ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

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M.A., ATLANTA UNIVERSITY, 1988

FAULKNER'S WOMEN: SOCIAL AND FAMILIAL CONFLICTS IN
THE SOUND AND THE FURY, LIGHT IN AUGUST AND
ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

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Dissertation dated May, 1993

William Faulkner's works have prompted numerous studies. Many of these studies have concentrated on Faulkner's treatment of his female characters and their role as either sex objects during their middle age or spinters during their old age. This sort of interpretation of Faulkner's treatment has led different critics, male and female, to accuse Faulkner of antifeminism. This study points to the conclusion that Faulkner was not against women or their sexuality. On the contrary, he was almost always sympathetic toward women and toward their struggle against the social restrictions and injustices of a male-dominated society. This conclusion is supported by analyses of Faulkner's women whom many critics have failed to recognize. Concentration will be placed on The Sound and Fury (1929), Light in August (1932) and Absalom, Absalom! (1936).
Chapter I is an overview of the prevailing opinions of various critics addressing Faulkner's handling of social and familial barriers erected against women. Chapter II contains an account of the unconquered women, who are basically composed of females whose self-esteem and strong will helped them to reject the male's control or dominance and who kept the plantations going during the Civil War. Chapter II comments on the ghosts, or those women who were betrayed by the social system and the unfulfilled promises of its male-dominated society. Chapter III addresses the ghosts who have lived for the greater part of their lives as spinsters. In Chapter IV attention is turned to the rebels, or those women who reject, quite openly, Southern ideals concerning womanhood. Chapter V is devoted to revealing Faulkner's attitude toward and admiration for the endurance, patience, and courage of the unconquered, the ghosts and the rebels.
FAULKNER'S WOMEN: SOCIAL AND FAMILIAL CONFLICTS IN
THE SOUND AND THE FURY, LIGHT IN AUGUST AND
ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
MAY 1993
PREFACE

The dissertation deals with the social barriers and familial restrictions that were imposed against women in Faulkner's South. In other words, Faulkner's portrayal of his female characters in the prominent works of his time of genius, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, does not only reveal his admiration, support and sympathy for them, but shows his indirect criticism of the male-dominated Southern society and its tradition as well. These novels introduce the special world of Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County and offer an elaborate description of its topography and its people. Faulkner's characters, particularly the women, live under a code of social barriers and familial prohibitions that structure the self-understanding of Yoknapatawpha County.

Because of the tormented abundance of social and familial conflicts and of the number of vital female characters and their direct connections to these conflicts, I have placed Faulkner's women in three groups: The Unconquered, The Ghosts and The Rebels. It is hoped that this analysis of the social and familial conflicts and of the women who fall within these groups will clarify many readers' understanding of Faulkner's works and the social and familial milieu of Faulkner's time.

This study includes four chapters of critical analysis of each group of women mentioned. Chapter I is introductory. It presents the prevailing opinions of critics covering Faulk-
ner's handling of social barries and of relationships between men and women.

Generally, criticism concerning male and female relationships in Faulkner’s works—as we will see in the following chapter—is negative and charges that Faulkner is biased against women, or toward certain groups of them at least. This chapter also links Faulkner’s concepts of social barriers and of women to his criticism of traditional Southern concepts of race and women.

Chapter II discusses those women who fall within the first group, "The Unconquered." This group is basically composed of those females who refused their men's "yearning" to subjugate and control them and kept the plantation going during the Civil War, or those who generally held their families together amid disruption and confusion. Furthermore, it establishes a proof of Faulkner’s admiration for their patience and endurance.

In Chapter III "The Ghosts" are discussed. These are those de-sexed females, usually spinsters, who have lived for the greater part of their lives as barren "ladies." The implication is that they rejected, betrayed and used by their society and male-dominated ideas. This chapter argues that their patience, endurance and strength won Faulkner’s admiration as well as the reader’s praise.

In Chapter IV attention is turned to "The Rebels." These young women are the complete reverse of the "chaste
Southern lady," and they reject quite openly Southern ideals concerning womanhood, familial codes of honor and social status. This chapter reflects Faulkner's Sympathy for these women and his indirect criticism of current social and sexual barriers or restrictions.

Chapter V of the dissertation is devoted to presenting Faulkner's admiration, respect and support for women and for their patience, endurance, rebellion and rejection of the social barriers and sexual restrictions placed upon women in typical Southern communities. By portraying the above mentioned groups as symbols of patience, endurance and leadership, Faulkner is criticizing and rejecting the social structure of the South. Even though he does not state his criticism directly, his tone is obvious and his target is clear.
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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW

For the nineteenth-century romancers, America represented the promises, whether fulfilled or betrayed by experience, of freedom and of life under unprecedented political arrangements, whereas Europe embodied feudalism, oppression, suffering and defeat. American life was "innocence;" Europe was a past burdened with guilt, as its history, myths, and superstitions attested. However, for many American writers such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner, there was no need to turn to Europe and its past for images of tragedy and defeat. The South after the Civil War became their model for these images. For example, Faulkner's region—even his hometown—"had known the invasion of alien armies, skirmishes and battles, destruction of homes, looting of property, the death of its young men, and, after the war, the long, difficult effort to reconstitute a society ripped apart by defeat, pillage, and devastation."1

The Old South differed from the rest of the United States in that its hierarchicai social system made mobility between the classes much less feasible than elsewhere. "The egalitarianism to which, at least in principle, the institutions, rhetoric, and folk fantasies of American public life in other regions were committed was, in the South, greatly

compromised by a social system based upon chattel slavery."\(^2\)

These were the social conditions that Mark Twain had represented in medieval costume in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, a book in which the simple application of "egalitarian Yankee pragmatism to a feudal slavocracy led not to a more just society, but to revolt."\(^3\) The intransigence of the South regarding the democratic dogma espoused elsewhere in the United States is what most characterized the culture and history of that region. In effect, in Faulkner's literary works the values attributed to Europe by his authorial forebears was characteristic of Southern history and was internalized in the experiences of Southern men and women aware of their own heritage.

It is necessary now to examine, as precisely as is possible, just what, as Faulkner sees it, is the history of his world, Yoknapatawpha County. In outline it is this:

... First there were the Indians...Chickasaw. They were dispossessed and later evicted by white men. The most ruthless and rapacious of the white men became plantation owners and exploited the land by means of concurrent exploitation of Negro slave labor. These crimes brought a curse, fulfilled in the Civil War and the reconstruction, which destroyed the plantation economy and the aristocratic families which had been founded on it. The land was overrun by a new race of exploiters, Northern carpetbaggers and native Scalawags, who threatened and who still threaten to turn not only the South,

\(^2\)Ibid.,

but the whole world, into a mechanized desert.\textsuperscript{4}

This overview sheds light on the historical events of the United States. It reflects the beginning of the country's discovery, the brutality of the settlers in killing the aboriginal Indians, the Civil War between the Northern and the Southern states, and the age of industrialization and technology and its impact upon the environment.

Generally, it is Faulkner's women, or some of them at least, whose responsibility it is to endure, to carry on while the men go off to war, to keep the once proud families from crumbling completely, and to outlast the curse of slavery. War and subjugation constitute a situation which exerts perhaps the strongest pressure upon man's will and capacity to endure, and Faulkner seems to realize that it is not only the men at war who have to somehow find the courage to endure, but also the women who are left behind.

Those who tend to ignore the significance of sex and women in Faulkner's novels need to be reminded of the extent to which his works are saturated with sexual themes. Faulkner believes that one can illuminate human frailties by placing a character in a sexual situation. The illumination is made even more acute by placing the character in an abnormal sexual situation.\textsuperscript{5} For example, in The Sound and the Fury the action

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., 121.

focuses on the psychotic Compsons. There is Quentin, who cannot have a normal relationship with other women, who loves his sister Caddy with a veiled incestuousness, who broods on the mystery of the female and grows physically sick when he thinks of any other male becoming sexually involved with Caddy, and who finally drowns himself rather than endure a life marred by his sister’s belonging to another man. Furthermore, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the first narrator, Miss Rosa Coldfield, is a repressed old maid who had been on the verge of marriage to Colonel Sutpen, but ended up a sexually frustrated, embittered old woman who hated him. In Faulkner’s fiction a plethora of examples show that the importance of women and their sexuality cannot be ignored or underestimated in any discussion of Faulkner’s literary works.

Despite the fact that the South had developed its own attitudes toward its varied historical experience, assumptions Faulkner shared and furthered in his fiction while criticizing them simultaneously, the tension is strong, in Faulkner’s work, between the desire to have had a history and the realization that even before the war the seed was sown of the defeat of the of the South, the destruction of its way of life, and the downfall of its aristocracy. This aristocracy had, in the nature of things, certain high and rigidified obligations toward those whom it owned or led. Faulkner is quite specific in making clear "the character of these obligations and the cost, not only to the aristocrats, of
their flouting or ignoring the responsibilities intrinsic to their position.⁶ At the same time, he makes it clear that the aristocratic class subscribed to its own code of honor, at once a badge of distinction and a curse, as appears in his chronicle-histories of the Sartorises in *The Unvanquished* and the Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury*.

In order to understand Faulkner's characters, both male and female, it is important to realize that he deals heavily with Southern history, legend and myth. It is important to say that Faulkner's work covers a long period of time, from much before the American Civil War to World War II (1807-1933). This time-period is presented in his fiction by the birth of Thomas Sutpen (1807) in Virginia to Jason Compson's sale of the family mansion upon the death of his mother (1933). In fact, the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* even refers to World War II. However, the issue of the chronology of each novel will be addressed in detail in the following chapters. Though Yoknapatawpha County, the mythical region of Northern Mississippi which Faulkner created for the setting of his work, is not an actual place, it is similar to Lafayette County, Mississippi, and contains the groups of people which any typical Southern county contained.

Faulkner's major novels, in a rather uncanny manner, follow the reaction of what James A. Snead calls "nous," that

⁶Ibid., 23.
is to say the faculty of intellectual apprehension and intuitive thought which is sometimes identified with the highest or thought which is sometimes identified with the highest or divine intellect, to the threat of social chaos: "(1) anxiety; (2) classification; (3) ranking the classifications; (4) dissemination by written and oral repetition; (5) enforcement by threatened or real violence; (6) effacement of the process." Faulkner’s lifework develops along the lines of such a defense against chaos, discovering particular pitfalls at each stage. For instance, The Sound and the Fury addresses a major revolt, represented by Caddy, against the family’s code of honor, which is part of the totality of the social pressure which is imposed upon women. Furthermore, the novel reflects minor revolts against the discrimination of the anxious nous: Quentin’s and Benjy’s syntax, the novel’s typography, and the general lack of sequence in thought-processes; Quentin’s incestuous wish to merge with his sister; and, finally, his desire to escape individuation entirely by means of madness and suicide. In addition to Caddy’s revolutionary attitude, Lena Grove of Light in August has a definite capacity for intellectual apprehension to accept her role in society and to reject the social structure which imposed its codes of restrictions upon women.

Recent critics of Faulkner, including David Minter,

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Leslie A. Fiedler, Maxwell Geismar, Irving Howe and Mary Cooper Robb, have emphasized the novelist's profound need to believe himself to have been his own father in order to escape, not only the Freudian family romance and literary anxieties of influence, but also the cultural dilemmas of what King terms "'the Southern family romance.'" 8

In his Love and Death in the American Novel Leslie A. Fiedler gives a good deal of attention to Faulkner's attitude toward women, and many of his comments are gross exaggerations. In general, Fiedler believes that Faulkner echoes in his fiction a great deal of the American male's typical antifeminism:

Not content with merely projecting images of the anti-virgin, he insists upon editorializing against the women he travesties in character and situation. No Jiggs and Maggie cliche of popular anti-feminism is too banal for him to use; he reminds us that men are helpless in the hands of their mothers, wives, and sisters; that females do not think, but proceed from evidence to conclusions by paths too devious for males to follow; that they possess neither morality or honor; that they are capable, therefore, of betrayal without qualm or quiver or guilt, but also of inexplicable loyalty . . . that they are unforgiving and without charity to other members of their own sex . . . that they use their sexuality with cold calculation to achieve their inscrutable ends, etc., etc. 9

It is obvious that Fiedler's claim against Faulkner's


antifeminism is beyond the truth and the reality because, when examining Faulkner's fiction, one can find Faulkner's sympathy, admiration and support for women and their patience, endurance and strength against Southern social and familial restrictions.

Other critics have also pointed out what they consider to be Faulkner's insistently negative treatment of women. For example, in his article entitled "The Negro and the Female" Maxwell Geismar says that "Faulkner can see humanity only in terms of its aberrations." In speaking of Faulkner's feelings of discontent regarding modern society and its inhabitants in general, and women in particular, Geismar states that we have also noticed where the crux of Faulkner's discontent has come to rest. As the series of women in Light in August are the factors of Joe Christmas's degeneration, we have seen that Faulkner himself has focused his anger on the feminine portraits which mark his work as a whole. We recall Cecily Saunders, the "papier-mache Virgin" of Soldier's Pay. This "Virgin," turned into a vicious prostitute, becomes the Temple Drake of Sanctuary. The neurasthenic Mrs. Compson of The Sound and the Fury is perhaps the most purely contemptible character in the novel. We remember the Belle Mitchell of Sartoris, whose effect, like that of Joanna Burden of Light in August, was of "a rich and fatal drug, a motionless and cloying sea" in which the Faulknerian male watches himself drown.

Once again one can see the "short-sightedness" of Faulkner's

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11 Ibid., 246.
critics and their immature judgment of him when they deal with his female characters. It is true that Faulkner is discontented with his society and its tradition; however, this does not mean that he is discontented with women.

In a similar manner, David Minter expounds on Faulkner’s inclination toward misogyny: "Faulkner is all too willing to proclaim the subtle and insidious powers of women, to evoke a sense of their dizzying attractions, even to speculate, in the style of legend, on female malevolence as one of the root terrors of existence." Minter adds that Faulkner does not hesitate to permit his male characters to express their negative feelings about women:

In *Absalom, Absalom*! Henry Bon learns that you "can’t beat women anyhow and that if you are wise or dislike trouble and uproar you don’t even try to." This statement reflects "a lesson Faulkner never tires of repeating, though always with the certainty that men, being victims of themselves, must prove incapable of learning it. Quentin Compson goes further than Bon: "Women," he says, "are like that...they have an affinity for evil." The Rev. Hightower, urging Byron Bunch not to marry Lena Grove, remarks, "No woman who has a child is ever betrayed; the husband of a mother, whether he be the father or not, is already a cuckold... There have been good... women who were martyrs to brutes... . But what woman, good or bad, has ever suffered from any brute as men have suffered from good women?"

Despite these critics’ derogatory remarks on Faulkner’s women, they do admit that he is not merciless in his attack on

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13Ibid., 133.
all women. Old women, Negro women, and particularly "sexless" women, they insist, escape his scorn. Irving Howe, for instance, writes:

Such splendid old ladies as Miss Rosa Millard, Aunt Jenny DuPre and Dilsey, all conspicuously beyond the age of sexual distraction, command Faulkner's unmixted admiration. They neither threaten nor attract; they give household orders and provide intuitive wisdom; they are beyond the magical powers of sexuality. But there is hardly a young woman in his books who does not provoke quantities of bitterness and bile; and so persistent is this distaste for the doings of 'woman-flesh' that it cannot be dismissed as a vagary of either Faulkner or the characters who convey it.  

Similarly, another Faulkner critic, Mary Cooper Robb, points out that

Faulkner never seems to make a reality of women unless they are what has been called "Southern Madonnas of low mentality" or stubbornly old . . . like Miss Habersham or Aunt Jenny or negroes like Molly and Dilsey and Nancy . . . Their responsibilities include their menfolk, servants, young relatives, and animals, toward all of whom they exhibit a disillusioned patience which Faulkner treats with respectful amusement.  

Fiedler also states that

Until his very latest books, Faulkner has treated with respect only aged females, white ladies or colored women past the menopause. The elderly maiden or widowed aunt is the sole female figure in his fiction exempt from travesty and contempt.  


16Fiedler, Love and Death, 77.
It is true that each of the above-mentioned comments would suggest that it is necessary to group Faulkner's women if one is to make any meaningful analysis of them. However, their comments failed to explore the main reason behind such grouping. That is to say, the reason behind this grouping is related to women's age and their sexuality and to their social and familial struggle, rather than to the false claim of the various critics who declare that this division is caused by Faulkner's "mistreatment of women" and his hostile attitude toward them.

In an attempt to categorize or type Faulkner's women and to separate those whom he admires or respects from those whom he does not, Irving Malin has separated Faulkner's women into two large groupings: "the sexual and the asexual." In fact, David Miller claims that the presence or the lack of sexuality or "femaleness" is the primary determining factor in Faulkner's conception of female character:

Faulkner views his feminine characters according to their sex, rather than species, according to their fecundity and the animal attraction which it begets in man. The degree to which a character possesses this femaleness determines her relationship to the plot and to other characters. In general, Faulkner places his women in one of two categories: they are either earth-mothers or ghosts. The ghosts are either sexless, or their sex is ignored; the earthmothers are all of the female that is admirable, or despicable: in either case it is fertility (or lack of it) which forms their characters.  

However, Miller failed to recognize Faulkner's conception of

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potential respect and admiration for all of his female characters, for their struggle, patience and battle against social barriers and familial restrictions.

It is clear that Faulkner himself had established this "sexual" classification or categorization of women, at least by the time he wrote *Absalom,Absalom!* In attempting to account for Henry Sutpen's inability to understand his father's first marriage (with an actual ceremony) to a part-Negro bride, Mr. Compson presents a direct statement of Southern gynelatry:

> It would be the fact of the ceremony . . . that Henry would balk at . . . a youth with Henry's background, a young man grown up and living in a milieu where the other sex is separated into three sharp divisions, separated (two of them) by a chasm which could be crossed but one time and in but one direction--ladies, women, females--the virgins whom gentlemen someday married, the courtesans to whom they went while on sabbaticals, upon whom that first caste rested and to whom in certain cases it doubtless owed the very fact of its virginity.\(^\text{18}\)

Having said that Faulkner's interests within his writing are women and their sexuality, it is important that those critics who tend to ignore the significance of sex and women in Faulkner's novels need to be reminded of the extent to which his works are saturated with sexual themes. Faulkner apparently believes that one shows human character most illuminatingly by placing a person in a sex-situation. It is obvious from his portrayal of the female characters and their sexuali-

ty that Faulkner comprehends the importance and the cruciality of sex and women in any society. Moreover, Faulkner’s ability to connect women and sex refutes the claims of those who have failed to see his point.

The human casualties of division may be sensitive to what their fellow citizens ignore, but racial oppositions overwhelm even those who recognize and seek to change them. In a radically segregationist society, polarized thinking supports a thoroughly destructive economic system. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen encounters "a land divided neatly up," yet division "had never once been mentioned by name." One Mississippi woman speaks of "'race talk ...' euphemisms and pretense under certain circumstances," whereby racial ideologies are covered up. The central concerns of Faulkner scholarship up to now—"the Negro," "endurance," "the human heart"—overlook, much in the manner of Southern "race talk," the oppressive social rhetoric that has produced the need to "endure." The novels I treat here, as much as any others in modern fiction, self-consciously analyze the linguistic supports of an immoral social system, examining those buried rhetorical strategies that facilitate racial segregation—elements of division that show their flaws best in written form.

Faulkner’s most compelling protagonists do not seek division but, rather, its often unconventional remedies: miscegenation, incest, Edenic refuge in the Big Woods, or
schizoid mental merging. Absolutisms, facing the test of experience, break down under the pressure of the unsystematic real. Faulkner’s major novels, The Sound and the Fury, Light in August and Absalom,Absalom!, primarily concern the white mind and its struggles with the systems of division it has created. For example, The Sound and the Fury deviates in many ways from standard fictional treatments of the white, and also of the black, for the main narrative conflict is not any putative "Negro" problem. The problem in fact, is a white one; we here inquire into the deleterious effects of racial division upon the white mind. The white Compsons’ perceptions are askew, each in its own way. Through its skewed social relations, the novel features a discourse that puts its readers somewhere else. One problem concerns the peculiarity that, by the same confusion which has caused Benjy to lose his customary ascendancy in the social hierarchy, readers have also lost their ability to understand the novel.

The real nature of the social and sexual struggles in The Sound and the Fury is often presented in the form of spatial barriers. For instance, in the seminal image of the novel, Caddy disobediently peers from a tree at her grandmother’s corpse, seen through a window. Her daughter Miss Quentin later escapes by climbing down the same pear tree. Her brother, also a Quentin, tries to shoot Caddy’s and Herbert Head’s voices "through the floor" (74). The theme of "barriers" emerges most cogently in the opening words: "Through the
fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting" (84). Benjy keeps peering through the fence at a plot of earth once his, later sold for Quentin's Harvard education. Were Benjy to go "through the fence" (74) he would violate the bargain which has exchanged his precious land for money, but he does not know this and breaks through the barrier.

It is clear that the familial restriction upon Caddy and her life made it almost impossible for her to have any influence upon her life and her family. Being a female in a male-dominated society has caused her frustration, isolation and rejection by the rest of the Compson family members. Her behavior as well as her social status are judged, unfortunately, according to her sexuality. In other words, the harsh judgment she has to face is a result of being a female in a male-dominated society.

The tragedy of Caddy's life is not so much her isolation and her bleak existence that Faulkner's fiction suggests; it is rather that she has had so little effect on anyone. Quentin and Mr. Compson are dead; Jason lives largely to torment her and her child, Miss Quentin. Mrs. Compson muddles Miss Quentin's life just as she had Caddy's; Benjy can only wail; no one has learned to love, or to cope, from her example. Caddy has only the use of other people, chiefly men, who cynically want to make use of her. As a child Caddy provides the only real love Benjy is ever to know; as an
adolescent, she understands Quentin's anguish better than he does himself; as an adult, she is motivated solely by her love for her daughter, Miss Quentin, and is consequently a pawn in Jason's manipulation. However, Caddy is the victim of a social morality—and a mother and a husband—who consider the state of one's hymen the sole index to one's value. Charity, love per se, is worthless; and the Compson family completes its final somersault to damnation because it condemns its one caring child.

In Light in August Joe's basic desire to reject everything from women is revealed in his relationship with Joanna Burden. Indeed, even though Joanna leaves him food he still prefers to steal his nourishment. Later, even when he has already seduced her, he prefers to violate her anew each time. With these acts Joe is asserting his masculinity. He is refusing to allow the woman to have any influence on his life. In fact, each time he sleeps with Joanna it is "as if he struggled physically with another man" (85). Joe also views women as being capable of destroying his own individuality. Consequently, when Joanna tries to force him to change radically he must destroy her or his own sense of security and isolation will be violated and he will surrender his own individuality. Simply, Joe kills Joanna in self-defence because she has just attempted to kill him and would have succeeded if her gun had not failed to fire. Moreover, it is Joanna's habit to leave food for him in the kitchen. One
evening when he enters the house, the food that is set out for him seems to offer an explanation of her behavior. "Set out for the nigger. For the nigger" (249), he thinks. In other words, Faulkner presents to the reader Joanna's behaviors, which have led to Christmas' action.

In *Light in August* Lena Grove has an immediate and obvious impact on her culture. Although Byron Bunch is Faulkner's steady voice of reason in that novel, even he learns from Lena to be resourceful, understanding, and assertive. Much more primitive than Caddy Compson, Rosa Coldfield and Joanna Burden, Lena is able to act partly because social and familial conventions are relatively unimportant to her. The facts that Joanna has learned through her experience in the South and its social structure—which reflects Faulkner's attitude—is that she is an outsider and that she is able to see the error of her father's judgment or comments on the Negro people: "You must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level" (240). In addition, she has learned that the "racist and negative" attitude of the white toward the Negro was wrong, too.

In *Absalom,Absalom!* Judith Sutpen has both awareness and the ability to act. It is she who buries Charles Bon's body, runs the homestead, and takes in Bon's child and rears him lovingly, even through the yellow fever epidemic which causes her own death. Ultimately, although *Absalom,Absalom!* is focused on the narrative process of Quentin and his grotesque
discoveries, Judith's acts continue, ameliorating the damage of warped philosophies and other people's misdirected energies.

Keeping in mind the importance of sex and the importance of the Southern social and familial structure, I have chosen to place Faulkner's women in three categories: "the unconquered," "the ghosts," and "the rebels." Even though Faulkner's women are being treated in groups, this does not submerge or overlook their individual characteristics and the social or familial conditions of each female character whom Faulkner created to magnify these "rough" conditions and his tone of sympathy and admiration for these women.
CHAPTER TWO
THE UNCONQUERED

William Faulkner came out of an old-fashioned society, and his "new-fashioned" fictional world remains a society in which the roles of the sexes are clearly defined. Between the sexes there is a defiant polarity—though this need not, and generally does not, entail antagonism. Nevertheless, just because Faulkner’s conception of woman is not traditional, it has been frequently misunderstood by his contemporary readers and by our contemporary readers. Furthermore, Faulkner’s admiration, respect, and sympathy are crystallized when dealing with the unconquered women, those who remained steadfast and defeated the male’s ambition to subjugate and control them, for their endurance, their patience and their struggle against Southern social barriers. Dilsey Gibson of The Sound and the Fury and Judith Sutpen of Absalom, Absalom! reflect these traits. By portraying these women as symbols of patience and endurance, Faulkner blames, criticizes and condemns the social barriers and familial restrictions of the South. Even though he does not state directly his criticism, his tone is obvious and clear. Both of these issues will be the focus of the following discussion.

At the University of Virginia, when Faulkner was asked whether he found it easier to write about men or women he replied that it was much more "fun" to write about women, and he gave a reason: "Because I think women are marvelous,
they’re wonderful."\textsuperscript{1} However, that he found women wonderful does not rest upon his own assertion. His fiction provides overwhelming evidence of his interest in women, his sympathy for them, his acknowledgement of their force and power, and his belief in their crucial importance to the human community. One of Faulkner’s major purposes, in his fiction, as Wesley Kort states in her article "Social Time in Faulkner’s Fiction," is to provide us with "fictional characters who in their concreteness and particularity carry conviction and suggest something of the mysterious uniqueness of the flesh-and-blood woman."\textsuperscript{2}

Women do not live by men’s code of honor. On the contrary, their clear-eyed apprehension of what can be done and ought to be done usually compels them to regard as hopelessly abstract the ethical patterns that men impose upon themselves. Women—at least Faulkner’s women, Caddy Compson of The Sound and the Fury and Lena Grove of Light in August—do not live by the prescribed codes of honor, but this does not mean that they do not have their own standards of courage and justice. Theirs, however, are not quite those of their men, and Faulkner does not expect them to be. In fact, as one explores Faulkner’s fiction, it becomes clear that he believes

\textsuperscript{1}Joseph L. Blotner, ed., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 55.

\textsuperscript{2}Welsey Kort, "Social Time in Faulkner’s Fiction." Arizona Quarterly 37 (Summer 1981): 103.
it is a mistake for either sex to try to adopt the special values of the other. One can find that Faulkner rejects the imposed codes of restrictions on Southern women. For example, in The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner views Dilsey Gibson's suffering and subjugation as a result of the Southern social system, which deprived women of their rights.

Faulkner's treatment of women throughout his fiction indicates that he did indeed find them "marvelous" and "wonderful" in their capacity for horrifying depravity, as well as in their capacity for sheer goodness. All of which is to say that Faulkner saw women essentially as human beings; their special sex role did not make them inhuman in the eyes of this male novelist. In fact, because of their special role, women occupied a place at the center of Faulkner's fictional world.

Generally, it is Faulkner's women--the unconquered, at least--whose responsibility is to endure, to carry on while the men go off to war, to keep the once-proud families from crumbling completely, and to outlast the curse of slavery; they "remain human, responsible, and creative." War is indeed the situation which exerts perhaps the strongest pressure upon man's will and capacity to endure, and Faulkner seems to realize that it is not only the men who have to somehow find the courage to endure, but also the women who are left behind.

Let us now take a closer look at those undaunted matriarchs whose patience and endurance gain Faulkner's
admiration and respect, those white sisters and wives and female Negroes who had been left behind. As a rule, they are strong, courageous, practical, indomitable, and free from sexual obsessions. It is appropriate to begin any discussion of Faulkner's characters with Dilsey of *The Sound and the Fury*, for she is a symbol of Faulkner's admiration, respect and sympathy and sets the pattern for this group, the unconquered. Dilsey is a crystalline example of those women who went through torments and unjustifiable social pressures, restrictions and misfortunes.

*The Sound and the Fury* is the story of the decline of a Southern aristocratic family, the Compsons. Despite their economic misfortunes and moral degeneration, however, there is one among them who is able to maintain some semblance of order and peace in the almost overwhelming chaos. Ironically enough, Dilsey Gibson, the Negro maid and cook, is the stabilizing force and the backbone of the family. She cares for the family and keeps them from falling completely apart through her firmness, stability and faith. Though she is mindful of her position, she takes an active part in the lives of the Compsons and is always there to help when problems arise. Dilsey is not the self-abasing, passive, indifferent type that one might expect of an illiterate, limited Negro servant of her day. In a compassionate manner, she attends not only to the physical needs of the family but to their emotional and psychological needs as well. Dilsey is truly
the most praiseworthy character in *The Sound and the Fury*.

One cannot help but recall Dilsey when reading Lillian Smith's description of the Negro matriarch in her work *Killers of the Dream*. In the novel Smith describes the role of the "mammy" who was so intimate a part of the Southern white household:

Her role in the family was involved and of tangled contradictions. She always knew her place, but neither she nor the employer could have defined it. She was given a limited authority, but it was elastic enough to stretch into dictatorship over not only children, but the white mother and sometimes even the male head of the family. They leaned on her strength because they had so little of their own or because she had so much, and, once leaning, they could not free themselves from subjection. Many an old nurse, knowing all there was to know of her white folks, familiar with every bone of every skeleton in their closets, gradually became so dominating that her employers actually feared her power.³

From the beginning of *The Sound and the Fury* one can see that Dilsey Gibson has an extremely important role in the decaying household of the Compsons. For example, in the Benjy section there is evidence of her stamina and ability to see the truth in the family history which continues throughout the novel. Dilsey Gibson first appears long after Mr. Compson's funeral, as Mrs. Compson and the idiot son, Benjy, are getting ready to visit the cemetery. She wonders aloud why Jason, now the head of the household, does not get a new surrey since "this thing going to fall to pieces under you all some day"

This seemingly insignificant comment reveals her sense of the deteriorating condition of the Compsons. One also can notice that throughout this first section Dilsey understands Benjy and cares for him with affection. She is the exact opposite of Mrs. Compson, the mother, who cannot understand her son and is emotionally incapable of giving honest love to him because she is so self-centered. She feels that her idiot son is a personal judgment and a curse on her, and she can only pity him, as she does herself. Dilsey, on the other hand, understands his needs and does all she can to satisfy them. When he appears overwrought in the carriage just before they leave for the cemetery, Dilsey tells the mother to "give him a flower to hold" because she knows this will comfort him. "That's what he wanting," she says. Typically, the mother is only concerned with herself: "No, no...you'll get them all scattered" (10). Nevertheless, Dilsey remedies the problem by taking the flower from Mrs. Compson's hand and giving it to Benjy herself. The mother realizes, however, her insufficiency and the fact that she depends on Dilsey for everything. When Jason asks her what he should do about Uncle Maury's constant borrowing of their money, she says, "Why ask me? I don't have any say-so. I try not to worry you and Dilsey" (12).

Dilsey is indeed the antithesis of Mrs. Compson in every way. For instance, Mrs. Compson has always been sick, useless, helpless and dependent on Dilsey to manage the
family's affairs. Cleanth Brooks would agree that Mrs. Compson is one of Faulkner's more despicable women characters, and probably his most despicable mother:

The basic cause of the breakup of the Compson family is the cold and self-centered mother, who is sensitive about the social status of her own family, the Bascombs, who feels the birth of an idiot son as a kind of personal affront, who spoils and corrupts her favorite son, and who withholds any real love and affection from her other children and her husband. Caroline Compson is not an actively wicked and evil person so much as a cold weight of negativity which paralyzes the normal family relationships. She is certainly at the root of Quentin's lack of confidence in himself and his inverted pride. She is at least the immediate cause of her husband's breakdown into alcoholic cynicism, and doubtless she is ultimately responsible for Caddy's promiscuity.4

It is Dilsey and not the mother who raises the children. She is the one who tries to shield the children from all the misfortunes which take place. When a death occurs, Dilsey tries to get them away from the unpleasantness of the funeral. When Benjy reaches puberty, it is Dilsey who must take responsibility for telling him that he can no longer sleep with Caddy. The children always say they are going to tell Dilsey on each other, not to inform their mother. When they get into mischief, it is she who must discipline them. Dilsey is quite aware, however, of the fact that she has, in effect, been the children's mother and has understood and cared for them as a mother should. The irony of the entire

pathetic situation is that the deprived, illiterate Negro does in fact comprehend the world better than the others. Quentin, the oldest, reflects on Negroes' ability to see and accept things in a quite different manner from whites: "They come into white people's lives like that, in sudden sharp black trickles that isolate white facts for an instant in inarguable truth like under a microscope; the rest of the time just voices that laugh when you see nothing to laugh at, tears when no reason for tears" (211).

Dilsey emerges as an even stronger figure in the Jason section. When Miss Quentin asks for another cup of coffee, at the beginning, Dilsey refuses to give it to her, "let alone whut Miss Cahline say" (227). An argument follows between Miss Quentin, Caddy's daughter, and her uncle, Jason, concerning her promiscuous behavior in general and, specifically, her playing hookey from school. Dilsey, as usual, intervenes, but Jason slams the door in her face and insists on her keeping out of the room where he and Miss Quentin are arguing. Dilsey, however, persists and enters the room; when he pulls off his belt to beat Miss Quentin, Dilsey grabs his arm, and he flings her away and causes her to stumble. Even after she has gotten older and lost some of her strength, she still tries to protect the Compson children. Hardly able to move, Dilsey risks her safety and bravely dares Jason to strike her instead of Miss Quentin. Her persistence and fearlessness in the presence of Jason intensify the reader's sense of her
enduring nature. Even in the midst of trouble and potential disaster, she keeps her head and restores peace. Jason later makes a sarcastic but cogent remark to his mother about Dilsey: "That's the trouble about the nigger servants, when they've been with you for a long time they get so full of self-importance that they're not worth a damn. Think they run the whole family" (257). Dilsey has, in fact, run the family, but not because of her feelings of self-importance; there has been no one else with the stability and understanding necessary to run the family except her.

By the time the reader comes to the final section of The Sound and the Fury he or she is quite prepared for Dilsey to be the center on whom the final state of the Compson's destruction or fall is depicted. Dilsey is the most noble and admirable character that we have encountered, and we sense this even in this section. Her physical condition has deteriorated:

She had been a big woman once, but now her skeleton rose . . . 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 guts, and above that the collapsed face that gave the impression of the bones themselves being outside the flesh (331).

As the novel proceeds, however, it is important that Dilsey has remained steadfast and faithful, has retained "courage" and "fortune," and has "endured" (Appendix, 427) in spite of the decay of everything around her. Just as always,
Mrs. Compson is completely dependent on her. "She stood at the head of the back stairway, calling "'Dilsey'" at steady and inflectionless intervals" (333). Just as Mrs. Compson calls her name "with machine-like regularity" (337), she relies on her to keep the household functioning, and Dilsey goes about her work just as efficiently as ever. Later, when Jason tells his mother sarcastically that she's "got a prize set of servants" (347), Mrs. Compson admits her utter helplessness. "I have to humor them. I have to depend on them so completely. It's not as if I were strong. I wish I were" (348).

Dilsey's religious experience allows her to transcend the suffering and problems of her world in a manner which the Compsons are never able to achieve. She is really sincere in her belief and faith in God. Throughout the preacher's sermon near the end of The Sound and the Fury she quietly cries. It is quite evident that she understands the relevance of the sermon on the life, death and resurrection of Christ to her own life. Dilsey later says, "I've seen de first en de last ... I seed de beginning, en now I see de endin" (397). She means that she has seen the beginning, of the Compson family when they were prosperous, proud, and respectable. She has also seen the end, their deterioration and what is left of their heritage. All that is left of this aristocratic family is "an ancient white horse in a battered and lopsided surrey" (398), the "solemn and profound" clock which "might have been
the dry pulse of the decaying house itself, a shabby garden and broken fence" (360), an empty, hypochondriac mother, a ruthless son, Jason, and an idiot son Benjy, who constantly wails "in his hoarse, hopeless voice" (394).

It is in the context of this view of human existence that life despite its tragedies does continue— that the character of Dilsey assumes its full significance in the novel. It is the mother who fosters life, and Dilsey is the protecting, serving mother of the Compson household which Mrs. Compson ought to be. Dilsey assumes the practical duties of motherhood, and by her devotion to the routine tasks of cooking for the Compsons and serving their basic physical needs she imposes an order on their family life, which would be entirely chaotic without her. Throughout the novel Dilsey is constantly engaged in actions of service, but it is in the fourth section, when her duties have become painfully burdensome because of her old age, that the heroic dimensions of her character are made fully apparent. In Faulkner's appendix to the novel he wrote of Dilsey and her kind, "They endured." It is this quality of endurance that emerges in The Sound and the Fury as Faulkner's highest ideal.

In his development of Dilsey's character, Faulkner, as Karl Frederick points out in his book William Faulkner: American Writer, relies heavily on "descriptions of her appearance, gestures, and routine activities to suggest the
quality of her life." Repeatedly in the fourth section, Faulkner presents Dilsey's laborious mounting of the stairs to answer Mrs. Caroline's whims, her hand on the wall to steady herself as she goes slowly up and down. Dilsey's whole life has been characterized by "continuous physical effort to provide for the needs of others, who significantly wait at the top of the stairs." Though she is physically drained herself, she continues to respond faithfully to every demand. In the fourth section of the novel, Dilsey struggles in the rain one Sunday morning to get the firewood. Despite Mrs. Compson's constant interruptions, Dilsey manages to prepare breakfast for the family. The reader feels both astonishment and disgust on discovering that Mrs. Compson has unnecessarily forced Dilsey up the stairs once again to look after Benjy.

Faulkner's portrait of Dilsey does not, however, emphasize only the pathos of her servant's role. Instead, he "wisely and skillfully tempers the presentation of her hardships with humor, which springs from the very nature of hardships with humor, humor which springs from the very nature of Dilsey's character." Dilsey not only endures, but she endures with sound mind, compassion, and a sense of the comic foolishness of human life. Faulkner's description of Dilsey

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6Ibid., 71.

7Ibid.
at the opening of the fourth section is a superb combination of the effects of the tragic and the comic, the noble and the farcical. For example, when Dilsey first steps out of her door on that rainy Easter Sunday morning in 1928 she wears an outlandish outfit which in its total effect evokes the comic. Her black straw hat is "perched upon her turban;" "mangy and anonymous fur" rims her cape; her skirts "balloon" about her legs; nevertheless, there is a touch of dignity, Faulkner suggests, even of regality, in her appearance which is conveyed by the "maroon velvet cape" and the "dress of purple silk." She is "gaunt," her flesh loose and dropsical, "a skeleton left rising like a ruin or landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts" (331). Dilsey views the gloomy weather with a "child's astonished disappointment" and re-enters the cabin to replace her Sunday garments with a blue gingham dress, "a man's felt hat and an army overcoat." Next, she struggles with the umbrella, which nearly blows away, "precariously" balancing the wood she collects while she contrives to open and close the umbrella. The minute the wood falls into the box in the kitchen, Mrs. Compson begins calling her.

Despite the physical and the psychological pressures, Dilsey is able to maintain the comic spirit, for she is never overcome--her spirit seems unlimited and indomitable. Despite the depressing weather and Mrs. Compson's unreasonable demands, Dilsey sings as she prepares the breakfast food, at
first something "mournful and plaintive, austere," but gradually, as the fire heats the room, "she was singing louder, as if her voice too had been thawed by the growing warmth" (336).

In *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner makes it clear that Dilsey's pattern of life is

the noblest response that mankind can make to the limited and evil nature of human existence. Indeed, it is precisely because of his recognition of man's inability to achieve transcendence that he posits Dilsey's endurance despite despair at the burdens of life's evil as his highest ideal.®

Her belief is not illusory; it is simply the best one can do in the face of life's limitations. Dilsey's perspective on life is splendidly realistic, uncynical, and self-forgetful. She pampers and protects Miss Quentin, Caddy's daughter, because she recognizes that the girl is the victim of life's circumstances. She openly criticizes Jason's inhumanity and senses the humor of Miss Quentin's triumph over him. Most significantly, she is not ashamed of Benjy, for, "unlike the poor white trash," she knows he is "God's own child," as she is herself.®

Dilsey's poverty and her status as a member of a deprived race do not, then, assure her nobility, but they may have had something to do with her remaining close to a concrete world  

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®Ibid., 60.
of values, so that she is less perverted by abstraction and "more honest than are most white people in recognizing what is essential and basic." In general, "Faulkner's Negro characters show less false pride, less false idealism, and more seasoned discipline in human relations." Dilsey's race has also had something to do with keeping her close to a world still informed by religion. These matters are important: just how important they are is revealed by the emphasis Faulkner gives to the Easter service that Dilsey attends.

The Compson family is blighted by the very real limitations of human life, its evils and its curses; however, they multiply the chaos of their existence because each, to a different degree, devotes himself or herself to selfish aims. On the other hand, Dilsey creates order out of chaos by her love of and service to theirs. As Faulkner said of her, "Dilsey, the negro woman, she was a good human being. That she held that family together for not the hope of reward but just because it was the decent and proper thing to do." Dilsey represents Faulkner's highest ethical vision because she endures the burden of all those activities which, both physically and spiritually nourish and sustain human

10Frederick, William Faulkner: American Writer, 77.

11Ibid., 76.

12Blotner, Faulkner in the University, 85.
life. The matriarch of her own demanding Negro family and of
the white Compsons, she is the full embodiment of the "mother
earth" figure of The Marble Faun. Indeed, Faulkner effectively
conveyed his sense of the astonishing irony and mystery of
human life when he chose an old Negro woman servant to
represent his new vision of the ideal woman.

In the previous discussion, I have tried to shed light on
the incredible endurance of Dilsey Gibson through her "tough"
experience with the Compsons and with the prescribed social
system of the South, which could be briefly described as
immoral, rigid, and cruel against women in general and Negroes
in particular. Keeping that in mind, now let us shift our
attention toward the second figure among the "Unconquered"
ladies who endure in the midst of war and domestic chaos,
namely Judith Sutpen of Absalom, Absalom!, who stands on the
other side of the Faulkner’s equation of endurance, idealism,
sympathy and respect, and who symbolizes women of endurance
and patience when dealing with family pressures and restric-
tions.

She is left single when her suitor, Charles Bon, is
killed. Never idle, she keeps the plantation going with the
aid of Clytie, her Negro half-sister, and helps to nurse the
wounded in a nearby hospital. She is one of the few char-
acters in the novel who is capable of morally significant
action. Completely self-effacing, she goes about her duties
without a complaint. Whenever she is described, emphasis is
always placed on her impenetrable, calm, and absolutely serene face. Note her overwhelming strength of character, as found in Mr. Compson's account of her life during the war:

She lived alone now . . . she lived in anything but solitude, what with Ellen (her mother) in bed in the shuttered room, requiring the unremitting attention of a child and she (Judith) and Clytie making and keeping a kitchen garden of sorts to keep them alive; . . . When she came to town now, in the made-over dress which all Southern women now wore, in the carriage still, but drawn now by a mule, a plow mule . . . to join other women--there were wounded in Jefferson then--in the improvised hospital where (the nurtured virgin, the supremely and traditionally idle), they cleaned and dressed the self-fouled bodies of strange injured and dead and made lint of the window curtains and sheets and linen of the houses in which they had been born.  

It is apparent from the beginning of the novel that

the female principle, to which Mr. Compson frequently refers, is a source of conflict for the male protagonist, Thomas Sutpen, as well as a significant force in the novel. What are the characteristics of this female principle which figures so prominently in Faulkner's novels? It is the passive and indomitable life force of nature.  

Elizabeth M. Kerr points out in her essay "The Women of Yoknapatawpha" that Faulkner's generic Woman is "akin to the 'fecund' earth, like earth itself a potential source of renewal and development for physical continuity within the

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13William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House Publishers, 1936), 128. Further quotations from this novel will be indicated in the text by page number only.

14Minrose Gwin, Black and White Women of the Old South (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 40.
continuous process of nature." Her ability to sustain life amid destruction and disintegration enables them to achieve what Rosa Coldfield in Absalom, Absalom! defines as "that doom which we call female victory, which is: endure and endure, without rhyme or reason or hope of reward—and then endure" (144). Judith Sutpen also comments on this necessity for endurance:

You get born and you try this and you don't know why only you keep on trying it and 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 . . . and all the others all trying and they don't 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 . . . and it can't matter, you know that, or the ones that set up the loom would have arranged things a little better, and yet it must matter because you keep on trying (128).

The "indomitable female endurance" of Absalom, Absalom! is represented in Judith Sutpen. When Thomas Sutpen returns to his home from the war he finds it dominated by three women—Judith, Clytie, and Rose Coldfield, his late wife's sister, who has learned that they "did not need him, had not the need for any man" (154). Judith, whom Minrose C. Gwin refers to in Black and White Women of the Old South as "one of Faulkner's finest characters of endurance," is perhaps the most admirable character in the novel. As a little girl she is

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16Gwin, Black and White Women in the Old South, 41.
stronger than her brother, Henry, who vomits at the sight of his father fighting one of his slaves, while she watches calmly. Unlike her father, however, she is motivated by love and compassion. It is she who invites Charles Bon's Octoroon mistress to visit his grave. It is she who, on his mother's death, sends to New Orleans for his son and tries to rear him. Some years later, it is conjectured that she also tries to free him by promising to take care of his Negro wife and child if he will go to the North to pass as white and find a better life. Later, she takes him into the house when he is stricken with yellow fever and dies nursing him. Unlike her father, she always acknowledges openly the blood kinship which exists between her and the Negro children whom he fathers. Even though they have the "taint" of Negro blood, they are never turned away from her door. She grows up with Clytie in the same house and looks upon her as her sister, unlike the conduct of her father, who never acknowledges his Negro son, Charles Bon, and who rejects his first wife when he finds that she has Negro blood. Her capacity for love and suffering far outweighs her father's supposed achievements.

Though Thomas Sutpen is the novel's primary focus, and though the story of Judith is only obliquely dealt with, it is Judith's story which impresses us most. As Myra Jehlen, in her Class and Character in Faulkner's South, states: "The story of Judith, though muted and played down in terms of the whole novel, is one of the most moving that Faulkner has ever
written."17 She comments further on this amazing woman:

She is the young woman who falls in love with a fascinating stranger, the friend of her brother, who means to marry him in spite of her father's silent opposition, and who matches her father's strength of will with a quiet strength of her own. She endures the horror of her fiancé's murder and buries his body. She refuses to commit suicide; she keeps the place going for her father's return. Years later it is Judith who sees to it that Bon's mistress has an opportunity to visit his grave... Judith is doomed by misfortunes not of her making, but she is not warped and twisted by them. Her humanity survives them.18

Quentin's father, Mr. Compson, who is one of the narrators, is perhaps the only character in Absalom, Absalom! who is able to understand and appreciate Judith. When he tries to explain her actions, especially as they relate to Bon, he is forced to admit that she is always motivated by the "old virtues." Though she never understands what has transpired between her father and Bon--her half-brother, though she does not know it--on that Christmas before Bon leaves mysteriously, she waits for him without questioning for four years:

And Judith: how else to explain her but his way? . . . have you noticed how so often when we try to reconstruct the causes which lead up to the actions of men and women, how with a sort of astonishment we find ourselves now and then reduced to the belief . . . that they stemmed from some of the old virtues? The thief who steals not for greed but for love, the murderer who kills not out of lust but Pity? Judith, giving implicit love where she had derived


18Ibid., 82.
breath and pride: that true pride, not that false kind which transforms what it does not at the moment understand into scorn and outrage and so vents itself in pique and lacerations, but true pride which can say to itself without abasement I love, I will accept no substitute; something has happened between him and my father; If my father was right I will never see him again; if wrong he will come or send for me; if happy I can be I will, if suffer I must I can (120-21).

After telling his son about how Judith had somehow scraped up enough money to provide headstones for Charles Bon and his son after their deaths, Mr. Compson comments on the nature of women:

They lead beautiful lives—women: Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably excommunicated from, all reality. That's why, although their deaths, the instant of dissolution, are of no importance to them since they have a courage and fortitude in the face of pain and annihilation which would make the most Spartan man resemble a pining boy, yet to them their funerals and graves, the little puny affirmations of spurious immortality set above their slumber, are of incalculable importance (192-93).

Clearly, in addressing the unconquered group, one can notice that Dilsey of The Sound and the Fury and Judith of Absalom, Absalom! went through tormented phases of struggle against social barriers and familial restrictions, social in the case of Dilsey and familial in the case of Judith, and that Faulkner responded with admiration and sympathy for their "divine" endurance and "incomparable" patience, which kept them beyond any man's comprehension and enabled them to conquer. Moreover, Faulkner's portrayal or treatment of these two women shows, indirectly, his criticism of the traditional and social system of the South, which restricts the role of
women and denies them freedom.

This is not the last word on the subject, but it constitutes an important word, and it states effectively one of Faulkner's great themes. The heroine attempts to live her vision, Faulkner's vision of change, or to impose it upon reality--and generally fails. Nevertheless, out of the failure, if the dream is a high one and pursued heroically, she wins a victory in defeat, or at least suffers defeat only on her own terms. On the other hand, if the ideal of the masculine-dominant Southern society is too limited, which means too cruelly at odds with nature, its effort ends in alienation and final disaster.
CHAPTER THREE
THE GHOSTS

David Miller has placed Faulkner’s women in one of two categories: "earthmothers or ghosts." The last of these two categories, the ghosts, are those women who are rejected and subjugated by their male-dominated society, but who are treated with grace and admiration by Faulkner for their strength and patience, which make them live in the reader’s mind, he says. The group is comprised of women who are either sexless or sexually rejected and ignored. Miller goes on to point out that "as ghosts these women do not have the rich-rotten fertility of the earthmother." He adds, however, that "none of Faulkner’s women are born ghosts; it takes much trouble to produce a de-sexed female, nor does it happen without a struggle from the would-be earthmother." Moreover, "each of the ghosts has either been, or tried to be, if not an earthmother, at least a lady: femaleness is the universal heritage, although not the universal possession, of all women."¹ Lillian Smith, author of Killers of the Dream, attempts to delineate the segregated culture of the deep South on the basis of her personal experiences as a Southerner and describes in a similar manner the little ghost-women of small Southern towns:

The majority of Southern women convinced themselves

that God had ordained that they be deprived of pleasure and meekly stuffed their hollowness with piety, trying to believe any tightness they felt was hunger satisfied. Culturally stunted by a region that still pays nice rewards to simple-mindedness in females, they had no defense against blandishment. They listened to the round words of men’s tribute to the Sacred Womanhood and believed, thinking no doubt that if they were not sacred then what under God’s heaven was the matter with them! Once hoisted by the old colonel’s oratory, they stayed on lonely pedestals and rigidly played ‘statue’ while their men went about more important affairs elsewhere . . . Sex was pushed out through the back door as a shameful thing never to be mentioned.  

Though Miller fails to mention it, the fact that there were "ghosts" at all in Southern society can be partially attributed to existing puritanical moral codes governing the behavior of Southern white "ladies" and prevailing Calvinistic attitudes toward sins of the flesh, at least where women were concerned, as Lillian Smith seems to suggest above. Both of these factors contributed to the elevation of white women to a supposedly sexless plane and, consequently, relegated them to the role of "ghosts." These unnatural codes of conduct were designed to preserve virtue, or at least the appearance of virtue; even after marriage, ironically enough, the women were to remain "pure" and "ghost-like." Faulkner’s ghosts, often spinsters but sometimes wives, become so, he seems to imply, not because they desire this condition but because their backgrounds have forced them into it. Moreover, if one

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looks closely enough he is likely to find beneath their ghostly facades real women desiring the same kind of life which normal women lead.

David Miller insists that of the numerous ghosts about whom Faulkner writes Rosa Coldfield of *Absalom, Absalom!* is the most tragic. She had been "ephemerized before she had a chance to become a woman, changed by the war to a ghost before the South could make her a lady." Miss Rosa is one of the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!* who is attempting to re-tell and interpret the Sutpen legend. Faulkner filters the same characters, primarily Thomas Sutpen and all of those with whom he came in contact, through the personalities of his narrators, so that the reader can see how they interpret matters in terms of their own experience. Just as an artist reveals himself through his creations, Faulkner's narrators reveal themselves through their narrations. Their stories and interpretations of what happened to Thomas Sutpen and his family are largely the result of their own needs, preoccupations, and obsessions, so that one can never really know exactly what took place prior to the telling of the story. There is no such thing, then, according to Faulkner, as an objective presentation of the Sutpen story, nor is this ultimately what is important. At best, we gain both an insight into the

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personalities of the narrators and a limited knowledge of the people whose motives they try to analyze and understand. In other words, Chapter One is Miss Rosa's narration. She lives in the past, in her cherishing of her hatred of Sutpen, and in her frustration. She has been wearing black for forty-three years, and has shut herself up in the "dim coffin-smelling gloom" of an unventilated, dark room; she exudes "the rank smell of female flesh embattled in virginity" (8). In fact, she has remained rigid with horror and hate for many years; we learn the source of this hate much later. Miss Rosa Coldfield had been a child when her older sister Edith was abruptly married into the Sutpen family. After the death of her sister and after the War, she is courted by Sutpen and promised marriage if they breed and if she bears him a son. She, of course, rejects this proposal as an insult and grows to hate Sutpen. For her he becomes the incarnation of evil, Satanic, and a demon. She hates him chiefly because he destroys for her that social eminence, respectability, and security which she so desperately wants. Because of him, she must remain a virgin and a lonely woman for the rest of her life.

Faulkner seems to suggest that Miss Rosa is a victim of the cruel ironies of history, of her upbringing, and of that tradition of puritanic ideals which deprives a woman of that which is necessary for her complete development. Her unhappy childhood can be attributed to her being born to older parents and the fact that she never had an authentic chance to be
young. Furthermore, she was born at the price of her mother's life, and she is never permitted to forget it. She is raised by the same spinster aunt who had forced her older sister Ellen into marriage, "growing up in that closed masonry of females to see in the fact of her own breathing not only the lone justification for the sacrifice of her mother's life, not only a living reproach to her father, but a breathing indictment ... of the entire male principle (that principle which had left the aunt a virgin at age thirty-five" (59-60).

Consequently, Miss Rosa is forced to grow up in a stifling atmosphere with only a father, whom she secretly hates, and a spinster aunt. "In a grim mausoleum air of Puritan righteousness and outraged female vindictiveness Miss Rosa's childhood was passed" (60).

After her father's death during the War she goes out to Sutpen's Hundred to live, since she, a pauper, has no one but Judith, her niece, to whom she can turn. Failing to find love and marriage, she finds satisfaction by "projecting upon Judith all the abortive dreams and delusions of her own doomed and frustrated youth." She takes vicarious satisfaction in the preparations for Judith's marriage, offering her the only gift in her power: "She offered to teach Judith how to keep house and plan meals and count laundry" (71).

Miss Rosa is a tragic, ironic symbol of chaste womanhood. While she is indeed "pure," her life has lacked every thing
which makes life meaningful and significant. Never having experienced true happiness, love and fulfillment, she, like a ghost, lives in an unreal world which lacks clear outlines and substance. She compares her life to the prenatal existence of a baby when the infant is unaware of all things and really not alive: "Turned twenty true enough yet still a child, still living in that womb-like corridor where the world came not even as living echo but as dead incomprehensible shadow" (162). Like an aborted fetus, she is never given a chance to breathe and really to live, engaged in a denial of reality in which she clings to an illusory view of life in order to overcome her sense of the inadequacy and abnormality of her real existence. Engulfed by this death-in-life existence, such women may be driven to perverse expressions of their sexual desires, to the extent of performing criminal acts which are direct expressions of their sexual needs. The woman gradually becomes so entrenched in decay that her very appearance reveals her inner tragedy. Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the most extensively developed woman of this type in Faulkner's fiction:

Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or no husband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in a hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shin bones and ankles, clear of the floor with that

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air of impotent and static rage like children's feet, and talking in that grim haggard voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by the outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust (7).

Rosa Coldfield is a woman who has been excluded from the normal female role of marriage and motherhood. As a result, she becomes in middle age a character enshrouded by the signs of death. She is "dominated by unrealities and by a furious rage at man, who has denied her the normal fulfillment of her femininity." Her outrage at life's betrayal is outwardly and immediately expressed by Rosa Coldfield's appearance, her words, and actions. Born to her parents during their middle age, Rosa spends her youth in isolation, her only sister already seven years married to Sutpen when she is born. Mr. Compson suggests that Rosa's mother's death in childbirth was an event for which Rosa never forgave her father. Motherless and sisterless, she is left to a spinster aunt who rears her in "that cold masonry of females" in which she considers Rosa's very existence: "So Miss Rosa was both pauper and orphan, with no kin above dust but Judith and the aunt who had been last heard of two years ago . . . Ellen was dead two years ago now" (84). The "indictment" proves, indeed, to be transferable, for Rosa grows up in possession of a cold and

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5Page, Faulkner's Women, 68.
implacable hatred of her father and her brother-in-law Thomas Sutpen, the "demon" who dominates her existence. Her hatred is not entirely unfounded, but it is nevertheless heightened, intensified, and exaggerated by "the grim mausoleum of Puritan righteousness and outraged female vindictiveness supplied by the aunt." As if the combination of her aunt's vindictiveness and her father's eccentric morality were not enough to warp Rosa's attitude toward life, she is exposed from early childhood to Thomas Sutpen. Feeling the effect of the chaos that surrounds this mammoth figure long before she can understand it, she begins as a child the life-long process of escaping life, fabricating for herself a fantastic explanation for the impact which Sutpen makes up on her and her family. In Rosa's imagination Thomas Sutpen becomes ogre and demon, a visible and actual curse upon the Coldfields.

Rosa Coldfield's character is part of the larger motif in Absalom,Absalom! of the failure of the female world to halt the destructiveness of the male drive which is embodied in Thomas Sutpen." Sutpen is consumed by his dreams, and is incapable of submitting himself to the compromise with life that women require. Not only Rosa, but all women who encounter him, are powerless victims of his selfish design, including his wife; Ellen Coldfield, who is as weak and ineffectual as a butter-

6Ibid., 69.


8Ibid., 33.
fly; and Milly Jones, a poor-white character, completely and pathetically immature, whom Sutpen seduces, abandons and causes her desperate grandfather, Washington Jones, to murder, as he murders her newborn daughter, before which Jones had actually avenged Milly by slaying Sutpen. The result is the creation of a world which is characterized by impotence; Sutpen fails to establish his dynasty, and his dreams come to nothing. Absalom, Absalom! "portrays the death and decay that are the result of man's perverted use of women to achieve his selfish goals. Women's potential powers of life are, as a result, negated, and she becomes an effective force for countering the male's destructive drive."9

She, "the spinster doomed for life at sixteen" (75), can only experience love and life through her imagined partaking of the raptures of Judith and her lover, Charles Bon. When Judith's mother announces their approaching marriage, Miss Rosa responds: "We deserve him" (77). She begins secretly making garments for Judith's trousseau "which were to be for her own vicarious bridal (78)." Though she is herself in love with Bon, she insists that she know nothing of love, especially romantic love: I do not love him; how could I. I had not even heard his voice . . . because I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love . . . became not mistress, not beloved, but more than ever I became all

polymath love's and androgynous advocate . . . I did love him . . . and even if I did, not as women love . . . Because I asked nothing of him. And more than that: I gave him nothing, which is the sum of loving (146).

Clearly, from the previous discussion one can deduce that Rosa Coldfield of Absalom, Absalom! is a victim of the cruel ironies of history, of her upbringing, and of the social system which deprives a woman of that which is necessary for her complete development. Once again, this is a reminder for those critics who failed to see Faulkner's sympathy and admiration for women and for their just struggle against the restrictive system of the South.

Joanna Burden of Light in August shows another side, but more perverse, of the desperation and depravity which loneliness and spinsterhood foster. Through her Faulkner shows that it was not only the Southern ladies who became "ghosts," nor was it just the Civil War that brought about the change. Miller describes this "part-time" ghost:

Continued rejection as a "nigger-loving'" Yankee, coupled with a peculiar version of the white-man's burden, did it to the part-time ghost, Joanna Burden. It is significant that until Joanna attracted Joe she remained the ghost which her silent sufferings had produced--withdrawn, detached, calm, and without sex.\(^{10}\)

Maxwell Geismar protests that Faulkner has made "this decent

\(^{10}\)Ibid., 11.
and well-meaning abolitionist spinster"\textsuperscript{11} the special object of his venom. He further accuses Faulkner of hating her because she is a Northern woman and ofsubjecting her to humiliation which he spares the Southern women in his novels. This comment is obviously unfounded. Joanna is one of Faulkner's masculinized women, but he is no harder on Joanna than he is on his other masculinized women, including Drusilla Hawk Sartoris, the Southern girl who rides with a Confederate troop of cavalry, and Miss Emily Grierson, a Southern woman who, after years of spinsterhood, acquires a lover and kills him after he threatens to leave; moreover, she sleeps with his dead body until she dies, years later. "It is inaccurate to say that Faulkner is unduly hard on either of them; he thinks, rather, that life has been hard on them."\textsuperscript{12}

Joanna Burden is an outsider in the community who faces problems created by an inconveniently aroused sexuality; her refusal to capitulate to the community's standard that makes onlookers uncomfortable. They deal with their "discomfort by labeling, denouncing, or ignoring her, and her murder is only a final violent re-enactment of the sort of repudiation she has suffered through her life."\textsuperscript{13} Unmarried, child-

\textsuperscript{11} Maxwell Geismar, \textit{Writers in Crisis} (Boston: Houghton-Mufflin Company, 1942), 245.


\textsuperscript{13} Page, \textit{Faulkner's Women}, 68.
less, and, worse, a patron of black causes, Joanna is at every level a threat to the values of the local white patriarchy; the site of her house, far outside the town, symbolizes her marginal social position. In being intelligent, opinionated, and single, Joanna Burden violates every aspect of the local social code for women. She is thus a "traitor" to her gender, a situation severely "exacerbated by her treachery to her race because of her overt interest in ameliorating the plight of oppressed blacks."

Both her innate qualities and the choices she has made inevitably condemn Joanna to pariahhood.

When we first see Joanna Burden, she is a forty-two-year-old virgin living the life of a recluse in a huge house completely isolated from the rest of the community. Her family had come from the North and had settled in Jefferson to help Negroes, but had met incessant opposition, and finally her grandfather and half-brother Calvin were killed by Colonel John Sartoris. She has remained in the house alone all these years, and has been completely shunned and ignored by whites because of her associations with the Negroes of the community. Taught by her father that her mission in life is to carry the burden of the black race, she grows up with the idea that she must dedicate herself to raising the Negro to a higher level,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\text{Ibid.}, 72.\]
and until the appearance of Joe Christmas she has spent her adult life helping Negro colleges, advising young Negroes, and contributing to various development funds. Nevertheless, Joanna has become warped by the submergence of her true self beneath her role of missionary, and her relationship with Joe Christmas reveals this fact. She has been forced to bury a part of herself, but her needs and desires are there, and when they are awakened too late for normal fulfillment in children and a home something horrible happens to her. Cleanth Brooks comments on the metamorphosis which she undergoes as a result of her first sexual encounter: "Faulkner is pitiless in recounting the details of Joanna Burden's sexual discovery of herself and in indicating the man's revulsion from her--his feeling that he "was being sucked down in a bottomless morass" (227).

But there is never any question that Joanna is essentially the victim--of sex too long repressed, of sex driven up into the head--or of her being compelled to her actions by a self that she had scarcely known existed. To witness Joanna's one love affair is like watching a stunted autumnal plant frantically trying to bloom and seed itself before the killing frosts.15

The relationship between Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas, brief though it is, is perhaps the strangest man-woman relationship in all of Faulkner's novels. When Joe Christmas provides an opportunity for the sexual gratification which her

puritanic background and personal circum-stances have denied her, she, now free of her inhibitions, becomes so completely demoralized that she shocks even Joe with her nymphomania. Having remained a virgin for over forty years, Joanna's initial response to sex is that of a fanatic. She enjoys her own corruption, and even prays to God to allow her to remain corrupt for a few more years. She seems to enhance her corruption by screaming "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (245) as he makes love to her. As the relationship progresses, she becomes more obsessed. She sometimes goes into fits of jealousy for no apparent reason; she also assigns places for secret meetings and leaves little notes telling him where to find her. Sometimes she even hides naked in closets, and sometimes he finds her beneath shrubs, "naked or with her clothing half torn to ribbons upon her, in the wild throes of nymphomania (245)." In six months she becomes completely corrupt. Once the seed has sprouted, once she has tried to return to that period of her adolescence which her subsequent experience has erased, there is for Joanna no compromise:

The impervious and fierce urgency that concealed an actual despair at frustrate and irrevocable years, which she appeared to attempt to compensate each night as if she believed that it would be the last night on earth by damning herself forever to the hell of her forefathers, by living not alone in sin but in filth ... She revealed the terrible and impersonal curiousity of a child about forbidden subjects and objects; that rapt and tireless and detached interest of a surgeon in the physical body and its possibilities (244).

Joanna has the same fierce desire as Faulkner's
earthmothers, but to sustain the bloom which Joe Christmas has at last brought forth she must fulfill the role of the earthmother and negate her ghostliness or barrenness: she must produce a child. So intense is her desire to do so that she mistakes her menopause for pregnancy, and when time forces her to admit the truth she can no longer be Joe's lover. She must repent her sins and resume the ghosthood which her previous fanaticism required. She must renounce Christmas as a sex partner and reform him. She now wants him to make something of his wasted life by going to school and, later, by getting a decent job. He must expiate his sins and kneel and pray with her. When he refuses, she tries to kill him, but her pistol fails and he kills her, for Joe has no use for a praying ghost.

When the love-phase ended, the past from which she could not escape began to exert its control over her. The overwhelming guilt she begins to experience reflects both the Calvinist and Southern ideals which have shaped her personality. The damaging psychological effect of the Calvinistic outlook, which represses desires and distorts attitudes toward sex, is presented quite strongly by Faulkner through the character of Joanna Burden. The chief cause of Joanna's tragic life has been the overwhelming oppressiveness of the Calvinistic spirit which she has inherited from her ancestors.

Joanna Burden is one of the most pathetic women characters in the Faulkner canon. Her life is plagued by guilt,
thwarted sexuality, and sterility. The nature of her existence is determined by the vision left to her by her ancestors.

I seemed to see them for the first time not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all children coming forever and ever into the world white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And it seemed like the white babies were struggling, even before they drew breath, to escape from the shadow that was not only upon them but beneath them too, flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross (221).

Joanna assumes the burden of inexorable white guilt, denying the natural female drives within her in order to conform her martyrdom to this vision. Joanna's philanthropy is not the life-living product of love, but continually a sacrifice to alleviate her own fears and guilt. Her thwarted sexuality is a perversity which Faulkner effectively conveys through his descriptions of Joanna's physical appearance: "He saw a head with hair just beginning to gray drawn gently back to a knot as savage and ugly as a wart on a diseased bough" (241). The strangeness of Joanna's appearance is matched by the violent and perverse manliness with which she yields to Christmas in the sex act.

Joanna's character forcefully demonstrates the destruction that accompanies woman's alienation from the normal process of mating and child-bearing. Normal sexuality produces new life, but thwarted sexuality, as it is exemplified by Joanna Burden, is characterized by lust and nympho
mania and culminates in sterility and violent death. For example, in the novel Faulkner describes Joanna’s behavior and Christmas' reaction to them:

During the period (it could not be called a honeymoon) Christmas watched her pass through every avatar of a woman love. Soon she more than shocked him: she astonished and bewildered him . . . He began to be afraid. He could not have said of what. But he began to see himself as from a distance, like a man being sucked down into bottomless morass (245).

Christmas attacks Joanna with the violence that expresses his rebellion against the force of life; Joanna never sees Christmas as a man, but only as a Negro, the embodiment of a lifetime of guilt against which she rebels through the sin of the sex act. Their sexual relationship is abnormal and perverse because they are devoted not to fostering life, but to destroying it.

In Light in August the most vociferous spokesman of racist and sexist ideology is Euphues ("Uncle Doc") Hines--Joe’s maternal grandfather, who places Joe in an orphanage and abandons him because he thinks Joe has some Negro blood. Later he demands Joe's death when he hears that Joe has been captured, yet everybody subscribes to his basic tenets: only the white man can claim the privileges of full and sovereign humanity; he alone is entitled to lay down the law. Women, on the other hand, are assigned to an inferior essence, and so are quite "naturally" destined to occupy subordinate positions in the social structure. Masculine standards, white stan-
dards: tracing identical boundaries, serving identical purposes, they are the pillars of the power system, known as law, which governs the community and to which every one of its members is summoned to submit. And woe to the offenders: sooner or later they will be dismembered—not only ostracized, but broken apart, body and soul.

Such is the dominant course, and Faulkner allows us to measure its effects, to see how it works, how it warps, and how it kills. Count the corpses: Milly Hines bled to death by her own father, David Hightower's wife driven to suicide, Joanna slain and beheaded, Christmas shot and emasculated—three women and one "Nigger." Their tragic deaths are eloquent testimony to the murderous violence of Southern ideology. For once, "the hackneyed phrase 'dominant ideology' seems perfectly appropriate. Southern ideology, however, has yet another, more official component: Puritanism, ideological discourse at its most articulate and most intimidating, the common idiom by means of which the community defines and vindicates its priorities, and whose authority is the more undisputed as it is assumed to be derived from divine transcendence itself."\textsuperscript{16}

Not only do Joanna's troubling eruption of female sexuality and her decapitated body signify her individual plight, they also serve as indices to the larger tensions in

\textsuperscript{16}Page, \textit{Faulkner's Women}, 73.
the novel. *Light in August* contains for a Faulkner novel perhaps for any novel written by a man in the early twentieth century—an unusual number of references to physiological processes such as menstruation: "She would have to wait another month, watching the calendar to be sure, so there would be no mistake; through the bedroom window she watched the month accomplish . . . The marked day on the calendar came and passed; she gave herself another week to be doubly sure," (252) and childbirth: "She gave again that loud, abject, wailing cry. Mrs. Hines was now bending over. She turned her head . . . 'Get,' she said. 'Get for the doctor. It's come now'" (378). It is obvious that these facts of feminine physicality are related to the more complicated presence of the female. At one level *Light in August* is about the problematic feminine and the difficulties created when individuals and society attempt to confront, to cope with, and to incorporate it.

Clearly, Rosa Coldfield of *Absalom,Absalom!* and Joanna Burden of *Light in August* represent the female struggle against the restrictions and traditions that were imposed against women by the Southern society of the era. Nonetheless, each one of them has her own approach in responding to a tradition, a culture and a society that innately oppress, restrict and isolate women from their roles as full members of Southern society.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE REBELS

The community is at once the field for the individual’s action and the norm by which his or her action is judged and regulated. It sometimes seems that the individual is "forced or obliged" to reject the judgment or the regulation of his or her community for its shallowness and bigotry. Much the same is true in two of Faulkner’s rebellious characters: Caddy Compson of The Sound and the Fury and Lena Grove of Light in August. Moreover, one needs not to forget Caddy’s daughter, Miss Quentin, who is influenced by her mother’s actions and rejection of her family’s social status and codes of honor. Faulkner views the rebellion of these stronger women (Caddy, Lena and Miss Quentin) in light of the social and familial restrictions against them. Nonconformity, with whatever disasters may follow, is the most frequent pattern in Faulkner’s treatment of rebellious women, and his attitude toward the nonconformists is often compassionate.

Caddy Compson of The Sound and the Fury is the rebel for whom Faulkner seems to have the greatest sympathy. Instead of conforming to the traditional ideals of Southern womanhood, she refuses to suppress her feminine nature and become a "Southern lady." Significantly, she is the daughter of the woman who, among Faulkner’s characters, expresses the greatest devotion to the Southern concept of womanhood and shows the greatest lack of ethical awareness and the greatest
hypocrisy. Instead of convictions, Mrs. Compson has a pathetic allegiance to the idea of womanhood as she has conceived it from her illusions. It is important to say that Caroline B. Compson should not be regarded as individualistic in her mind-set concerning her status as a lady. She is also a typical product of her society and epoch, and her illusions and prejudices are those with which she has been indoctrinated since childhood. Some of the novel's most pointed and effective irony is directed at Mrs. Compson's unsatisfying dependence on her concept of herself as a Southern "lady." When she reflects on the self-destruction of her son, she does so in these egotistic terms:

I don't know. What reason did Quentin have? Under God's heaven, what reason did he have? It can't be simply to flout and hurt me. Whoever God is, He could not permit that. I'm a lady. You might not believe that from my offspring, but I am (189).

A whining, self-centered, useless woman, Mrs. Compson lacks any genuine emotions or maternal tenderness. She wears mourning for Caddy's lost "virtue," but takes her to a winter resort, South Bend, Indiana, to get a husband, although she knows Caddy is already pregnant. Mrs. Compson shows none of the finer qualities of true ladies, and one is forced to conclude that her constant assertions that she is a lady are partially the result of her inner awareness that she is not.

Let us now take a closer look at Caddy Compson, since she has been labeled as promiscuous, corrupt, irresponsible and
sinful. While it is true that her sexual attractiveness brings about much of her difficulty, Caddy's life exerts a cohesive force in *The Sound and the Fury*. She is the central concern of each brother, and the telling of her story is the common purpose of each section. She causes the other characters to speak out. That Caddy's life is significant for the development of the story is also apparent. "Her most important and distinctive quality is unselfish love." She is the only Compson who loves without thought of self and with a genuine desire for the happiness of others, and especially of that of her two brothers, Benjy and Quentin. She is the only factor in Benjy's life, with the possible exception of Dilsey, which gives it meaning, for the other things he loves are inanimate objects—the fire, the pasture, the red and yellow cushion, and the Jimson weed. She climbs into bed with him when his hands are cold and tries to make him happy by telling him about Christmas. She has the ability to sense what he wants and the initiative to obtain it for him.

The beauty of Caddy's love becomes especially prominent when seen against the background of the other characters' lack of concern for Benjy's happiness. Quentin never hurts Benjy, but neither does he show any affection papers dolls, and

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1Catherine B. Baum, "'The Beautiful One': Caddy Compson as Heroine of *The Sound and the Fury*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, XII (Spring 1967): 36.
Mrs. Compson's words to Benjy always lack of concern for Benjy's happiness. Quentin never hurts Benjy, but neither does he show any affection for him. Jason agitates and teases Benjy by cutting up his paper dolls, and Mrs. Compson's words to Benjy always lack real feeling. All Mrs. Compson insists on is the appearance of virtue, and Caddy places no value on her maidenhood, which means "no more than a hangnail" (10) to her. What does matter to her is the communication of love. Mr. Compson perhaps best empresses Caddy's attitude toward virginity when he says it is "contrary to nature" (3). Caddy, then, openly rebels against the restricting social conventions of her society and gives herself freely to those for whom she feels affection. The men in Caddy's life after Dalton Ames appear only vaguely in The Sound and the Fury, and one can only speculate about Caddy's motives in yielding herself to them. There is no evidence that she loved them as she had Dalton Ames, but her indifferent attitude toward virginity and her need to give and receive love, which she has not found at home, may explain her promiscuity.

Among the Compson children, Caddy is clearly the leader, though Quentin, two years older than she, thinks that he should be. As the oldest Compson of his generation, he feels it is his duty to protect his sister and to see to it that her reputation remains unsoiled. That is what chivalric Southern
tradition requires of older brothers. Nevertheless, Quentin does not do well as a protector, even as a child. On the day of their grandmother’s funeral Caddy falls into a shallow, tributary stream as she is romping with her brothers. When she then takes off her wet dress, Quentin, in reprimand, pushes her, so that she falls backward in the mud and dirties her drawers. He knows that he will be held responsible for Caddy’s actions, so that this childhood scene becomes symbolic of later relationships between the brother and his sister, when other attempts at protection are also totally ineffectual and when Quentin blames himself for what happens to Caddy.

In our earliest view of Caddy Compson we see her "at a branch," a creek or small stream, as a rather daring young girl. She is not concerned with appearances, but instead searches for the truth and reality of any situation. It is Caddy who climbs the tree to see exactly what happens during her grandmother’s funeral. As Caddy grows older, she sees through the neurotic whining of her mother and the weakness and cynicism of her father. She feels the need to reject this artificial world and look for some way to reject everything connected with the Compson legacy. She later admits that she does not love the men with whom she has slept, and she also stresses that she has made them sleep with her. She has seen through the false concept of honor and the superficiality of the entire so-called aristocratic Southern society.

Caddy is banished from the Compson household because
of her "sins" and her rebellious behavior. Mrs. Compson, at one point in *The Sound and the Fury*, resorts to the wearing of black as a sign of death in retaliation for one of Caddy's early indiscretions. Benjy, the idiot son, becomes more derelict than ever and loses all existing order in his world because of Caddy's sin. Quentin, the intellectual, bases his existence on Caddy's virginity and honor. The thin membrane that determined her virginity symbolized to Quentin the honor of his family and of the entire Southern region. Caddy's sin is ineradicable in Quentin's eyes, and has destroyed all of the order in his shallow existence. The animalistic Jason uses Caddy's sin as a means of draining money from Caddy and sadistically torturing both Caddy and her daughter, Miss Quentin.

The real tragedy of Caddy's life is not so much her isolation and her bleak existence, which Faulkner's fiction suggests; it is, rather, that she has little positive effect on anyone. Quentin torments Caddy with the question: "Have there been very many Caddy I don't know too many will you look after Benjy and father you don't know whose it is then does he know don't touch me will you look after him and father" (143).

Thus Caddy can be pitied for the results of her desperate love-search. She gives love freely, and wonders why she does not receive love. She is doomed, for her capacity for love cannot be quenched, and the misguided fixation-love offered by Quentin is fruitless. Caddy comments that if she had only had
a mother perhaps events would have developed much better. Nevertheless, she is represented as having an instinctive understanding of love as two-way process of giving and receiving. Her capacity for love expresses itself just as intensely through her adoration of her older brother Quentin as through her compassion for her younger brother Benjy. She is victimized by her family, and her relationships are forms of rejection springing from the hypocrisy and artificiality of the once-valid Compson honor. Caddy is a realist, and her acts also assert her individuality and her effort to combat the horror of the Compson world. The innocent Caddy gives herself to Dalton Ames with the same purity of love she has previously given, in different forms, to Benjy and Quentin. Thus she stands, finally, as betrayed by her mother, by Quentin, by Dalton Ames and by Jason.

An extension of Caddy’s rebellion is seen through the behavior of Miss Quentin, Caddy’s daughter. She is much like her mother in her promiscuity and her relationship with Jason. Much of Miss Quentin’s rebellion is revealed through her constant sexual misconduct, which she utilizes as a weapon against Jason. He makes Miss Quentin’s life unendurable, as he compares her morals to her mother’s and what he believes to be the morals of “nigger wenches” in town. The reaction of Caddy’s daughter, Miss Quentin, to Benjy also heightens the effect of Caddy’s tenderness by contrast. Miss Quentin feels only disgust and repugnance for Benjy and his repulsive table
manners, whereas Caddy patiently feeds him. Cleanth Brooks makes the following statements about Miss Quentin's dislike of Benjy in comparison to her mother's love for him:

She . . . lacks certain virtues that her mother possessed: graciousness, pity, and disinterested love. Quentin despises Benjy, the unfortunate to whom Caddy gave her love, and this is not hard to understand, remembering that she has always seen Benjy as an adult, all-but-mindless being and never as the little brother—the relationship in which her mother knew him.²

The qualities Caddy evinces before her loss of innocence—her self-reliance, courage, independence, and especially her love—are attributes that certainly make her "beautiful." Ironically enough, however, those qualities in her character that are admirable are the ones which lead to her fall: "her complete selflessness, which leads her to be indifferent to her virginity and to what happens to her; her willingness to put the other person's interest first; and her great desire to communicate love."³ Caddy's interest in men is a natural part of growing up. Her loss of virginity to Dalton Ames, her only significant lover and father of her daughter, Miss Quentin, for the first time reveals not only her passion, or her promiscuous tendencies, as some would have us believe, but also her selflessness. Love is to her more important than morality and respectability, and Caddy has been taught no good

³Baum, "'The Beautiful One,'" 88.
reason for preserving her chastity or upholding the ideals of the "chaste" Southern woman. Much later, Miss Quentin is at the point of exploding: "'I don't care,' she says, 'I'm bad and I'm going to hell, and don't care. I'd rather be in hell than anywhere you are'" (235). These words, in essence, convey the same hopelessness her mother, Caddy, had felt in the Compson household years before. In the novel's Appendix Faulkner comments upon Caddy's tragic fate and her overwhelming capacity for love:

Doomed and knew it, accepted the doom without either seeking or fleeing it . . . she loved him not only in spite of but because of the fact that he himself was incapable of love, accepting the fact that he must value above all not her but the virginity of which she was custodian and on which she placed no value whatever (413).

Though Caddy is a rebel and cares nothing for the virginity which her family and her society value so highly, and though she becomes pregnant and marries someone who is not the father, she at least is not a hypocrite or one who hides behind appearances. In her marriage to Herbert Head, Caddy is willing to assume responsibility for her actions. She cares nothing for Herbert, but does not marry him merely because she is pregnant and desirous of preserving the family's honor; her concern for Benjy and her father has convinced her that marrying Herbert is the only positive act she can perform. By marrying Herbert Head Caddy hopes she will enable her father to stop worrying about her and, conceivably, to stop drinking. Then he will not die in a year, as his doctor has predicted,
and Benjy will not have to be sent to an asylum. Faulkner's support for Caddy Compson and her rejection of the family standards of honor which are part of the whole social system illustrates and symbolizes Faulkner's rejection of the whole social system which imposes such restrictions.

In light of the importance of rebellious women in Faulkner's apprentice fiction, it is not surprising that a character like Caddy Compson should emerge as the focus of interest and emotional attachment in The Sound and the Fury. Caddy is a central character in the novel because the Compson family "desperately needs her feminine qualities of warmth and responsiveness, her aggressive courage, and her ability to assess realistically life's possibilities and limitations." Though she is always seen through the prisms of her brothers' attitudes toward her, the striking description of Caddy's appearance and gestures which accompanies their recollections of her serves to make her physical presence felt throughout the novel. Caddy in her muddy drawers climbing the pear tree and Caddy with her arms about Benjy are memorable representations of the nature of her childhood character.

Having addressed Caddy of The Sound and the Fury and Faulkner's attitude toward the Southern social system, I wish to shift my attention to Lena Grove of Light in August,

who is another rebellious female figure who stood for her beliefs and who rejected the social system and its taboos.

*Light in August* begins with Lena sitting beside a road in Mississippi, her feet in a ditch, her shoes in her hand. She has been on the road for a month, riding in a long succession of farm waggon or walking the hot, dusty roads, trying to get to Jefferson. To emphasize her overwhelming capacity for endurance, the image of the urn of Keats' ode is used symbolically in connection with her. She is described as "something moving forever and without progress across an urn" (5). Circular imagery, which suggests her completeness as a person, is also associated with Lena. She becomes an integral part of the natural surroundings: "She went out of sight up the road: swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon itself" (7).

Lena Grove, the heroine of *Light in August*, possesses a certain shrewdness which assures that her physical needs will be met. Though she has behaved "shamefully" in the moral context of her world by becoming pregnant outside of marriage, Lena is not burdened by any sense of guilt. Indeed, Lena experiences little genuine concern about her unmarried state. She is burdened neither by the dead moralities nor by intellectual introspection. Her unthinking, unquestioning attitude toward life results in an absence of despair and a serene acceptance of whatever life brings. On the rare occasions when she pauses to ponder the alternatives life might have
offered her, Lena recalls her decisions with neither shame nor anxiety, but with self-mocking good humor. Climbing out of her bedroom window to begin her pursuit of Lucas Burch, the man who fathered her child and then left her, Lena thinks, "'If it had been this hard to do before I reckon I would not be doing it now'" (12).

Lena's serenity and self-confidence stem from the fact that she is fulfilling the role in life which she was created to perform. She has little concern for who has planted the seed, for her life is made meaningful by her prospective motherhood. Because Lena expects almost nothing of herself or of anyone else, life is for her a series of astonishing and pleasurable surprises. Lena's journey in Light in August is characterized "by her immense personal enjoyment of life despite the hardships it has brought her. Her presence does arouse the good in the hearts of those she encounters, for they recognize that she is engaged in the sacred act of replenishing the earth and assuring the survival of man."5 Her self-confidence, her inner assurance and faith, and her tranquillity are the result of her immense satisfaction with the role she is performing.

Lena senses her own oneness with the order of her creation, and she has no reason to fear life. She is free to allow the escape of her detestable lover Lucas Burch "'I'm

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going to do it'" (23) because she is confident of the worthier devotion of Byron Bunch. She has endured great hardships—the early loss of her parents, a poverty--stricken youth ("whatever place she run from ain't going to be a whole lot different or worse than the place she is at" (24)) the absence of any promise of material or family security, desertion and betrayal by her lover—yet she is free of anxiety. She has expected so little from life that disappointment is nearly impossible. When pleasure comes to her, the bearing of a child, a devoted lover, and an adventurous journey, she is able to enjoy fully the abundance of human life ("Like a lady et. Like a lady travelling" (23)).

The serenity and timelessness surrounding Lena's travels in search of Lucas Burch, for example, reveal her feminine stasis and comfortableness in the world, but they also reflect an effortless mobility that brings into vivid contrast Joe's own experience of the "open road." While Lena Grove is carried along by wagons described in homely metaphors, "like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road," and the road itself rolls along "like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool" (321), Joe Christmas feels himself driven along alien, circular roads that lead him back inexorably to his fate, to the givens of his existence: "But I have never got outside the circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (321). To Lena the past is "a peaceful corridor paved with unflagging
and tranquil faith" (15), but for Joe "all the past was a flat pattern . . . all that had ever been was the same as all that was-to-be and had-been would be the same" (266). These words reflect both an absence of progress and the perception of life as a single, problematic dilemma—a struggle against entrapment.

Lena Grove is presented as a simple, unsophisticated country girl who has an abundance of strength and patience. Michel Gresset, in his book Fascination: Faulkner's Fiction, 1919-1936, points out Lena's critical situation and vulnerability:

Lena Grove is another of Faulkner's primitive characters; a social outcast who has made herself vulnerable to social criticism because she has violated certain moral conventions. At first glance, her innocent attitudes toward love and hate appear to be merely naive. Yet from the start Lena Grove is represented as having peculiar power to evoke from other various reflections of her own gentleness, kindliness, and compassion.6

Having become pregnant and having been deserted by her lover, Burch, she feels it is her duty to pursue him and provide her unborn child with a father. She does not hide or become embarrassed by the fact that she is unmarried and pregnant."I am looking to meet him up this way" (9). Richard Chase, author of The American Novel and Its Tradition, describes Lena:

Lena Grove is one of those intensely female females we meet in Faulkner's books... She has all those womanly qualities which, as Faulkner likes to point out, baffle, fascinate, outrage, and finally defeat men. By implying that Lena Grove somehow symbolizes this ideal unity Faulkner suggests no metaphysical reconciliation. He merely praises again that enduring stoicism and wisdom of the heart which he finds among the poor whites, Negroes, and other socially marginal types.

That is to say, Faulkner's admiration for his rebel characters is caused by their courage, strength and resistance when dealing with the imposed restrictions and bitter criticism of their society.

The importance of Lena Grove's character in Light in August cannot be overestimated. Faulkner commented:

the story began with Lena Grove, the idea of the young girl with nothing, pregnant, determined to find her sweetheart. It was—that was out of my admiration for women, for the courage and endurance of women. As I told that story I had to get more and more into it, but that was mainly the story of Lena Grove.

In the early pages Lena is on the road, apprehensive that her child will be born before she finds Lucas, wishing to be thought a "lady," and tacitly refusing to hear facts that will "undermine the consoling picture of her situation that she has created for herself—in short, a comprehensible young woman caught up in a conflict between private illusions and dis-

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8 Joseph L. Blotner, ed., Faulkner in the University, Charlottesville, Virginia: (University of Virginia Press, 1959), 75.
tressing external realities." By the end of Light in August we admire her ability to cope quietly with the birth of her baby in relative isolation and her refusal to make a hasty marriage for the sake of her "good name." Lena seems at one and the same time

an uncomprehending peasant with strong survival instincts and an elusive, almost mythic presence. This not to say that Faulkner’s presentation of Lena is anything but richly ambiguous, but rather to point out the ways in which it complicates our responses to, and assessment of, this pivotal female figure.¹⁰

Lena Grove is another of Faulkner’s primitive and pagan characters, a social outcast who has made herself vulnerable to social criticism because she has violated certain moral conventions. At first glance, her innocent attitudes toward love and hate appear to be merely naive; nonetheless, from the start Lena Grove is represented as having a peculiar power to evoke from others various reflections of her own gentleness, kindliness, and compassion "She expels her breath. It is not a sigh so much as a peaceful expiration, as though of peaceful astonishment. A right good piece it seems now" (11).

Compared with the embattled lives and specter-haunted thoughts of Gail Hightower, Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, the calm journey of Lena Grove with a willing Byron Bunch in

⁹Page, Faulkner’s Women, 62.

¹⁰Ibid., 63.
her wake seems almost an impertinence. Lena finds herself at the center of the actions and the reactions of various characters and the object of a clearly friendly public attitude. Each person she meets sees not her but an image of what he believes her to be, and that image is least partly predetermined by the convention that identifies virginity with virtue. "Apparently Armstid has never once looked full at her. Yet he has already seen that she wears no wedding ring" (9). For Mrs. Armstid, Henry Armstid's self-reliant wife, who donates her meager saving to help Lena Grove, Lena is the fallen woman; for the men at the store, a foolish virgin to be treated with mingled pity and scorn; and for Byron Bunch, who loves her, essentially the innocent victim of a scoundrel. Each of these images, grounded in a concern with Lena's unmarried state, conveys more information about the observers and their society than it does about Lena, for she does not share the preconceptions of the community.

From the moment we see her delicately licking the sardine oil from her fingers, she is wholly absorbed in the new sensations with which her leisurely travels provide her. Even her search for a father for her child is more a matter of instinct than morality. Once Byron assumes this responsibility, "she shows no great haste to marry and so to remove the social stigma from herself and her child."

Inevitably, Lena is judged harshly, for she has violated the mores of society.

In a novel primarily about the violent collisions between illusion and reality, Faulkner dares to give importance to the women who recognize no disparity between them: illusion becomes reality in the vision of Lena Grove. Lena’s place in *Light in August* has been acutely perceived by Irving Howe, who looks beneath the usual platitudes about Lena:

She stands for the outrageous possibility that the assumption by Faulkner and his cultivated readers may be false—the assumption that suffering finds a justification in the growth of human consciousness. For Lena is and does "right" with a remarkably small amount of consciousness or suffering, neither of which she apparently needs very much; she is Faulkner’s wry tribute to his own fallibility, a tribute both persuasive and meant completely to persuade.12

In the novel’s first chapter Lena Grove’s narrative program dominates because it occupies the primary portion of the text, since her object—to find Lucas Burch—is foregrounded. For Lena, her destinator is both nature and culture, more precisely how she interprets nature. "She becomes pregnant (a fact of nature) and her brother calls her a whore."13 Lena’s older brother, then, is her opponent and a spokesperson of the culture, but as the spokesperson of culture he is also an embodiment of the more ideological

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13Ibid., 37.
destinator--culture (especially patriarchal language) reading nature (especially female sexuality)--which reoccurs in The Sound and the Fury. Yet a narrative movement recurring in Faulkner's fiction a virgin who becomes sexually active and then becomes a wife, for which there is no middle term, per se; that is, there is no discretely named subject position, and in male discourse this position is reduced to 'whore,' a term which inaccurately and moralistically names the action of this transitional stage. Just as virgin and wife are culturally privileged, only the movement from virgin to wife is marked as the ideal or "classic" role for a woman to play.\(^\text{14}\)

In the previous discussion I have tried to shed light on Faulkner's rebels, namely Caddy Compson and Miss Quentin and Lena Grove; they are the Faulker rebels for whom the novelists seems to have the greatest sympathy. Instead of conforming to the traditional ideals of Southern womanhood, they refuse to suppress their feminine nature and become "Southern ladies." Despite the familial restrictions and the social rejection caused by their "immoral" deeds, Caddy and Lena did not weigh social rejection or family values. Furthermore, their struggle and their rebellion make them gain not only Faulkner's sympathy and admiration, but the reader's as well.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., 96.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

The main goal of this dissertation is to fill a critical gap concerning Faulkner's female characters that has been left by various critics. My discussion of a chosen group of Faulkner's female characters (the unconquered, the ghosts and the rebels) reveals Faulkner's admiration, sympathy and respect for the female protagonists in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Faulkner admires Dilsey Gibson and Judith Sutpen for their endurance, exalts Caddy Compson and Lena Grove for their courage and rebellion, and cherishes Joanna Burden and Rosa Coldfield for their patience. Moreover, I have analyzed each character according to their traits: endurance, patience, strength, and rebellion. These characteristics are discussed in the context of familial restrictions and social barriers which lend themselves to the classifications named.

Additionally, this study has focused on the literary criticism surrounding Faulkner's women. Various critics such as Leslie A. Fiedler, Maxwell Geismar and Irving Howe, to name a few, had different views about Faulkner's women. For instance, Fiedler had accused Faulkner of being "antifeminist." Geismar had also pointed out what he considered to be "Faulkner's feeling of discontent." In a similar manner, David Minter added that Faulkner did not hesitate to permit his male characters "to express their negative feelings about women." On the other hand, other critics such as Charles H. Nilon,
Darrell Abel and Myra Jehlen had minutely developed or shared my view. In other words, they had stated that Faulkner was sympathetic and respectful towards his women protagonists for their struggle and was resentful of the Southern social codes and barriers which caused restrictions between genders and between races. For example, Nilon points out that "a tone of admiration is the central device establishing Dilsey's character. Her image, patience, and endurance are not distorted, but they appear to be larger than life—size." This larger-than-life image comes from Faulkner's attitude toward the character and is primarily a matter of tone." Furthermore, Nilon details Faulkner's rejection and criticism of the social system in the South, which had oppressed women and blacks for years. Nilon points out that Faulkner's Negro characters destroy the kind of myth that supports Negro stereotypes. Also, Nilon states that "Faulkner does not justify the social and economic advantage that some white men take of Negroes, nor does he define their acts on moral grounds that predicate the Negroes' individuality as different from that of white men."¹ In the same manner, Jehlen believes that the story of Judith Sutpen in Absalom,Absalom! is one of the most moving that Faulkner has ever written."² Abel adds


²Myra Jehlen, Class and Character in Faulkner's South, 85.
that "Faulkner was always fascinated by rebels and has usually accorded them a full measure of dramatic sympathy."

Faulkner's admiration extends to those women who have the ability to endure and to face the hardships of life and of society, and who have the valor to lead and to steer the ship in the midst of confusion and disorder. Illustrating this admiration is Dilsey Gibson of The Sound and the Fury, who symbolizes endurance, leadership, patience and self-respect in a very hostile and actively racist environment. Her ability to serve and, above all, to manage the daily life of the Compsons, despite their rigidified attitude toward her, has led to Faulkner's admiration, respect and sympathy. In the same manner, Caddy Compson and her daughter Miss Quentin win Faulkner's and the reader's admiration for their courage to reject her family's code of honor and social status. Caddy's patience and strength in facing the consequences of her rebellion make her a true heroine. Jason's brutality towards her and her daughter, Miss Quentin, gave both more reasons to defend what they believed in and to protect their own existence. Furthermore, the reader can sense that Caddy is a victim of a family who strongly believed in the importance of the established social status and its privileges. Nevertheless, one notice that Caddy did not accept or respect either

her given social status or her family's code of honor.

On the other hand, in dealing with the social struggle as illustrated in The Sound and Fury, one can grasp the notion that Dilsey Gibson is the spokeswoman of the unconquered women whose self-esteem and great valor prevented men from controlling them. Her ability to run the daily life of the Compson family makes her, in Faulkner's eyes at least, the ideal woman for the future. Dilsey was the guardian of the children, the custodian of the Compson's house, and the protector of Caddy's daughter from Jason. Despite her old age and her weak health, Dilsey tried as much as she could to keep order in a family which lacked all sense of humanity and which treated her with cruelty. It is obvious that Dilsey represents Faulkner's highest ethical vision for her assumption of the burden of all those activities which nourish human life. Indeed, Faulkner effectively and precisely conveyed his notion of the astonishing irony and mystery of human life when he chose an old Negro servant to represent his new vision of the ideal woman. In addition, Dilsey's struggle with the Compsons, which is the result of the Southern social system, which could be briefly described as immoral, brutal, rigid and cruel towards women in general and Negroes in particular, shows Faulkner's disapproval of the social system of the South. Observing the unconquered group of women, one can notice that Dilsey Gibson of The Sound and the Fury and Judith Sutpen of Absalom, Absalom! went through tormented phases of struggle against social
barriers and familial restrictions, earning Faulkner's admiration for their irrefragable endurance and incomparable patience, which kept them beyond any man's comprehension and enabled them to conquer. Moreover, Faulkner's portrayal or treatment of this group shows indirectly his criticism of, rejection of, and contempt for the traditional social system of the South which restricts, denies and oppresses the role, existence and freedom of women. Furthermore, other examples can be found in Caddy Compson's courage to reject her family's restrictions and criticism and rejection by her community for being unmarried and pregnant. However, despite this criticism, both rebels, Caddy and Lena, refused to give up under familial and social pressure. They were willing to face the consequences of their "sinful and disgraceful" deeds with courage and determination. Likewise, Joanna Burden and Rosa Coldfield, the ghosts, won Faulker's admiration, sympathy and respect for their strength and endurance in dealing with the unfulfilled promises of the conventional Southern men and in accepting their spinster position for the rest of their lives.

The Sound and the Fury, Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! are primarily works about the modern world, a world of changes in social structure and the familial influences upon women in particular and minorities in general, and, incidentally, about the South. The Southern elements, to be sure, are very important. However, these novels are essentially about the disintegration of families, of traditions,
and of culture. The Southern settings perhaps render these lesions and dissolutions more poignant simply because the South as a region, I believe, is still family-centered, stubbornly traditional, and old-fashioned. Faulkner not only challenges the reader to take part in his cosmos, but he gives the reader the opportunity to understand himself or herself by fully analyzing, and in most cases admiring, the struggling characters of his fictional world.

Indeed, Faulkner's female characters, whether unconquered strugglers, ghosts or rebels, are unified in part by the admiration, sympathy and respect of Faulkner as well of the reader. Almost all the females of the three groups are emotionally mature, strong, responsible, patient and realistic individuals, whether they are spinsters, mothers, wives or widows. William Faulkner creates a fictional territory of his own out of the New World historical experience, which included the tragedy of the Civil War and the defeat of the Confederacy, the racistic society which enslaved and brutalized the African race, and the social and familial restrictions and oppression of women so deeply rooted in Southern communities. All these factors played major roles in Faulkner's literary career.

Despite derogatory remarks and false accusations of some critics concerning Faulkner's treatment of women, one can still see Faulkner's fair treatment, support, admiration and sympathy for his female characters upon examining his literary
works. For example, in *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner argues that women "have the courage and fortitude in the face of pain and annihilation which make the most Spartan man resemble a puling boy" (192); in *Absalom,Absalom!* he declares that women "had not the need for any man (154)," and when he was asked at the University of Virginia whether he found it easier to write about men or women he replied that it was much more "fun to write about women," and he gave a reason: "Because I think women are marvelous, they're wonderful." However, that he found women wonderful does not rest upon his own assertion. His fiction provides overwhelming evidence of his interest in women, his sympathy and admiration for them, his acknowledgment of their force and power, and his belief in their crucial importance to the human community. After having surveyed the female characters from Faulkner's major novels, namely *The Sound and Fury, Light in August*, and *Absalom,Absalom!* , one can arrive at more plausible conclusions about his attitude toward women. Much that Faulkner's admires in them arises from their endurance and their struggles, like those of Dilsey Gibson of *The Sound and the Fury* and Judith Sutpen of *Absalom,Absalom!*; their patience and their anger, like that of Joanna Burden of *Light in August* and Rosa Coldfield of *Absalom,Absalom!*; and their courage to rebel against convention and tradition, like those of Caddy Compson and her daughter Quentin of *The Sound and the Fury* and Lena Grove of *Light in August*.

Faulkner's treatment of his female protagonists and their
struggles, patience, endurance, and rejection of the social and familial restrictions upon women occupied most of his major literary works. Faulkner saw his female characters as victims of social and familial behavior which had been the practice of Southern society for decades. In other words, Faulkner's treatment of his female characters argues against the claims of those critics who failed to see the importance of women in his canon.
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