

“The Courage to Be” as seen in William Faulkner’s “Dry September”

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It could be said that “Dry September” is a veritable epitome of Faulkner’s world, which denotes Christian existentialism. After Hyatt H. Waggoner we could say that Faulkner’s fiction is existentialist as much of modern painting is existential, and the fiction of Kafka, and the earlier poetry of T. S. Eliot, and the theology of Paul Tillich.¹ And as Tillich himself has said, existentialist art rediscovers in a manner appropriate to our time “the basic questions to which the Christian symbols are the answers.”² Thus, the aim of this paper is to study Faulkner’s existential world, described in “Dry September” by tracing the images of “dust” and “moon” referring to Tillich’s theology as a foothold.

The story appears in *Scribner’s* in January of 1931. It tells of the apparent murder of a black man, Will Mayes, by a band of Jefferson townsmen totally based on a white woman’s claim. There is no distinct evidence of Mayes’ violence to the woman. But the seeming defenders of female honor and racial purity do not care about justice. That situation is best described by the words of the lyncher: “Happen? What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?” (CS 171–72) Truly in this story no one seems without fault. Even Hawkshaw, the one character who tries to save Will Mayes, in a moment of weakness and anger strikes him. It can be said that all of them participate in the racial crime.

However, Faulkner’s treatment of the Negro problem is comprehensive. Faulkner is writing about the Negro–white relationship as it exists in the south. He neither defends nor criticizes the

South. As he said, “I wasn’t trying to—wasn’t writing sociology at all.” (FU 10) Faulkner is not writing about a conflict between the North and the South. Rather, he says that he is writing about people in their ontological conflict :

I was simply trying to write about people. The writer uses environment—what he knows . . . Now, let’s see, I’m going to write a piece in which I will use a symbolism for the North and another symbol for the South, that he was simply writing about people, a story which he thought was tragic and true, because it came out of the human heart, the human aspiration, the human—the conflict of conscience with glands, with the Old Adam. It was a conflict not between the North and the South so much as between, well you might say, God and Satan. (FU p. 58)

In his Christian view of the world Faulkner believes that there is a correct relationship that should exist between God and man and hence between man and man. The evils of man’s life are derived from the perversion of this relationship, in which the Negro problem is included. In that sense we can say Faulkner takes the Negro problem not so much as a social problem but as an ontological one.

Furthermore, since there is no description of Maye’s actual murder in the story, we could say that Faulkner is interested in examining causes and effects of the crime rather than the crime itself. Faulkner shows how the burden of guilt is extended to the people in the community, among whom Minnie and McLendon are directly responsible for

¹ Hyatt H. Waggoner, *William Faulkner From Jefferson to the World* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), p. 251.

² “Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art,” in Carl Michalson, ed., *Christianity and the Existentialists*, Scribner’s, 1956, p. 147.

Maye's killing.

According to Hawkshaw, Minnie Cooper is "about forty. . . . She aint married." (CS 169) She has lived in a small frame house with an invalid mother and "a thin, sallow, unflagging aunt." (CS 173) She sits on her porch each morning for an hour and a half, eats dinner, and lies down until the heat begins to cool. Then she spends her afternoons shopping and haggling over prices. Each year she buys three or four new dresses. Though when young she had an attractive body that "had enabled her for a time to ride upon the crest of the town's social life," (CS 174) now she watches younger girls paired with younger men while "the sitting and lounging men did not even follow her with their eyes anymore." (CS 175) Her bright dresses contrast with her empty and idle days with "a quality of furious unreality." (CS 175) We could say Minnie Cooper obstinately rejects facing reality. First, she stops going to dances and asks her friends to have their children call her "cousin" instead of "aunty." Her drinking whiskey, wearing new dresses, going shopping in the afternoon, and attending movies with friends in the evening seem to be all vain struggles to rebuild her glorious past. The story of the rape appears to be another of her attempts to regain the center of attention. She seems to have succeeded in her wish. However something is wrong; "Her hands trembled among hooks and eyes, and her eyes had a feverish look," and she has to "breathe deeply." (CS 180) It seems that she is suffocated by her spiritual dryness.

Though described as a man of action and dominance, McLendon, who "had commanded troops at the front in France and had been decorated for valor," (CS 171) is finally exposed himself. He returns to his home to strike his wife in his fury. "He caught her shoulder. . . . He released her and half struck, half flung her across the chair." (CS 182) Like Minnie, deprived of his pose and its appearance, McLendon is revealed as less than human. It is as if in their mindless attempt to nullify other human beings, Minnie and McLendon have succeeded in nullifying their own humanity as well.

The tragedy is not only theirs. The women who gather around Minnie share Minnie's values, which is indicated by their physical resemblances. The bright, haggard look is Minnie's most remarked on physical characteristic, "with that bafflement of fu-

rious repudiation of truth in her eyes." (CS 174) Minnie's friends too have haggard, bright look "also with that feverish, glittering quality of their eyes." (CS 180) They have lost all their individuality. And so have the four men who participate in Will Mayes' lynching. That they have lost their humanity is suggested by the anonymity at the moments of their crime:

There was no sound of nightbird nor insect, no sound save their breathing and a faint ticking of contracting metal about the cars. Where their bodies touched one another *they* seemed to sweat dryly, for no more moisture came. "Christ!" a voice said; "let's get out of here."

But *they* didn't move until vague noises began to grow out of the darkness ahead; then *they* got out and waited tensely in the breathless dark. There was another sound: a blow, a hissing expulsion of breath and McLendon cursing in undertone. *They* stood a moment longer, then *they* ran forward. *They* ran in a stumbling clump, as though *they* were fleeing something. (CS 177) [emphasis added]

Here we could say that each of them has been already punished, their individuality abandoned. They are deprived of their authenticity. The depth of self-destruction is manifested in the bottomless vat into which the body of Mayes is cast. The tragedy is not so much Will Mayes as theirs, which is the predicament of a sense of nonbeing and guilt. According to Tillich the name of their predicament is sin:

A profound ambiguity between good and evil permeates everything he [=man] does, because it permeates his personal being as such. Nonbeing is mixed with being in his moral self-affirmation as it is in his spiritual and ontic self-affirmation. The judge who is oneself and who stands against oneself, he who "knows with" (conscience) everything we do and are, gives a negative judgment, experienced by us as guilt. The anxiety of guilt shows the same complex characteristics as the anxiety about ontic and spiritual nonbeing. It is present in every moment of moral self-awareness and can drive us toward complete self-rejection, to avoid the feeling of being condemned—not to an exter-

nal punishment but to the despair of having lost our destiny.³

He also writes, "It is our human predicament that a power takes hold of us, that does not come from us but is in us, a power that we hate and at the same time gladly accept. . . . The name of this power is sin."⁴ In the story the image of this power is symbolized by the image of dust. In the middle section which contains the ultimate murder of the Negro, the word, "dust" is used repeatedly as many as sixteen times. It is stifling and obsessive. We are almost choked by its extremely intense presence. The dust symbolizes the power of sin from which none of the people can escape. No matter how hard one tries, he cannot get away from it. The world seems to succumb with the sense of guilt of the crime. Faulkner said to one of his interviewers: "I think that given time he [=man] will solve most of his problems, except the problems which he is doomed forever to, simply because he is flesh and blood."⁵ The dust symbolizes "the power of sin" in Tillich's words or "the problems that man is doomed forever to" in Faulkner's words. Also, as the Bible and the Prayer Book caution man to remember that he is dust and will return to dust, that unless he be regenerated he lives only toward death, so does Tillich: "We are fascinated by it [=power of sin]; we play with it; we obey it. But we know that it will destroy us if we are not grasped by another power that will resist and control it."⁶ In this predicament of sin, Faulkner cries out for a healing measure, a spiritual reconciliation with the source of being. Does Faulkner see this power that will resist and control the power of sin? Is there any suggestion of redemptive power to terminate the state of sin in the story?

Here we must note the concept of redemption. According to *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*:

Redemption, meaning buying back, implies that a situation has existed in which an individual or a society has been brought into some kind of bondage. This may have been an earthly kind, e.g. an individual may have become a slave, or a tribe may have been subjected by a stronger nation. Alternatively the bondage may have been of a superhuman kind, e.g. an individual may believe himself to have been paralysed by a spell or a taboo or by some demonic agent; a society may be doomed to lie under a ban or a sentence of condemnation. . . . there is no working out of detailed correspondences in an effort to construct a comprehensive theory of atonement. We are left in no doubt that the great deliverance has been achieved; that it was a costly process involving the precious blood of Christ (I Peter i. 18-19); that its benefits (freedom from bondage to sin, the law, demonic powers) could now be appropriated by faith (Rom. 3. 24), and that what could now be enjoyed in part by the redeemed would receive its fulfilment in the age to come (Rom. 8. 23). . .⁷

The Christian message proclaims that we are bought back at the cost of the precious blood of Jesus Christ in order for us to be a new being. What is remarkable here is that the central theme represented by such words as redemption is that of divine compassion leading to an active agent on behalf of those in their serious predicament. As Tillich points out, it is the greatness and heart of the Christian message that God, as manifested in Christ on the Cross, totally participates in every phase of human existence. There is no human condition into which the divine presence does not penetrate.⁸ We could say even in the dying of Will Mayes as well as man's rejection of himself in his guilt the divine presence penetrates.

In the story Faulkner has introduced such a redemptive power, the divine presence in the image

³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 52-53.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), pp. 48-50.

⁵ *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. Robert A. Jelffe (Tokyo: Kenkyusya, 1956), pp. 27-28.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, p. 48.

⁷ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* ed. Alan Richardson & John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 487-8.

⁸ *The Eternal Now*, p. 46.

of the moon. Characteristically, in their dry land, the moon is said to be “silvering the air, the dust, so that they seemed to breathe, live, in a bowl of molten lead.” (CS 177) Indeed, Faulkner first introduces the moon in an image of a stain: “At each armpit [of Butch’s shirt] was a dark halfmoon.” (CS 171) And early in section three the moon is described as a “rumor.” However, in the very moments when the crime is being committed, the moon is bleeding: “Below the east the wan hemorrhage of the moon increased.” (CS 177) The phrase “the wan hemorrhage of the moon” reminds us of Jesus on the Cross in which man, entrapped in the power of sin, is saved. It is notable that on Hawkshaw’s limping toward home, “The moon was higher, riding high and clear of the dust.” (CS 179) It is as if owing to the redemptive power the grace of God pitied guilt-stricken Hawkshaw in his failure to save Mayes. And at the end of the story: “The dark world seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars.” (CS 183) Though dark, the world is still kept under the glare of compassionate divine light.

This God who is watching compassionately, omnisciently is mentioned in *Go Down, Moses* by a Faulkner-like character:

Dispossessed. Not impotent: He [=God] didn’t condone; not blind, because *He watched it*. . .

And Grandfather did own the land nevertheless and notwithstanding because He permitted it, not impotent and not condoning and not blind because He ordered and *watched it*. *He saw* the land already cursed even as Ikkemotubbe and Ikkemotubbe’s father old Issetibbeha and old Issetibbeha’s fathers too held it, already tainted even before any white man owned it by what Grandfather and his kind, his fathers, had brought into the new land which He had vouchsafed them out of pity and sufferance, on condition, from that old world’s corrupt and worthless twilight as though in the sailfuls of the old world’s tainted wind which drove the ships—’

‘. . . That having Himself created them He could

have known no more of hope than He could have pride and grief but He didn’t hope He just waited because He had made them: not just because He had set them alive and in motion but because *He had already worried with them so long; worried with them so long* because *He had seen* how in individual cases they were capable of anything any height or depth. . . . And He probably knew it was vain but He created them and knew them capable of all things because *He had shaped them out of the primal Absolute* which contained all and *had watched them* since in their individual exaltation and baseness and they themselves not knowing why nor how nor even when; . . .⁹ [emphasis added]

The moon, which symbolizes the grace of God, is always watching man’s world and “worried with them.” Because of the total participation of the grace of God through Jesus’s blood on the Cross into the predicament of sin and death, we can agree with Charles H. Nilson that atonement is possible for Faulkner’s characters.¹⁰ According to the *Bible Dictionary*, atonement is “the means by which the guilt-punishment chain by violation of God’s will is broken, as well as the resulting state of reconciliation with God.”¹¹ As what Tillich says in *The Courage to Be*, Faulkner locates the source of courage to be, even in the face of the tensions involved in death, guilt, and meaninglessness in man’s experience of the support of God who participates in every phase of our existence as the ground of power of his being.¹² Because of this support of the grace of God, Faulkner says that man will prevail.

In his answers to questions, in his interviews, and most notably in his famous Nobel Prize speech, Faulkner praises man and keeps telling us that man will “prevail.” Here the key is the word prevail. When looking up the word in *Concordance* to the Bible, we find, in general, the word prevail occurs in contexts where a victory is won with God’s help:

Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I

⁹ William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (New York: A Division of Random House, 1973), pp. 258–9, 282–3.

¹⁰ Charles H. Nilson, *Faulkner and the Negro* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965), pp. 106–111.

¹¹ *The HarperCollins Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 88.

¹² *The Courage to Be*, p. 51.

have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed" (Ge. 30:8); "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Ge. 32:28); Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed. (Ex. 17:11); The Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the LORD gave Cu'shan-rishatha'im king of Mesopotamia into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cu'shan-rishatha'im. So the land had rest forty years. (Jud. 3:10); So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine, and killed him; there was no sword in the hand of David. (1 S. 17: 50); Thus the men of Israel were subdued at that time, and the men of Judah prevailed, because they relied upon the LORD, the God of their fathers. (2 Ch. 13:18) etc.¹³

Prevail, as we have seen, is a Biblical word, and has a religious connotation of gaining a victory with God's help. Furthermore, Faulkner expresses his faith that to prevail means not merely to survive but to elect the right out of one's will with courage in "Commencement Address Delivered by William Faulkner at Pine Manor Junior College, Wellesley, Massachusetts" on June 8, 1953:

In the beginning, God created the earth. He created it completely, furnished for man. Then he created man completely equipped to cope with the earth, by means of free will and the capacity for decision and the ability to learn by making mistakes and learning from them because he had a memory with which to remember and so learn from his errors, and so in time make his [I] own peaceful destiny of the earth. Then God stopped. It was not an experiment. God didn't merely believe in man. He knew man. He knew that man was competent for a soul because he was capable of saving that soul. . . . And He demanded of man only that we work to deserve and gain these things—liberty, freedom of the body and spirit

both, security for the weak and helpless and peace and freedom for all—because these were the most valuable things He could see within our capacity and reach.

So He used that split of the dark proud one's character to remind us of our heritage of free will and decision; He used the poets and philosophers to remind us, out of our own recorded anguish, of our capacity for courage and endurance. But it is we ourselves who must employ them. . . . To do it ourselves, as individuals, not because we have to merely in order to survive, but because we wish to, will to out of our heritage of free will and decision, the possession of which has given us the right to say how we shall live, and the long period of our recorded immortality to remind us that we have the courage to elect that right and that course.¹⁴

What we have to take notice of is that "He [= God] demanded of man only that we work to deserve and gain these things—liberty, freedom of the body and spirit both, security for the weak and helpless and peace and freedom for all." It is for others' needs that we have to work. In the light of divine love, we can see the world where other human beings are struggling under the same compassionate God.

Truly, as Tillich points out, there is an ultimate unity of all beings, rooted in the divine life from which we emerge and to which we return. All beings participate in it. And therefore they all participate in each other. And we participate in each other's having and in each other's not having.¹⁵ That is also the human condition Faulkner suggests:

You get born and you try this and you dont [sic] know why only you keep on trying it you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying and they dont [sic]

¹³ *Cruden's Concordance to the Holy Scripture*, edited under the Supervision of Rev. William Jenks, D. D. (Philadelphia: American Publishing Company, 1890), pp. 192–3.

¹⁴ *Faulkner: A Complete Guide to the Brodsky Collection Volume V: Manuscripts and Documents*, ed. Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin (Jackson and London: University of Mississippi, 1988), pp. 204–5, 7.

¹⁵ *The Eternal Now*, p. 45.

know why either except that the strings are all in one another's way like five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug . . .¹⁶

Tillich continues to point out that when we become aware of this unity of all things, something happens to us. The fact that others do not have changes the character of our having: it undercuts our security and drives us beyond ourselves, to understand, to give, to share, to help.¹⁷ That is, we are now out of ourselves to be new beings and care for others' needs. In other words, knowing that we are totally accepted by the grace of God, we can overcome the despair of self-rejection and have the courage to accept others and try to meet other's needs as Faulkner's good characters do.

A good example in Faulkner of the transformation of a new being is Nancy. She has been transformed from the prostitute Nancy in "That Evening Sun," to the devoted nun Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun*.¹⁸ What is needed for the transformation to be a new being? Nancy says, "All you need, all you have to do, is just believe;" (234) or "Trust in Him." (236) So what we should do is, with faith in mind, to meet others' needs as a new being who is bought back at the cost of the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Here we could say Faulkner expresses in the word "prevail" such a notion of practicing what Faulkner calls "the verities of the human heart," courage, honor, pride, compassion, pity¹⁹ at the cost of self-sacrifice in his faith.

In the story under discussion, Faulkner exemplifies the notion of prevailing in the person of

Hawkshaw. We learn from the story "Hair," written immediately after "Dry September," that lit by the divine light Hawkshaw has prevailed even after the event in "Dry September." Blotner writes in his *Biography*:

On March 20 he tried *The American Mercury* with another story which further explored the life of a character treated earlier. "Hair" took up the barber, Hawkshaw, after the events of "Drouth."²⁰ It was as though Faulkner had become intrigued with characters he had created and was impelled to discover what would happen to them in later life. The story was told by a drummer, a much more humane one than Plunkett's accessory in the murder of Will Mayes. The drummer spoke directly to the reader in a highly conversational tone such as Sherwood Anderson's narrators often used, describing Hawkshaw's fidelity to a dead fiancé and to her parents.²¹

According to the story, Hawkshaw is "A little, sandy-complected man with a face you would not remember and would not recognize again ten minutes later. . ." (CS 137) He is a religious person who goes to church. When he is 21, Sophie Starnes, to whom he is engaged and for whom he has been saving money for several years, dies. In her last breath, she asks Hawkshaw to see to the mortgage her lazy father left behind at his death to her mother. So each year between 1905 and 1916 he pays the interest on it and appears for two weeks each April, on the anniversary of Sophie's death, to repair the house and fences. In 1916, Mrs. Starnes,

¹⁶ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 127.

¹⁷ *The Eternal Now*, p. 45.

¹⁸ Faulkner says that Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun* and the servant Nancy in "That Evening Sun," are the same person. (FU 79)

¹⁹ When asked, "Someone who talked to you gave a list of virtues. I've heard you mention some of them tonight. Do you have that ready?" Faulkner answered, "Well, let's use a little better word to me than virtues—they're the verities of the human heart. They are courage, honor, pride, compassion, pity. . . That is, they are the verities to be practiced not because they are virtue but because that's the best way to live in peace with yourself and your fellows. . ." (FU 133-134)

²⁰ "Dry September" was first published in the January 1931 issue of *Scribner's*. Faulkner's schedule for submission of works for publication shows that it was sent under the title "Drouth" to the *American Mercury* on February 8, 1930, and to *Forum* on March 7, 1930. See Diane Brown Jones, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1994), p. 169.

²¹ Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 650.

on her own deathbed, underlines Sophie's request, as she is afraid to face her husband in the afterlife unless the mortgage is paid off. So, from 1916 until 1930, Hawkshaw diligently pays the entire one hundred dollars a year each April 16th. He spends his entire two-week vacation from Maxey's barbershop cleaning up and refurbishing the property, not for his own eventual use, but so that "those Albama Starnes can come and take it." (145) Considering his age and realizing he will not be financially clear of the Starnes family for a full quarter-century after Sophie's death, he makes no further effort to seek a wife for the next thirteen years. When he is finally able to mark their ledger "Paid in full April 16, 1930," he marries 17-year-old Susan Reed who he has associated with, cut hair for, and protected over the last 12 years.

As we've seen, Hawkshaw is thoroughly devoted and truthful. Though at the time of his failure to save Will Mayes, he struck Mayes, after which he might have suffered from self-rejection. We could say he has prevailed in his devotion to others' needs.

In short, Faulkner's dust in "Dry September" symbolizes the problems of sin which man is doomed forever to and "moon" symbolizes the grace of God, the ground of courage to be, to prevail. Faulkner sees man as a moral creature, limited by his mortal condition. A great deal concerning sin and death are up to the grace of God. There is always a possibility for each of us, even for Minnie and for McLendon, to be a new being at the moment of facing divine grace in faith. In spite of the fact that the eternal dust is with us, there is the same moonlight covering all the creatures in the world which compassion provides for every phase of our being. Faulkner seems to suggest, because of the total penetration of the grace of God into every phase of our existence, one must have the existential "courage to be" and he must face the realities of life, and the complexity of the human condition directly and honestly over his failures and self-rejection.

Notes

- N. B. —The following abbreviations have been used:
 CS: *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1950).
 FU: *Faulkner in the University: Class Conference at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, ed. Frederick L.

Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, Va.: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959).

PF: *The Portable Faulkner*, ed., with an introduction and notes, by Malcolm Cowley (N. Y.: The Viking Press, 1946).

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study William Faulkner’s Christian Existential world in “Dry September” by tracing the images of “dust” and “moon” referring to Paul Tillich’s theology as a foothold. In conclusion “dust” symbolizes the power of sin, “the problems man is doomed forever to” and “moon” symbolizes the grace of God, the ground of courage to be, to prevail.

We could say Faulkner suggests, because of the total penetration of the grace of God into every phase of our existence, one must have the existential “courage to be” and he must face the realities of life, and the complexity of the human condition directly and honestly over his failures and self-rejection.

Key Words : William Faulkner, “Dry Spetember”, “the courage to be”