

Some Thoughts on Faulkner's "Racism"

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We live, fortunately, at a time which has done away with the conviction of white superiority and banned racial prejudice. This has come about during the last decades as a historic development; we may well ask ourselves how we would have, or have indeed, judged, acted or reacted on racial issues some fifty or sixty years ago, as, for instance William Faulkner did while living in a densely race-conscious Southern world.

At present, almost everybody is enlightened and reformed and it does not require any courage to accept and appreciate blacks, their achievements and humanity; it is simply a matter of conforming to general opinion. We are free to scrutinize works and personalities of the past for their racial attitudes voiced at a time which was not so enlightened as ours. To find them at fault can be even a matter of our covert self-congratulation.

Professor Philip Cohen in his essay on "Faulkner and Racism" in *Connotations* 5.1 has very perceptively traced the critical opinion over this period. I also agree with his judicious defence of Faulkner's position and work, I only regret that at the end of his essay he seems to agree with Professor Kinney's view that the figure of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* is an elaborate version of the black mammy stereotype. For this reason, I should like to contribute some thoughts on race in this novel,

*Reference: Arthur F. Kinney, "Faulkner and Racism," *Connotations* 3.3 (1993/94): 265-78; Pamela Knights, "Faulkner's Racism: A Response to Arthur F. Kinney," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 283-99; John Cooley, "Faulkner, Race, Fidelity," *Connotations* 4.3 (1994/95): 300-12; Philip Cohen, "Faulkner and Racism: A Commentary on Arthur F. Kinney's 'Faulkner and Racism,'" *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 112-22; Arthur F. Kinney, "Author's Commentary," *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 119-24; Arthur F. Kinney, "Faulkner and Racial Mythology," *Connotations* 5.2-3 (1995/96): 259-75.

with special attention to the personality of Dilsey, a figure which was somewhat more positively but still rather guardedly discussed by Professor Cooley.

I may add here an observation which, I think, confirms Professor Cohen's arguments. It is interesting to discover that major critics of the fifties and sixties had no trouble to discern in Dilsey the representative of the "ethical norm" (Olga Vickery),¹ or "The ethical norm of Christian humanism" (Robert J. Griffin).² On the other hand, without reference to her race, Vickery considered her—very wrongly I think— "almost as inarticulate as Benjy" (296) and David Minter in a strangely contradictory statement judged "Though her understanding is small, her wisdom and love are large."³ Perhaps the statements were made because at this time these were tacitly considered racial characteristics, even if no mammy-stereotype was involved.

The Sound and the Fury is a novel about a Southern family in decline, actually about two families, the Compsons (white) and their servants, the Gibsons (black). A probe of William Faulkner's racial bias might therefore begin with an assessment of the two families and their members, respectively. In the white family we have Mrs. Compson, a self-pitying, petulant, constantly nagging neurotic, who as an incompetent mother is largely responsible for the disintegration of her family. The responsibility is shared by her husband, Mr. Compson, a mildly cynic alcoholic, who is unable to assist his children or conduct the family's affairs. The two eldest children, Quentin and Candace, are linked in a tragic bond: Quentin, sensitive and weak, oppressed by the family's grand past and obsessed with his sister's sexual escapades, takes his life, while Candace's hunger for love ends in promiscuity; she is ostracized by her hypocritical mother and younger brother Jason. Jason, already mean as a child, reveals himself in a sarcastic monologue as totally self- and money-centered; in unabashed meanness, of which he is actually proud, he cheats his sister and niece of money and swindles his stupidly doting mother. There is finally Benjy, who as an "idiot" is the completely innocent youngest son, unable to reason or speak.

William Faulkner, a racist of an anti-white bias? Unthinkable how the critics would deal with him had he attributed this accumulation of weakness, selfishness, meanness, and failure to a black family! It should

be added that all minor white characters in *The Sound and the Fury*: Uncle Maury, Herbert Head, Gerald Bland, Dalton Ames, or Mr. Patterson are definitely less than likeable.

In contrast, the Gibson family is inoffensive and comparatively normal. Dilsey's husband Roskus serves as driver and handyman, their children Versh, T. P. and Frony take care of Benjy. Luster displays a childish "devilment," which his grandmother Dilsey likens to "Compson devilment." Among the Gibsons, Dilsey is of course the towering figure. In the draft of an introduction written in 1933—that is, long before the public or critical acknowledgement of black equality—Faulkner actually saw Dilsey in "towering" imagery:

There was Dilsey to be the future, to stand above the fallen ruins of the family, like a ruined chimney, gaunt, patient and indomitable⁴

Pictures of houses destroyed or burned during the Civil War are powerful in Faulkner's visual imagination; the chimney as the only part left is a characteristic feature of Civil War photos and a symbol of survival and perseverance. At the beginning of chapter IV, told by an omniscient third-person narrator, Dilsey is described as she emerges from her cabin when "The Day dawned bleak and chill . . ." Only a few lines of this marvelous description of the ancient time- and work-worn figure can be quoted here:

She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts⁵

Dilsey's nature and her functions in this novel are revealed by the motifs Faulkner attaches to her. As she emerges at the beginning of chapter IV on the bleak and chilly Easter morning she collects wood in order to start the fire in her kitchen: to prepare breakfast, warm the house and fill Mrs. Compson's water bottle. Her activities are recorded in slow-motion detail and thus stress the fact that she starts and tends the fire on the hearth of the Compson family, feeds and takes care of the family's needs. When Mrs. Compson appears and frets in her usual peevish

manner, Dilsey peremptorily tells her to get back to bed and rejects her complaints; even reproves her:

I don't see how you expect anybody to sleep, wid you standing in de hall hollein at folks fum de crack of dawn. (162)

This is very direct and graphic; it is certainly not "almost inarticulate," and it is not menial or submissive. Dilsey's tone toward her mistress generally in this chapter is astonishingly authoritative. I would therefore like to take issue with Professor Cooley's view that Dilsey "cannot change her circumstances" (*Connotations* 4, 307). She remains, of course, a black servant in a white family, but in 1928 she has changed her role, she is in control and virtually the mistress of the house. As to her command of language: she speaks Black English, and she uses it with acuity and wit. Two examples may stand for many: her critical comments on Benjy's change of names, which the blacks at once recognize as an evil omen because they have a natural feeling for the numinous quality of names. Dilsey says, "He aint wore out the name he was born with yet, is he?" (36), and she is quoted by her son Versh with "Your mammy is too proud for you" (43)—a wonderfully brief comment of Mrs. Compson's shallow and wrong-headed pride.

That Dilsey serves virtually as the mother for all the Compson children and especially for the weakest, the handicapped Benjy, is documented throughout the novel by a string of motifs. Not only that she feeds, dresses and undresses him, she waits on this unhappy imbecile with unflagging sympathy and loving care, and she knows how to relieve his wordless sorrow with a flower, fire and the satin slipper, symbol of the family's past grandeur.

At the end we see her, stroking the head of the 33-year-old Benjy:

Dilsey led Ben to the bed and drew him down beside her and she held him, rocking back and forth, wiping his drooling mouth upon the hem of her skirt. "Hush now," she said, stroking his head. "Hush, Dilsey got you." But he bellowed slowly, abjectly, without tears; the grave hopeless sound of all voiceless misery under the sun. (188)

Finally, Dilsey's stature is confirmed by the respect she receives from the black community as she walks with Benjy and her daughter to the

Easter service in the black church. For the occasion she is dressed in "colours regal and moribund" (158):

The cabin door opened and Dilsey emerged, again in the maroon cape and the purple gown, and wearing soiled white elbow-length gloves and minus her headcloth now. (171)

On the one hand, a pathetic imitation of white custom, on the other hand a claim to nobility, proudly expressed by stylish garments, and long cherished pride of belonging to a family of ancient prominence.

The Sound and the Fury, a novel about the decline of the South, exemplified in the decline of the Compson family, is also a testimonial to the humanity of their black servant Dilsey, who serves them with dedication, loving attention, and prudence. To judge her understanding "small" can only be explained by the inadvertent projection of earlier racial prejudice. Faulkner in motifs characterizing Dilsey, in her words and comments, and those of others, documents her deep understanding of every member of the family and of their tragic decline. As a woman of deep and broad understanding and humanity she is placed by Faulkner outside of any stereotype. Perhaps we have to ask ourselves if the stereotype of the black mammy, which is so often applied in critical comment to figures like Dilsey, is not in our minds rather than in the text. When we interpret a black female character by making use of it, sometimes it may even serve to confirm lingering racial stereotypes.

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NOTES

¹Olga W. Vickery, "The Sound and the Fury: A Study in Perspective," *PMLA* 69 (1954): 1017-37, rpt. in William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. David Minter (New York: Norton, 1987) 309.

²Robert Griffin, "Ethical Point of View in *The Sound and the Fury*," *Essays in Modern American Literature*, ed. Richard E. Langford (1963), rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Roger Matuz, vol. 68 (Detroit: Gale, 1991) 119.

³David Minter, "Faulkner, Childhood, and the Making of the Novel," William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: An Authoritative Text* 384.

⁴Faulkner 223.

⁵Faulkner 158-59. All quotations from the novel are from this edition.