat with the ragged and demoralized Rebel army, waiting for the end. General Compson as soldier appears to be a failure—"who failed at Shiloh in '62 and failed again though not so badly at Resaca in '64, who put the first mortgage on the still intact square mile to a New England carpetbagger in '66. . . ."29 All of these men, though brave, are not molded in the image of Jeb Stuart and his kind; they are human beings with interests far less noble than the preservation of the honor of an ideal society.

More important to Faulkner than the Lost Cause itself and its heroes is the effect of the Civil War legends on the descendants of the aristocracy. For these families, the Civil War never ended. They are

unable really to bury their dead heroes, and so they live with the ghosts of the past. Preoccupation with past glory results in inability to live productively in the present. The general characteristics of the Civil War generation are often seen in exaggerated form in their descendants. There is nothing left of Sutpen's grand design. Only a mulatto idiot, Jim Bond, remains as heir to the once magnificent but now destroyed plantation. The Sartorises of the twentieth century exhibit the same reckless tendencies as did the Civil War heroes John and Bayard. It seems almost as though the inclination to chivalric recklessness and self-destruction is so established in the family tradition that no male Sartoris can escape it. All seem impelled to follow the course of their ancestors who have become a legend. Aunt Jenny comments on the male members of her family, "Did you ever hear of a Sartoris dying from a natural cause, like anybody else?" Young John and Young Bayard Sartoris are the twentieth century representatives of the family. They too have a war to fight, World War I. John is killed in action when his plane is shot down; but he displays the same carefree attitude as old Bayard and Colonel John, thumbing his nose at his brother and waving to the enemy as he dives from his burning plane. Bayard comes home from the War disillusioned, for he is unable to reconcile his romantic image of the Civil War, which allowed for individual heroism.

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30 Faulkner, *Sartoris*, p. 103. 31 Ibid., pp. 251-252.
and the horror of World War I, which is a mass mechanical war with little room for personal gallantry. But he is obsessed with the family's tradition of heroism and violence. He seems regulated by the Sartoris legend and values a courageous death. So, like the first Bayard, he courts death, but his seeking of death seems meaningless. He speeds carelessly around the countryside in his car, attempts to ride a wild horse, and finally kills himself by flying an airplane he knows will crash. The reckless heroics of the Sartoris clan have become in the twentieth century a headlong rush to a violent and meaningless death.

The Compsons, whose Civil War hero was a failure in battle, continue the pattern of defeat which he began. Their story is a story of disintegration, of retreat and turning inward rather than the violent, impulsive activity of the Sartorises. The General's grandsons, Benjy, Quentin, and Jason IV, illustrate the degenerative process of the family. Benjy, an idiot, is a symbol of decadent formality and tradition. Like much of the South itself, he cannot stand a change in his pattern of life. He is upset when Caddy wears perfume because she smells different. Furthermore, Benjy's grief at Caddy's change when she wears the perfume, a symbol of her loss of innocence, is indicative of the sense of

32Vickery, pp. 20-21.

33Warren Beck, "Faulkner and the South," Antioch Review, I (March, 1941), 86.
loss felt by Southerners after the Civil War. The conflict destroyed a whole society which values, among other things, the virginity of its ladies. Benjy cries when Luster removes one of his little bottles from his play graveyard because the pattern is upset, and he wails when Luster changes the route to the graveyard for the same reason. Again, Benjy's inflexibility may represent an attitude of the descendants of ante-bellum aristocrats of the South. And his preoccupation with the graveyard is reminiscent of the South's inability to forget its dead and look to the future. Benjy's brother, Quentin II, cannot accept change either. He is obsessed with the past, particularly with the code of honor of the Old South. His sister's loss of virginity is especially disturbing to him because it is an act outside the old code. It is not only a reflection on his sister's honor but also on that of the family. It is significant, perhaps, that whenever Quentin attempts to defend his sister's good name by beating up or killing her lover he fails just as his grandfather had failed in his battle to defend the Southern way of life during the Civil War. Quentin cannot come to grips with the past. His absorption in the Sutpen legend is another indication of his preoccupation with the past. He wants to believe in the glorious tradition of the Old South, while, at the same time, he realizes the ruthlessness and injustice on which it was built. His agonized answer to Shreve's question, "Why do you hate the South?"34

34 Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom, p. 378.
indicates the unreconciled tension between the myth he wants to believe
and the reality he is beginning to see, "I don't hate it," Quentin said,
quickly, at once, immediately; "I don't hate it," he said. I don't hate
it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I
don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" Because he cannot
accept the past for what it was and because he cannot adapt to change,
Quentin is unable to live a productive life in the present and he has no
hope for the future. So he commits suicide. The last of the brothers,
Jason, is not incapacitated by the past because he completely rejects
all the ideals of the Old South for the mercantilistic, dehumanized values
of the modern world. He is somewhat successful in his business pursuits;
but he has no roots, no concept of morality, no sense of family, no love
for the land or his heritage. He has none of the vitality of his ancestors.

Gail Hightower, of Light in August, is another twentieth century
descendant of a Civil War hero who cannot live in the present because
he continually relives the past. He dreams of the heroic deeds of his
grandfather, who was "shot from the saddle of a galloping horse in a
Jefferson street one night" twenty years before his grandson was
born. So long does he dream his dream that it becomes his reality, and
he is no longer able to be concerned with anything else. The events of

35 Ibid.
the present seem trivial when compared to the past. Preoccupation
with the great deeds of the past makes him unable to act in the present. 

So he ignores his wife and, as a preacher, fuses his dream with Holy
Scripture so that he eventually loses his wife and his church. His life
becomes meaningful only when he sets aside his romantic vision. 

recognizes the tragedy of the present in Joe Christmas's death and when
he becomes really involved with people around him by helping Lena
Grove. Gail Hightower illustrates the ancestor worshiper of the New
South, who is unable to act because of his concentration upon the heroic
deeds of those before him.

Roth Edmonds, a descendant of Carother's McCaslin, has inherited
a sense of racial superiority from his forefathers which causes him to
reject his boyhood playmate, Henry. However, his grief over his
broken friendship illustrates the tragedy of disrupted personal relations
in the adult world of the South where white men do not accept blacks
as brothers. Once Roth adopts the idea that Henry's blackness makes
him inferior, he can no longer share a bed with him nor eat at the same
table. But Roth longs for his former closeness with Henry.

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37 Beck, pp. 84-85.

38 Carvell Collins, "Faulkner and Certain Earlier Southern Fiction,"
College English, XVI (November, 1954), 93.
Ike McCaslin is aware of the injustice on which the Old South was built and hopes to expiate the sins of the past by renouncing the past. Unlike Jason Compson, he is able to repudiate the unjust social structure of the Old South without rejecting its moral values—courage, endurance, skill, resourcefulness, and love of the land. However, he does not escape the curse completely, for he cannot accept the idea of racial intermarriage. But Ike sees hope that someday—in the distant future—the curse will be lifted and black and white will live together as brothers. "Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America . . . But not now! Not now!"

In Faulkner's novels, the virtues and vitality of the Old Order are seen most often in the middle class of the New South. The descendants of the ante-bellum aristocrats are in general so obsessed with the past that they are unable to live in the present. They have inherited disillusionment and a tendency to violence and self-destruction. They have been unable to adjust to change and to reconcile the legends of the past with what they know is truth. What is probably most significant, they have inherited the curse of racial separation. The McCallums, V. K. Ratliffe, the Armsteds, and others like them possess dignity, endurance, flexibility, courage, strength of character, and moral conscience. They are active people, alert to what is going on around them. But novels

\[3^{9}\] Ibid., p. 361.
such as *Intruder in the Dust*, *Light in August*, and portions of *Go Down, Moses* indicate that they have not entirely escaped the curse either.

They still cherish a paternalistic attitude toward the Negro who acts like a "nigger," and they fear and periodically hunt down and kill the one who does not. Faulkner has probed the old myths, and again they have not stood the test. For Faulkner, the past is not ideal, and the present is disappointing.
CHAPTER V

THE HAPPY NEGRO

While Americans dreamed of ideal people who were noble savages, simple and virtuous woodsmen, lordly gentlemen, gracious ladies or gallant heroes, they also developed myths about Negroes, supposedly inferior people brought to the New World to serve the noble whites. According to the tradition which developed, Negroes, unlike whites, are able to endure labor in the difficult climate of the South, for Africans are used to a hot, sticky climate. Moreover, certain racial traits of the Negro make him particularly suitable for slavery. He is by nature "submissive, light-hearted, amiable, ingratiating, and imitative," and he is mentally inferior to other men. It is sometimes asserted that the Negro has less capacity for human feeling than whites; he does not love as deeply nor does he grieve as long over separation or loss. Furthermore, Africans are barbarians who must be disciplined and controlled; the plantation serves as "a school constantly training


2 Ibid., p. 8.
and controlling pupils who [were] in a backward state of civilization. 3

The slaves are like children at the beginning of a long process of becoming civilized. Since they are not yet morally responsible, Negroes can be expected to be treacherous, stubborn, and lazy; they are often liars and thieves and they are more ardent about sex than whites. 4 All these moral problems become sources of humor in Southern literature. It is the duty of the kindly white master to teach his child-like dependents what is morally right and wrong and to provide for their physical needs as well.

Another group of myths about the Negro concerns his happy life on the Southern plantation. In their most thoroughly developed form, these myths picture several distinct types of Negro servants (the word slave is usually avoided) with certain characteristics and responsibilities.

There is the carriageman and groom, represented in Swallow Barn by Scipio, who conducts himself with "deferential courtesy and formal

3 Ibid., p. 11.


politeness."\(^6\) He dresses "in a ragged regimental coat, still jagged with some points of tarnished scarlet, and a pair of coarse linen trousers."\(^7\) His face is "lighted up with a lambent smile," and he has "all the unction of an old gentleman."\(^8\) Scipio also represents the faithful old retainer of the tradition. He has been set free but remains with the family. Another Negro figure of plantation legend is the gentleman's body servant who accompanies his master everywhere, even to war. When he is only a few days old, "Marse Chan" of Page's In Ole Virginia, is given Sam for his personal servant. Sam goes wherever his young master goes—to school, duels, rendezvous with his lady friend, and war. The ladies of the tradition have maids who are as faithful to their mistresses as the men are to their masters. Nancy, the maid servant for Miss Charlotte in Page's In Ole Virginia, looks upon her mistress as a queen whose would-be suitors "got to set dee cap an' all de cl'oes for dem."\(^9\) Nancy's own love affairs follow the pattern of those of Miss Charlotte, for she is courted by the body servants of her mistress's suitors and rejects her own men friends as Charlotte rejects their masters. Carey, of Swallow Barn is the Negro

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 21.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 22.
minstrel, another plantation type. He makes songs out of the history of the Meriwether family. Among the Negroes, he is respected as a seer. He is given special privileges by the white family because he is an old and faithful servant. When he rides with his white masters, he dresses in a bright-colored livery (reminiscent of the page who rode with the medieval knight). On such occasions, Carey rides at the rear, "his proper place." An important person in the plantation regime is the storyteller, such as Joel Chandler Harris's immortal Uncle Remus, whose stories about Brer Rabbit reveal much about plantation life and the relationship between Negro and white. Perhaps the most important Negro on the plantation, however, and the most beloved is the old mammy. Lucy of Swallow Barn has borne a family of remarkable size and intelligence. Her children have become useful as shoemakers, weavers, or carpenters. In her younger days, she has served as lady's maid and nurse to the children of Swallow Barn. At the time of the novel, she is old and lives in her own cabin where she is well-cared for by her benevolent master. The one sorrow of her life is her son Abe, who represents the "wayward" Negro of the myth. He has been involved in neighborhood brawls and destruction of adjoining farms. Finally he joins a runaway band of slaves living in the swamps. Much against his will, according to Kennedy, Meriwether is forced to sell Abe to a shipper in order to keep the slave out of prison. A promising young man, he has

10 Kennedy, p. 167.
been corrupted by "the most profligate menials belonging to the extensive community of Swallow Barn, and the neighboring estates."  

As pictured in romantic fiction, Negro religion is often comic. It is extremely emotional, lacking any clear-cut dogma. Although most slaves are religious, their piety is completely separated from their everyday life. A pious slave may devise elaborate schemes to get out of work or steal from his master and still consider himself a Christian. Literary portrayals often emphasize the humor of over-exaggerated emotion and the mournful and sentimental elements of Negro religion. The tradition also uses Negro superstition as a source of comedy. Rabbit's feet and similar charms, spells and curses, "hants" and popular beliefs connected with the cemetery, and all kinds of signs and wonders are prominent in romanticized versions of Negro life.

The ludicrous dress of some plantation servants, the popularity of possum hunts, fondness for watermelon, extravagant diction, and pompous courtships serve as other elements of humor often used in literary portraits of Negro slaves. The general characteristics of the bondsman as he is pictured in romantic legend are well-summarized

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11 Ibid., p. 467.  
12 Gaines, pp. 195-196.  
13 Ibid., pp. 196-197.  
14 Ibid., pp. 198-199.
by Kennedy in his chapter entitled, "The Quarter." In the Negro community, at Swallow Barn, there is an air of family attachment, contentment, good humor, and a genuine and obvious devotion to the master. The slaves are essentially parasitic, for they have not yet developed to the point where they can care for themselves. But they are well-cared-for by their kindly and benevolent master. Because they admire the white family upon whom they depend, the servants attempt to imitate the master class in dress and habit. They are a happy and carefree people. Meriwether gives the following description of his bondsmen:

Their fondness for music and dancing is a predominant passion. I never meet a negro man--unless he is quite old--that he is not whistling; and the women sing from morning till night. And as to dancing, the hardest day's work does not restrain their desire to indulge in such pastime. . . . Their gayety of heart is constitutional and perennial, and when they are together they are as voluble and noisy as so many blackbirds. In short, I think them the most good-natured, careless, light-hearted, and happily-constructed human beings I have ever seen.16

Historical and scientific evidence has failed to support the belief that the Negro is physically, mentally, or culturally inferior to other races, that he is especially suited for working in the swamplands and heat, or that he is particularly fit for slavery. Historical research has shown that the African ancestors of American slaves developed an

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15 Kennedy, pp. 449-460.
16 Ibid., pp. 454-455.
agricultural economy of their own almost as complex as the Southern plantation system, and there were intricate social and political institutions as well. Theirs was not a barbaric type of life but a civilized system which included cultural achievements in art, music, dance, and literature. It was because they were used to a settled agricultural life that Africans made good slaves. Other less settled people, such as the American Indians, were not successfully enslaved. Negroes did have trouble adapting to a new environment and social system but not because they needed to be civilized by a slow process of evolution. Furthermore, Negroes survived no better in the heat of the South than whites; sickness among the slaves was a major problem for most planters.

Modern scientific research has found impressive evidence to indicate that the mental capacities of Negroes and whites as races are approximately the same. There is such wide variation in mentality and personality within each race that it is dangerous to generalize about racial traits.

As for the myth of the "happy Negro," one need not search far for evidence of its falsity. The tradition fails to mention the living conditions which most slaves endured. The slave worked from sunrise to

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18 Ibid., p. 296.

19 Ibid., p. 10.
sunset all year round, and he had little time for song and dance. The average slave home was "cramped, crudely built, scantily furnished, unpainted, and dirty." The basic weekly allowance of food for field hands was a peck of corn meal and three or four pounds of salt pork or bacon. Although house slaves were often well-clad, most slaves were shabbily and insufficiently clothed. Lack of adequate housing, food, and clothing and the continual problem of bad health could not have contributed to an idyllic happy existence. Negro religion was very similar to that of the poor whites of the ante-bellum South. It was often emotional and remote from the process of day-to-day life, but the tradition does exaggerate some elements of Negro religion for humor. And Negroes were usually superstitious, though most of their superstitions did not stem from their African heritage but were learned from the whites around them. Laziness, lying, theft, and stubbornness were not so much indications of immorality as of subtle rebellion against the system of slavery. Slave runaways and uprisings were more impressive evidence of unrest among the slaves.

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20 Ibid., pp. 77-78.  
21 Ibid., p. 294.  
22 Ibid., p. 282.  
23 Ibid., p. 289.  
24 Ibid., p. 377.  
26 Stampp, p. 375.  
These two problems, along with those connected with the slave trade and miscegnation between white planters and their female slaves, are almost completely ignored in romantic versions of life in the old South. There is little evidence to support the idea that the Negro bondsmen of the ante-bellum South were happy.

Faulkner, as a Southerner, grew up with the myth of black inferiority and the tradition of the contented, well-cared-for, comic servant of pre-Civil War days. But he also recognized the horror of human slavery. His works reflect a tension between the stereotyped image of the Negro and the view of him as a human being. In *The Unvanquished* and *Sartoris*, Faulkner's most romantic novels, his portrayal of the Negro remains close to the stereotype of earlier literature. Except for Ringo, Negro characters remain largely in the background; that Ringo should play such a significant role in the novel is a departure from the usual treatment of the Negro in Southern literature, which tends often to use the Negro for a kind of comic relief but rarely as a major character. As in the old tradition, there are no mulattos in these two novels, and the Negro is generally treated humorously.

Simon Strother represents the faithful body servant of traditional literature. He accompanies John Sartoris to Tennessee during the Civil War and remains faithful to the Sartoris family long after the war is over. When John Sartoris dies, Simon remains with the body,
but he does not weep because "facile tears . . . are the white man's futile trait . . . which Negroes know nothing about." On the surface, he seems to be unfeeling, incapable of deep human emotion, as was the Negro of Southern romantic myth; but his silent presence there (in his old Confederate uniform) at the side of his dead master, and the simple way he places his hand on the coffin indicate the real depth of his emotion. Simon is treated humorously in Sartoris. His clothes and attitude when he first appears are reminiscent of Kennedy's Scipio. Simon is dressed "in a linen duster and an ancient top hat," and he assumes "an expression indescribably majestic." He has a typical pride in the white family for which he works, warning a Negro sitting in a car which is in the way of the hitching block, "Don't block off no Sartoris ca'liage, black boy. . . . Block off de commonality, ef you wants, but don't intervoke no equipage waitin' on Cunnel or Miss Jenny. Dey won't stan' fer it." Identifying closely with the gentlemanly status of his former master, he scorns anything that goes against his concept of a gentleman, such as riding in an automobile. "De ottomobile . . . is all right fer pleasure en excitement, but fer de genuwine

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30 Ibid., p. 4.
31 Ibid., p. 25.
gentlemun tone, dey ain't but one thing: dat's hosses."

The passages quoted above indicate another element of humor often associated with the Negro, the use of extravagant diction: "commonality," "intervoke," and "equipage." Certain character traits of the Negro of plantation myth appear in Simon. The scene which begins part two of Sartoris gives a humorous picture of Simon's laziness and irresponsibility. He argues with Miss Jenny that he cannot hoe with a new hoe because it is too dull. Miss Jenny muses, "Why he'd rather sit there and rasp at that new hoe with a file instead of grubbing up a dozen blades of grass in that salvia bed, I can't see ... But he'll do it. He'd sit there and scrape at that hoe until it looked like a saw blade, if I'd let him. Bayard bought a lawn-mower three or four years ago ... and turned it over to Simon. The folks that made it guaranteed it for a year. They didn't know Simon, though." And Simon separates his religion from his moral conduct. A good member of the church and a member of its "boa'd," he can't resist putting his hand on a pretty girl's thigh, even at the age of sixty. Although he has been entrusted by his church with the money they have collected for a

\[32\] Ibid., p. 231.

\[33\] Ibid., pp. 51-52

\[34\] Ibid., p. 232.
new building, he uses it himself, evidently giving it to a young girl in whose cabin he is later found murdered. He is able to "work" his employer--"Now, Cunnel, . . . you ain't gwine let dem town niggers 'cuse a member of yo' fambly of stealin', is you."\textsuperscript{35} Bayard pays Simon's debt. The theft, sexual immorality, and laziness--all negative traits--are comic elements in the characterization of Simon. The reader can laugh and excuse him as "just a 'nigger' acting like a 'nigger.'"

There are several Negro characters in these two novels who are faithful house servants. Louvinia, in \textit{The Unvanquished}, plays no major role in the action of the story, but she appears frequently, almost as a symbol of the routine of day-to-day life which must go on regardless of the war. She seems always to be there when needed, cooking, polishing silver, packing chests, cleaning, scolding the children or rushing them off to bed, or holding John Sartoris's boots at the back door for him on the day he barely escapes from the Yankees. When most of the Negroes leave for the Yankee lines, Louvinia remains with the Sartorises. Her husband Joby, who is comically a bit lazy, remains with the family too. Elnora, Louvinia's counterpart in Sartoris, continues to perform the boring but necessary tasks of household life, always droning a mournful Negro hymn as she works. These

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 234.
characters, like many Negro literary figures before them, are insignificant in the major action of the novel. But for Faulkner, they seem to stand as symbols of faithfulness, endurance, and patience.

The discontented Negro appears in both The Unvanquished and Sartoris. Loosh (The Unvanquished) is obsessed with the idea of freedom. He is in contact with the Yankees, long before they reach Jefferson and is the first person on the Sartoris plantation to know that Vicksburg has fallen and Northern troops are marching across Mississippi. He shows the Yankee soldiers where the silver has been hidden when they raid and burn the Sartoris plantation, and he leaves the plantation to join the thousands of Negroes on the road walking aimlessly toward the North, their Jordan. Says Loosh, "I'm going. I done been freed; God's own angel proclamated me free and gonter general me to Jordan. I don't belong to John Sartoris now; I belongs to me and God."

But Loosh seems possessed with an idea. Bayard says, "I don't think he could even see us."36 He and all the Negroes on the road appear to be running blindly to nowhere, to what they call Jordan. They are not prepared for freedom. Caspey (Sartoris) has just returned from World War I, where he has gotten an idea of racial equality:

36Faulkner, The Unvanquished, p. 90.
I don't take nothin' fun no white folks no mo! . . . War done changed all dat. If us cullud folks is good enough ter save France fun de Germans, den us is good enough ter have the same rights de Germans is. French folks think so anyhow, and ef America don't, dey's ways of learnin' 'um. Yes, suh, it wuz de cullud soldier saved France and America bofe. Black regiments kilt mo' Germans dan all de white armies put together, let 'lone unloadin' steamboats all day long fer a dollar a day. . . . War unloosed de black man's mouf. 37

But Caspey's braggadocio is humorous, and he does finally settle back into the racial pattern of the South. Loosh, Caspey, and the Negroes on the road are discontented with their position as inferiors, but, as in the tradition, they seem more like misled children than men who understand fully what freedom and equality mean.

Ringo is typical in many ways of the Negro of Southern legend. The relationship between Ringo and Bayard is a happy kind of companionship while they are children, and yet it is an intimacy based on the certainty that one can command and the other must obey. They play at war--fighting over and over again the battles of the Civil War, with Ringo fighting for the Confederacy. Ringo and Bayard together shoot at the Yankee groops when they approach the plantation, and they both hide under Granny's skirts. After the Sartoris plantation is burned, Ringo remains with the family, helping Granny in her "horse business" and aiding Bayard in tracking down and killing Grumby. In some respects Ringo is a comic figure, as when he announces to Bayard after emancipation:

37Faulkner, Sartoris, p. 62.
"Do you know what I ain't? . . . I ain't a nigger anymore. I done been abolished." But Ringo is really too intelligent to fit the old Negro image. According to John Sartoris, he is even smarter than Bayard. It is Ringo, not Bayard, who keeps Granny's books for her and reads off the names for her of those who have received help—in a South where it was unlawful to teach a "nigger" to read. Furthermore, Ringo plays too significant a role in the action of the story to fit easily into the old tradition.

In Go Down, Moses, many of the humorous elements connected with the old tradition still remain, but the Negro is definitely a major figure, and he appears as a real human being. Moreover, Faulkner deals openly with the issues which the myth ignores: runaways, miscegenation, and the exploitation of the Negro. Two Negro characters of ante-bellum days stand out, and both are mulattos with McCaslin blood in their veins. Tomey's Turl is the son of Carothers McCaslin and Tomey, his own daughter by a Negro mistress, Eunice. Tomey's Turl is in large part a comic figure. In the story "Was," which opens Go Down, Moses, Tomey's Turl has escaped to visit his girl on another plantation—a frequent occurrence. Although the hounds are sent after him, the whole chase seems almost like a game (similar to the game the hounds play with the pet fox who escapes several times a day).

38Faulkner, The Unvanquished, p. 247.
It is a ritual; the McCaslins know where Tomey's Turl is going, but he does not even need to run. The hounds know the game too and treat him as an old friend rather than an escaped slave. Beneath the surface humor, however, there is real tragedy, and tragedy does not fit into the traditional pattern. The exploitation of Tomey, which involves both incest and miscegenation, is the epitome of Southern injustice. Buck and Buddy, Carother's sons by his white wife, are aware that Tomey's Turl is their half brother, but, under the "system," they must dominate him and they have the legal right to sell him. The hunt itself, which is handled humorously, is far from funny to a thoughtful reader. It points up the real horror of a situation in which a man is not free to visit a woman friend or to marry when and whom he pleases, a system by which brother may hunt brother with hounds, simply because one brother has a Negro mother. The humor of the old tradition is still there, and Tomey's Turl, like the old stereotype, is loyal to his white family; but beneath the humor, the real tragedy of slavery and the grief of Negro-white separation is apparent.

Lucas, Tomey's Turl's son, is the major Negro character of Go Down, Moses. At times, Lucas seems to fit the stereotype and "acts like a nigger." His making of whiskey in his own still is something a "nigger" would do; the humor of the still episode is quite similar to that in older portrayals of the lying, lazy, but comic Negro. Moreover, like the Negro of the tradition, Lucas can work his white employer to
his own advantage. Finding a gold coin in an old mound where he is hiding his still, Lucas is convinced there is more gold around. He wants a three hundred dollar "divining" machine with which to locate the rest of the money. Although he probably has more money in the bank than Roth, he benefits from the white system of noblesse oblige by getting Roth to pay for the machine. When Roth refuses to give him the money, Lucas uses his employer's mule as security on the machine, intending to pay the three hundred dollars and get the mule back when he finds his fortune. Finally, Lucas's old hat, suit, and watch, given to him by Carothers, are reminiscent of the Negro "finery" of the legend, and, like the Negro of the tradition, he is proud of the white family he serves. But beneath these surface similarities to the stereotype, there is a real human being; Lucas does not always "act like a nigger," and it is his refusal to do so which causes him trouble in Intruder in the Dust. His pride in the McCaslins does not come from mere loyalty of Negro servant or tenant to his white landlord but from his awareness that he himself is really a McCaslin; he is the grandson of Carothers and, as such, the rightful heir to the property. His hat, coat, gold watch and chain, gun, and gold toothpick are not just "nigger finery" but are symbols of his McCaslin heritage. His belated greed for gold and his craftiness do not come from his Negro heritage but from the McCaslins. Like Carothers, he is tainted by the
"curse," excessive desire to possess wealth and power, but he has enough moral strength to give up for Molly his chances for a fortune. For her, he removes his hat in the courtroom and calls Roth "Mr. Roth," two things he has always refused to do.

Lucas has the McCaslin concept of honor. When Zachary takes Molly to the big house as his son's nurse and, perhaps, his mistress, Lucas goes to him and demands her return. In the struggle that follows, the gun misfires, but Lucas has proven his manhood; he is just as much a man as Zachary. Molly is returned to him. In Intruder in the Dust, Lucas appears as an indomitable, unswerving old man, whose very presence bothers the whites around him because they cannot force him to be a "nigger." He refuses to defend himself before people he knows will not listen; he will not be obviously frightened by knowledge that he will probably be lynched. He is patient and un-moved. Furthermore, he insists on paying his own way, for he does not intend to be indebted to any man. Lucas seems neither a part of the "system" nor a rebel against it; he is a man, living within himself, a symbol of strength, endurance, and patience.

The Negroes of Absalom, Absalom resemble very little the blacks of romantic literature. The Negro slaves on Sutpen's Hundred are

42Vickerv. n. 128.
described as savages ("wild niggers") who speak French, a language unknown to the townspeople. Because they cannot understand the language, the people of Jefferson assume that the slaves are speaking a barbaric African tongue. The fact that the Negroes speak a savage tongue and work naked convinces the townspeople that Sutpen's "niggers" are savages who must be kept under control by a display of force. Sutpen has frequent brutal wrestling matches with his slaves to prove his strength, and in the absence of his strength during the War, they flee to the Northern lines. They are a long way from Kennedy's laughing, contented, humorous, happy slaves.

Clytie is the faithful house servant of Absalom, Absalom. She struggles side by side with Judith and Rosa through the long, hard months of the Civil War; she helps to bury Charles Bon; she remains with the family until her death long after the war; and she cares for Henry in the old house during his four years of illness when he has come home to die. When she sees the ambulance which Rosa sends to get Henry, she believes the police are coming to arrest Henry for killing Charles Bon. To protect Henry, the last of Sutpen's children, she sets fire to the old house and kills herself and Henry. Clytie's faithfulness follows the pattern of earlier literature, but Clytie differs from the established image more than she resembles it. In the first place, she is a mulatto, Sutpen's daughter by one of his Negro slaves.
Unlike Tomey's Turl and Lucas, she is recognized as one of the family. Yet, because of her Negro blood, she must be treated as a Negro. She serves the rest of the family and sleeps on a pallet rather than on a bed. She is not the smiling, contented, comic figure of tradition. Like her father, she is a mysterious figure, even a little frightening. As a Sutpen, she inherits the Sutpen "curse." She shares in his design, helping in her way to increase and protect the prestige of the Sutpen family. She and Judith work together with whatever scraps are available during the difficult years of the war to make a wedding dress for Judith so that she may be married as a lady of her social class should. She has much of her father's fierceness, but, generally, Clytie is an admirable figure—strong, indomitable, patient, enduring, and faithful.

Charles Bon symbolizes the real tragedy of the "curse." There is no real proof in Absalom, Absalom that Charles Bon is Negro; the idea comes from Quentin and Shreve as they seek to piece the Sutpen story together. Evidently, Bon is white-skinned and, if he is Negro, no one suspects that he is. He is accepted by the community as white. He is cultured, refined, and well-dressed. But Bon is an isolated figure. Quentin and Shreve speculate that he is obsessed with the need to be recognized by his father. If so, it is the "curse" which destroys Charles Bon (and his father as well). Like Absalom in the Old Testament, he is
the rightful heir to his father's property. His father's refusal to recognize Bon as his son and heir brings about "warfare" within the family and the death of the oldest son, just as David's promise of his throne to Solomon brought about Absalom's rebellion and death. The title of the novel is reminiscent of David's mourning at the death of his son and suggests the real grief of Southerners who are separated from one another by a system which cannot recognize black and white as equal. It is the inability of Sutpen (and the South) to recognize his kinship with the Negro and the hunger of Bon (the Negro) to be accepted that bring suffering and destruction for both. The white-skinned mulatto, who is isolated from the Negro community and unaccepted by those members of the white society whose recognition he needs most, is an agonized, lonely figure, far removed from Kennedy's happy Negro in Swallow Barn.

Another Negro of Faulkner's fiction about the ante-bellum South who is a victim of the curse is the Negro of "Red Leaves." Because he is only a possession to his Indian masters and not a human, he is to be buried with him. But as Faulkner portrays him, the Negro is a man who is capable of fear and who has the human desire to live. His simplicity is seen as a virtue. His muscular, mud-caked, naked body is a noble contrast to the well-dressed, flabby bodies of his Indian pursuers. His will to live and his courage contrast sharply with the indolent figure of
Moketubbe who must be carried around on his litter. The Negro is the moral and physical superior of his masters.

In his portrayal of the Negro of the Old South, Faulkner goes far beyond the traditional happy Negro image of older literature. He sometimes makes use of certain characteristics of the old stereotype, but generally his Negroes are neither happy-go-lucky, carefree, nor contented. They are human beings, not character types, the victims of the "curse." Sometimes, they themselves are tainted by the "curse," when they have the white man's greed for power, wealth, and a life of ease. Often, however, they are admirable characters who through suffering have learned patience, humility, and endurance.

Faulkner's twentieth century Negroes are unable to escape the "curse" which victimized their forefathers. For example, in Go Down, Moses Tennie's great-granddaughter becomes Roth's mistress and bears him a son. She loves Roth, but he cannot accept her because of her Negro blood, even though she looks white. The girl, because of the depth of her love and the strength of her pride, seems far more human, more alive, more durable than Roth. But Negro and white are still separated, and not even love can overcome Roth's feeling as a white Southerner that the Negro is inferior. His exploitation of the Negro woman who is not good enough to be his wife is a repetition of Carothers' act of miscegenation and incest a century earlier. Time, war, and reconstruction
have failed to eradicate the evils of the past, and so they continue to be re-enacted in the present.

Rider, the Negro victim of "Pantalooin in Black" in Go Down, Moses, seems to be the moral (and physical) superior of those who hunt him down to kill him. The whites are unable to see the Negro as human and so expect periodic trouble from him. A white deputy expresses the typical feelings of his race:

Them damn niggers... I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they ain't human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes. 43

Rider's story stands in contrast to this image of the Negro, although the whites do not realize it. They are unable to see Rider's actions as expressions of deep grief at the loss of his wife. The Negro cannot stand his empty house, so he goes to work the day after he buries his wife. In work he hopes to forget for a while, but the deputy interprets his action as merely a sign of his lack of feeling. Then Rider turns to whiskey to help him forget but cannot. Finally, he goes to the mill to participate in a dice game which he has known for years is crooked. As if he deliberately seeks trouble, knowing that killing a white man regardless of the circumstances will mean certain death, he waits till

he sees Birdsong's extra pair of loaded dice; and, when the white man
draws his gun, Rider cuts Birdsong's throat with his razor. His
killing of a white man with a razor is seen by the white community as
a typical "nigger" action. They do not connect it with Rider's grief,
for, to them, a "nigger" does not grieve. But to the reader, it seems
evident that Rider is deliberately seeking death. The response of the
whites to the murder is ritualistic, a re-enactment of a pattern
periodically carried out in the South. A Negro, acting like a "nigger"
is expected to act, kills a white man, and the whites act as they are
expected to and hunt him down and lynch him. However, because
Faulkner does not portray Rider simply as "nigger"—a stereotype—
but as a man who is capable of love and grief and thought ("Hit look lack
Ah just can't quit thinking."), the reader accepts him as a man. Beside
such a man as Rider, the whites seem less than men.

Another of Faulkner's Negroes destroyed because of the "curse" is
Joe Christmas. Ironically enough, there is no real proof that Christmas
is mulatto. His grandfather assumes that Joe's father is Negro in spite
of the fact that he claims to be Spanish. There is no reason to believe
that he is Negro. But whether or not Christmas actually has Negro blood
in his veins, the important thing is that he believes he is Negro and
gradually takes on the characteristics which the white community attribute
to the "nigger,"44 and the whites of Jefferson are convinced that he is

44 Nilon, pp. 74, 77.
Negro. So, Joe Christmas acts like a "nigger" by taking away the virginity of a white woman, the worst offense that a Negro can commit in the South; and then, as is expected from a black man in his position, he murders his white lover by cutting her throat with a razor. Again the ritual is re-enacted, and the white pack hunts down and kills the offending Negro, who in his desire to live, his endurance, and finally his resignation to his fate seems more human than those who claim he is an animal. And yet, the whites who track him down are religious people who prepare for the hunt through worship on Sunday; they simply feel it is their duty to defend white womanhood, an unrealistic ideal, from an ambiguous but frightening black shadow. But they also feel guilty about their role. The white Southerner cannot escape the curse which turns him into an animal, and the black Southerner continues to be the victim of the curse.

Dilsey, the Compson's faithful house servant in The Sound and the Fury, is among Faulkner's most admirable characters. She is not bothered by her black skin. It seems significant that she has no white blood in her. Perhaps her utter blackness and the absence of any white heritage is symbolic of the fact that she is not tainted by white greed for power or wealth. She possesses all the best characteristics of the Old South without the bad--compassion (particularly in her relationship to Benjy and Caddy), endurance, patience, humility. Furthermore, she
is at peace with time. She is not obsessed with the past like yet she has the sense of the past which Jason lacks. Her abili know what time it is, even though the clock does not run right, symbol-izes her ability to accept the passage of time, to do efficiently what must be done when it is time to do it without racing the clock as Jason does. She simply accepts her status and takes life as it comes; and, with pity and humility, she endures.

Although Faulkner's view of the Negro varies from novel to novel and is occasionally ambiguous, it is obvious that he accepts neither the myth of Negro inferiority nor the image of the happy Negro of the Old South. As a matter of fact, his Negro characters are often pictured as the moral superiors of the whites around them; certainly, some of his most noble characters are Negro—Lucas, Clytie, and Dilsey. Like the Hebrews, they have known slavery and suffering and have endured. From their bondage they have learned patience, humility, compassion, and endurance. These virtues stand in contrast to the greed, excessive pride, and arrogance of the whites who are their social superiors. At the same time, their enduring and often silent presence is a symbol to the white man of his guilt as exploiter of the Negro. But, most important, Faulkner's Negro characters are not stereotypes but living individuals facing the particular problem which a Southern Negro must face, to remain human in a social structure which does not recognize his humanity.
CHAPTER VI

FAULKNER'S MYTH OF THE SOUTH

Faulkner's view of Southern history is neither traditional nor antitraditional. He neither accepts the myths of the past nor does he completely reject them. His historical method involves a probing into the past and a testing of it. He seems to be searching for an ideal time in history, a golden age of perfect happiness and brotherhood. So he examines the myths which point to such times, and he tests them for truth. The structure of Absalom, Absalom with its several narrators attempting to reconstruct the past, suggests the difficulty of finding historical truth. Each account of Sutpen's career moves from fact to myth, myth which may or may not be truth but which is intended to catch what the narrator believes is the spirit of the past. Moreover, it is difficult to separate the truth from the legend. The past is always cloaked in some mystery, and it is impossible ever to know the complete truth.

As a Southerner, Faulkner knows and cherishes the legends of his native South. But he is also aware of what historians call fact, and he feels compelled to deal with reality. So he tests the myths which point

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to periods in the South's history when life was blissful and ideal.

His works reflect the tension between fact and legend, a tension which must have been real to Faulkner himself. Out of his search he creates a new myth of the Old South.

He examines the myths about the wilderness paradise with its noble savages and American Adams and finds them to be only dreams. Many of the men of the wilderness were men who loved the land, who had the strength, courage, and will to remain in the wilderness and carve a civilized society out of it. They were noble and unique, larger-than-life men, but they were also obsessed with the desire to possess wealth, prestige, and power. Their greed led them to exploit the land and other men who were to plow and plant it so that its owners might live in ease. Their willingness to possess Negroes and to treat them as inferiors, as objects rather than men, brought a curse upon the South, the separation of man from man and the deep-seated longing for reconciliation.

Faulkner looks to the plantation South to probe the myths which picture an ideal feudalistic society in the old South. He contrasts the legendary Southern gentleman with men like Thomas Sutpen who literally dug a plantation out of the wilderness with courage, strength, will, and ruthlessness. Most important perhaps, against the image of the happy Negro, devoted to a kindly master who cares for him, Faulkner places the Negro who is human. Faulkner sees in the ante-bellum South men
of honor and courage, but he also recognizes the horror upon which their aristocratic existence is built, the institution of slavery which exploits and denies black men the right to be called brothers -- and so produces the "curse" which has not yet been lifted.

Then Faulkner turns to the Lost Cause and its gallant heroes. On one hand, he sees men with almost super-human courage who fight for the honor of their homeland, seeking to defend their aristocratic, rural way of life against a greedy and materialistic North. On the other hand, he recognizes that the reasons for fighting are much more complex; they involve a desire to preserve the status quo, to hold on to wealth and power, and to maintain the institution of slavery. For Faulkner, the Civil War is God's judgment on the South for its sins of exploitation. The South did fight bravely in the face of certain defeat, but the cause was not just. However, the War only destroyed the institution of slavery itself; it did not lift the "curse." The Negro was still "nigger" and not brother.

For Faulkner, the past is not ideal, but the present is even worse. Modern man has inherited the evils of the past -- the greed, the willingness to exploit, the fear of race, the grief of separation. He has also lost many of the virtues of the past -- the love of the land, a concept of honor, courage and loyalty, determination. The descendants of the old aristocracy have become degenerate either because they have not been able to
bury their dead heroes and are unable to live in the present or because they have compromised with the materialistic ideas of modern society. Almost all modern Southern whites are tainted by a tendency to view the Negro as their forefathers did, as an object rather than a human. "The white man has forced the Negro to be always a Negro rather than another human being in their dealings." The Negro is still enslaved by the white man's prejudice.

But Faulkner still believes that the "curse" may be lifted. Though the past and present have been plagued by injustice and the inability to recognize human kinship, there is hope for the future. For Faulkner, hope lies in the ability of the black man to learn "self restraint, honesty, dependability, purity—to act as well as the best of white man." Most of all he must endure that by his patient suffering he may stand as a living symbol of their guilt to the whites around him. He remains, like Lucas Beauchamp, "a tyrant over the . . . white conscience" of the South. Someday the South must abolish racial injustice, but it must accomplish

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2 Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, editors, Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville, 1959), p. 211.

3 Ibid.

this act by itself, for the lifting of the "curse" can come only as an act of conscience. It cannot be forced from the outside. But the curse will be lifted. "Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America. . . . But not now! Not now! . . . We will have to wait."

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