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Representations of Poor Whites in the Works of William Faulkner

In writing about his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, Nobel Prize-winning novelist William Faulkner aptly describes the real social structure of the Mississippi Delta of the early twentieth century, roughly divided into three segments of society: African-Americans descended from the ex-slaves, affluent whites descended from the antebellum planter class, and poor whites descended from poor European immigrants. While Faulkner (if not some of his characters) employs a respectful tone in describing the poor ex-slaves of the Mississippi Delta, his portrayals of Yoknapatawpha County's poor rural whites remain overwhelmingly negative. These characters are often lazy, socially burdensome, ignorant, mentally ill, sexually promiscuous, violent, and immoral, making them less human to the reader than the ex-slaves or the aristocratic Southern whites. They are the consummate 'others' to the society of Yoknapatawpha County. Despite these controversial depictions, many scholars have overlooked these poor rural whites as a significant part of Faulkner's canon. This essay examines representations of the rural poor in the novel *As I Lay Dying* and the short story "Barn Burning." In conjunction with these fictional works, the essay explores the ethnic origins of poor whites and their place in the social structure of the antebellum and postbellum South. "Barn Burning" describes the sharecropping system of cotton production, a method of tenant-farming that employed many poor whites and worked to keep them in poverty, while affluent land-owners

reaped the lions' share of profits. Furthermore, Faulkner's background in the aristocratic planter class informs his portrayals of poor whites, and the author becomes a voice for his Southern brand of political conservatism. His work progressively becomes more conservative in tone between *As I Lay Dying* and his later work "Barn Burning," moving from a portrayal of poor whites as ignorant, tragicomic figures (the Bundren family) to poor whites as a corrosive social force that threatens the fabric of Southern society (the Snopes family). Above all, William Faulkner stresses the 'otherness' and inferiority of the rural poor, and the fiction illumines his personal sociopolitical thought.

To understand the place of poor whites in the social structure of the South in general and the Mississippi Delta in particular, the reader must understand their ethnic and historical background. During periods of European migration, millions of immigrants swept into the South, most of them impoverished people or ex-criminals looking for a better life in America. Many were the so-called 'Celtic' peoples: "In each of the decennial censuses from 1790 through 1860, about half of the white population of the South was of Irish, Scottish, or Welsh extraction" (McWhiney XXI). According to historical records, "the American colonies south and west of Pennsylvania were peopled during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mainly by immigrants from the 'Celtic fringe' of the British archipelago—the western and northern uplands of England, Wales, the Scottish Highlands and Borders, the Hebrides, and Ireland" (XXI). Most of these people became yeoman farmers or day laborers, tending to exist in the lower-classes of society. These ancestors of Faulkner's poor whites were stereotyped as "clannish, herding, leisure-loving Celts, who relished whiskey, gambling, and combat, and who despised hard work, anything English, most government, fences, and any other restraints

upon them and their free-ranging livestock” (8). Scholars such as McWhiney tend to accept these historic stereotypes as truth and ignore societal prejudice and economic barriers against social mobility for these poor whites, instead blaming their degradation on their ethnic origins. The settlers of the South came from a European society of rigid class division, and these conceptions of shiftless poor whites were passed down from affluent Europeans to their American offspring in the South. Thus, the postbellum poor whites of Faulkner’s works exemplify many of these traits, culturally and genetically linked to these impoverished, displaced Europeans in the eyes of Faulkner’s aristocratic planter class. To Faulkner, these negative traits precede poverty, rather than seeing poverty as creating negative traits in this population.

William Alexander Percy’s autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son* provides an interesting correlation with the works of William Faulkner. Percy likewise was a descendent of the Mississippi Delta’s antebellum gentry who eventually introduced the sharecropping system to create a form of feudalistic, dependence-based economic system to replace slave labor in the aftermath of the Civil War. A contemporary of Faulkner with a similar socioeconomic background, Percy champions the sharecropping system and upper-class paternalism toward the poor members of society. And like Faulkner, his conception of Mississippi Delta social divisions of the early twentieth century roots itself in antebellum ideals:

The basic fiber, the cloth of the Delta population—as of the whole South—is built of three dissimilar threads and only three. First were the old slave-holders, the landed gentry, the governing class...Second were the poor whites, who owned no slaves, whose manual labor lost its dignity

from being in competition with slave labor, who worked their small unproductive holdings ignored by the gentry, despised by the slaves.

Third were negroes (19).

Like Faulkner, Percy divides the South into three distinct social classes and provides a succinct conception of poor whites. Their independent yet precarious position marks them as outsiders to the 'orthodox' system of slavery, and both the gentry and the slaves find them unsavory. They labor on the poorest land and gain little from their effort. Percy writes that "intellectually and spiritually they are inferior to the Negro, whom they hate" (20). While he can attribute the social position of African-Americans to slavery, somehow the degradation of poor whites is justified by their mental inferiority. Percy derisively refers to them as "hill-billies, red-necks and pecker-woods," and writes that among poor rural whites, "the virus of poverty, malnutrition, and interbreeding has done its degenerative work: the present breed is probably the most unprepossessing on the whole broad face of the ill-populated earth" (20). He is scathing in his portrayal of what Faulkner termed 'the redneck third estate' and ignores the fact that the slave system created their precarious, impoverished social situation. Rather he focuses on their ethnic stock, reasoning that "their forefathers served terms in English prisons for debt and were released on condition that they migrate from the mother country to the colonies" (19). He earnestly believes in their social and mental inferiority. William Percy is most interesting in that he wrote during the time of transition from the dismantled antebellum system to a postbellum New South of increased social mobility among poor whites, which Faulkner explores in the later "Snopes Trilogy" of novels. As this essay discusses later, both authors treat this social mobility as a negative social force displacing the former planter

class and the ex-slaves, and Percy writes, “When these [poor whites] have supplanted the Negro, ours will be a sadder country, and not a wiser one” (21).

Both nonfiction works such as *Lanterns on the Levee* and the fictional works of Faulkner are useful in the fact that historians have done little to record the lives of poor whites in the South. They are essentially a voiceless class that could do little to preserve their own history, and as the historian Charles C. Bolton writes,

Poor whites of the antebellum South are generally invisible beyond the kind of records that consist essentially of numbers—census and tax records.

Very little evidence survives, in other words, from which to build a portrait of human beings. Many of the clues we do have are encased in what is essentially a negative context—court records, ejection proceedings, and records of insolvent debtors (*Poor Whites of the Antebellum South* 1).

This glaring omission from Southern history persisted in the Mississippi Delta of Faulkner’s age, and only indirectly do records of the personal lives of poor whites exist. Most literary figures of the South descended directly from the planter class, who had the education and leisure time to record their lives, while both the systems of antebellum slavery and postbellum sharecropping produced “a backward and brutal society that condemned most whites to a life that fell considerably short of civilized standards” (*The Confessions of Edward Isham xv*). Since they could not record their own history, impoverished whites are described by an upper class that saw themselves as socially and mentally superior to this underclass, and thus the descriptions by Percy and Faulkner are often denigrating in tone. Both authors are a product of their society, social class, and popular opinions of the day.

In describing the condition of poor whites in the postbellum South, William Faulkner could advocate his own conservative sociopolitical views, based in a belief in paternalism by the white upper-class. By stressing the vast inferiority of poor whites in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, the author justifies the super-concentrated political power of upper-class whites in the early twentieth century, reasoning that poor whites would be deficient stewards of Southern society:

Faulkner's Snopes fictions of the late 1930s suggests Faulkner's ties to what Eugene Genovese has recently described as the "Southern Tradition" of American conservatism, a philosophical tradition opposed to both "market-oriented bourgeois ideologies" and "the mass politics of liberalism and social democracy" (Lessig 82).

Faulkner's fiction falls in line with other Southern writers of the 1930s, many of which belonged to the self-styled "Agrarian" movement based around Vanderbilt University, including such influential figures as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, and Andrew Lytle¹ (Genovese 5). These writers and intellectuals championed the conservative ideals of the Old South, decrying progressive reforms, industrialization, "radical capitalism," and "material progress" that ignored typical boundaries of social class (Genovese 12). Furthermore, these conservatives believed "that the preservation of a society's spiritual and moral values depends to a significant extent upon the nature and form of its property" (79). Thus, political power should belong to society's property owners, in this instance the remnants of the affluent, antebellum planter-class, localizing power in the hands of a small elite of whites determined by social class and blood lineage. Faulkner and these

¹ Members of the literary wing of the Agrarian Movement were also known as the "New Critics."

other Southern writers saw capitalism, industrialization, and progressive social reform as a threat to the South's dream of an agrarian society ruled by the aristocracy. Thus, they felt quite threatened by the agricultural, social, and economic reforms of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s, and Faulkner's fiction signifies a defense of the traditional class structure of the Mississippi Delta (Lessig 84).

The philosophy of the "Southern Tradition" corresponds closely with *traditional republicanism*, a belief which explicitly links property-ownership to political power.

Modern political theorist William Simon explains that "property is important to Republicans because it confers power. The Republicans deny any strong distinction between the kind of power property confers and political power" (Simon 62-63).

Traditional republicanism is a particularly strong form of political involvement because of its "preference for small, geographically based political units," which concentrates power in the hands of local landowners (62). The powerful aristocratic whites of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County (and the Mississippi Delta as a whole) correspond with the tenets of traditional republicanism. However, a society that relies solely upon traditional republicanism inherently signifies the widespread "disenfranchisement of nonowners," who have no political voice (Simon 65). Thus, the landless or tenant poor whites have no political power, while the aristocratic whites control society. As Charles C. Bolton notes, for poor whites in the South, a combination of land-based political clout, hereditary land-ownership, and the sharecropping system precluded any hope for social mobility among the lower classes (*Poor Whites of the Antebellum South* 11).

In describing the political philosophy of James Harrington's *Oceana*, J.G.A. Pocock relates the pitfalls of republicanism, in that it benefits the affluent classes at the expense of landless citizens:

I, 13. The man that cannot live upon his own must be a servant; but he that can live upon his own may be a freeman.

I, 14. Where a people cannot live upon their own, the government is either monarchy or aristocracy; where a people can live upon their own, the government may be a democracy.

II, 4. If a man has some estate he may have some servants or a family, and consequently some government or something to govern; if he has no estate he can have no government (Pocock 112).

In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, political power is super-concentrated among members of a small white elite that owns the vast majority of the land in the Mississippi Delta, the remnants of the old plantation system. Radical historian Eugene Genovese describes this "Southern Tradition" of conservatism, which justifies the disenfranchisement and subjugation of poor whites. Their lack of land-ownership and representation makes true democracy impossible, and Yoknapatawpha functions in a sort of quasi-feudalistic state in which the lower-classes serve the purposes of the affluent. Even more alarming, an absence of social mobility insures that poor whites will remain in a static position, never reaching the land-owning requirements of traditional republicanism.

The three-tiered social structure of Faulkner's South (ex-slaves, poor whites, and aristocratic whites) creates a quasi-democracy in direct conflict with capitalism and social

mobility, similar to Pocock's summation of aristocratic/feudalistic Europe: "a democracy of the independent, an aristocracy of the leisured and well-born, a fixed hierarchy of the independent and dependent" (138). Since most of the landholdings of the antebellum and postbellum South were passed down hereditarily, poor whites were inherently excluded from republican government. In hierarchical societies, Michael Walzer notes, "birth and blood are dominant over purity" and egalitarianism (27). This aristocratic "virtue" opposes the American democratic ideal of meritocracy, in which people receive employment, opportunities, and social mobility according to the belief that "offices should be filled by the most qualified people because qualification is a special case of desert. People may or may not deserve their qualities, but they deserve those places for which their qualities fit them" (Walzer 135). The social structure of Faulkner's South, based on aristocratic blood lineage, does not primarily value the personal talent or merit of individuals of the lower classes. Rather, it assumes that poor whites have no social value because they were born in a static situation of poverty in a society that allows little hope for social mobility. The "Southern Tradition" of conservatism opposes both capitalism and meritocracy. As the Southern Agrarian writer Robert Penn Warren argued, "'the poor white' is 'in the strictest sense...a being beyond the pale of even the most generous democratic recognition...[He is] so much social debris'" (Lessig 97).

Ultimately, the Agrarian philosophy boiled down to a paternalistic system based upon traditional republicanism's property ownership, calling for "the restoration of personal servitude for all laboring classes, regardless of race" (Genovese 32). However, the "Southern Tradition" signified an alarming paradox. While embracing the power of individual citizens and personal acquisition, this philosophy vehemently opposed free-

market capitalism, traditionally the greatest medium of social mobility; as Genovese writes, “Capitalism has historically been the greatest solvent of traditional social relations” (83). It threatened the upper-class whites’ monopoly of power. The conservatives of Faulkner’s time often “denounced capitalism...as a brutal, immoral, irresponsible wage slavery in which the masters of capital exploited and impoverished their workers without assuming personal responsibility for them” (Genovese 31). This opinion obscured the fact that the quasi-feudalistic systems of both slavery and sharecropping were *true* slavery, insuring that the lower-class remained in a static situation of poverty with no hope of social mobility.

Literary scholar Matthew Lessig argues that the Agrarians dovetailed especially with Faulkner’s personal sociopolitical beliefs, and, like his fellow writers, Faulkner saw the rise of poor whites as a threat to the traditional social order of the South. Furthermore, these Agrarian writers—especially Tate and Warren—became great admirers of Faulkner’s work and advocates for his artistic creation, precisely because the writer “possessed a sympathetic historical imagination to compliment [their] own” (80). They came from a similar background and shared similar values.² In a 1939 issue of *Time* magazine, Robert Cantwell wrote an exposé on Faulkner that re-introduced the author to the world and reinvigorated book sales, marking a watershed in his then-floundering career. Cantwell described the author as a “father, Southern landlord, and conservative Democrat,” inextricably linking him to family, land-ownership, and Southern philosophy in the minds of the American readership. Cantwell wrote that

² Himself having little formal education, Faulkner himself shied away from the literary establishment, as “literary talk made him feel unlettered” (Minter 133). Thus, the author had no formal ties to the Agrarians-New Critics, admitting, “I don’t like literary people. I never associate with other writers. I don’t know why—I’m just not social.” However, this did not detract from the Agrarians’ admiration of Faulkner’s work (134-135).

Faulkner described himself as a “social historian...[who] hopes that by recording the minute changes in Oxford’s life he can suggest the changes that are transforming the whole South” (82-83). Implicitly, Faulkner’s self-stated role as “social historian” connotes his critical view of the New South’s social change, especially the rise of poor whites.

Furthermore, Cantwell made sure to photograph Faulkner at the “master’s” home, Rowan Oak. After becoming financially successful, one of Faulkner’s first actions was to purchase and restore the large Rowan Oak estate, a dilapidated antebellum mansion in the Mississippi Delta. As literary scholar Diane Roberts points out, “In Oxford he had equipped himself with an aristocratic household: columns, chatelaine, and a black butler named Uncle Ned” (14). Throughout the twenties, thirties, and forties, Faulkner continued “buying up as much land as he could to improve the estate” (14). The author saw land-ownership as a triumph in his career, and it is interesting to note this purchase as informative of his personal moral philosophy:

For if we are to consider Faulkner as a critic of the capitalist marketplace, we must also understand him as a critic who writes from a Southern conservative tradition that, while opposed to corporate capitalism, also cherishes the rights of property, the (white) propertied individual and the social hierarchy that property engenders (Lessig 82).

Land-ownership buttressed Faulkner’s place in the upper echelon of Southern society. In February 1938, around the time he wrote his two classic sharecropper fictions “Barn Burning” and *The Hamlet*, Faulkner also bought “a 320-acre farm in a remote part of Lafayette County, Mississippi. Here Faulkner would raise mules, oversee four black

tenant families, run a commissary, and, as his brother Johnny noted, find ‘the kind of people he wrote about, the hill people’” (85). Faulkner himself became a tenant landlord, the master in a paternalistic economic relationship that worked to keep tenants in poverty while the landlord reaped the largest share of the profits. It is the type of economic system held up by the conservative Agrarian movement as ultimately superior to capitalism, cementing the social position of upper-class whites. Faulkner’s personal choices mirrored his sociopolitical beliefs, as he reestablished an antebellum estate, took on sharecropping tenants, and married Estelle Oldham, a Southern belle from an affluent, old-blood Mississippi family (Minter 29).

Between the writing of *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and the late-1930s Snopes fiction of “Barn Burning” and *The Hamlet*, Faulkner espouses progressively more conservative political views in his literature. While the poor white Bundren family of *As I Lay Dying* is often portrayed as lazy, socially burdensome, ignorant, mentally ill, sexually promiscuous, and the consummate ‘others’ to the rest of Yoknapatawpha society, the Bundrens are also tragicomic figures for whom the reader can sympathize in their suffering. They own land and even exist independently of the sharecropping system. However, the poor white Snopes family of “Barn Burning” constitutes an immoral, vindictive social force that threatens the fabric of Southern society, and the fiction effectively argues for a conservative, paternalistic social structure that would keep these sharecropping poor whites in their social class. The Snopes are overwhelmingly negative characters that, Faulkner reasons, take ruthless advantage of their neighbors. While viewing the changes of the South around him, he writes cautionary fiction to keep poor whites in check. In his later years, Faulkner even became conservative enough to

chastise his contemporary John Steinbeck for the sympathetic portrayal of the poor, sharecropping Joad family of *The Grapes of Wrath*; “Faulkner had privately criticized Steinbeck for his view that man and society could improve; such an approach, said Faulkner, ‘softened Steinbeck’s view and made him a sentimental liberal’” (Werlock 61). While Steinbeck martyrs poor whites, Faulkner disparages them as a threat to a just society in no need of reform. In these negative portrayals of poor whites, the author can justify their static social situation.

As I Lay Dying describes the exodus of the Bundren family, who must leave their isolated rural community of Frenchman’s Bend to bury their recently-dead matriarch, Addie, in Jefferson, the town of her birth. The novel employs a unique narrative structure that consists of, rather than chapters, fifty-eight short interior monologues by eighteen different narrators (consisting of various Bundrens and their neighbors). Thus, the reader receives not only the thoughts of the family regarding their social situation and precarious lifestyle, but also the unfiltered opinions of their neighbors. These neighbors often view the Bundrens as lazy, mentally deficient, and sexually promiscuous. By placing criticisms of the Bundrens in the mouths of other poor whites, Faulkner can mask his own criticism of the family and make their degradation seem more plausible. Yet while other poor whites comment negatively on the family and exemplify certain positive traits themselves, the Bundrens remain the definite focal point of the novel, conveying a negative conception of the rural poor. The pious Cora Tull concisely articulates society’s reaction to the Bundrens through her description of Jewel Bundren, the hot-headed, illegitimate son of Addie: “A Bundren through and through, loving nobody, caring for nothing except how to get something with the least amount of work” (22). Faulkner

portrays them as selfish and animalistic, lacking human compassion. While their mother lays dying, Anse sends two of his sons to make three dollars doing farm labor for another man, “denying [their] dying mother the goodbye kiss” (22). Anse’s laziness desecrates the death of the mother, and this callous act calls even his humanity into question.

Early in the narrative Faulkner portrays the patriarch Anse as a slothful poor white, parasitically living off the good will of the community. He is “consistently perceived by other whites as lazy, greedy, and deceitful, characteristics historically attributed to white trash to justify their lack of social mobility” (Leyda 42). While Anse is a farmer who owns a small tract of land, he refuses to work, forcing his children and neighbors to take up the plow in his stead. Faulkner and other Southern conservatives believe land-ownership to be tantamount to power and social capital, but the author subtly criticizes Anse for squandering his opportunity for power through slothfulness. The poor white ignores the voice given him by traditional republicanism. His laziness justifies his lower-level in the social structure of the Mississippi Delta. Even his son Darl comments,

The shirt across pa’s hump is faded lighter than the rest of it. There is no sweat stain on his shirt. I have never seen a sweat stain on his shirt. He was sick once from working in the sun when he was twenty-two years old, and he tells people that if he ever sweats, he will die. I suppose he believes it (*As I Lay Dying* 17).

Darl implies that his father actually can work, but has not toiled in the fields in several decades, using the frivolous excuse of having heatstroke “once.” Anse lacks the badge of honest farmer labor (sweat on his shirt), and thus states that physical labor will lead to his

death. Darl adds sarcastically, “I suppose he believes it,” criticizing his father’s deceitful nature. Anse’s laziness ultimately marks him as an inferior, burdensome member of society. Discussing the differences in social class, Anse remarks,

Nowhere in this sinful world can a honest, hardworking man profit. It takes them that runs the stores in towns, doing no sweating, living off of them that sweats. It aint the hardworking man, the farmer. Sometimes I wonder why we keep at it. It’s because there is a reward for us above, where they cant take their autos and such. Every man will be equal there and it will be taken from them that have and give to them that have not by the Lord (110).

By having Anse deliver this speech rather than a truly hard-working farmer, Faulkner trivializes a sound argument for social democracy against economic degradation. Anse duplicitously groups himself with hardworking farmers who “sweat” in the cotton-fields to support their families, yet we know from Darl’s narrative that Anse has not worked in several decades. Anse focuses not on the salvation of the afterlife, but the redistribution of society’s wealth following death, corrupting Biblical arguments for care of the poor. This poor white patriarch ludicrously calls himself an “honest, hardworking man,” and Faulkner marks Anse as a parasitical character that deserves his social situation.

Because of Anse’s laziness, other members of the Frenchman’s Bend community must support the Bundren family, perennially helping them bring in their cotton crop and even providing aid to help bury Addie Bundren in Jefferson. The Bundrens are a social burden, leading fellow farmer Armstid to remark, “If there aint something about a durn fellow like Anse that seems to make a man have to help him, even when he knows he’ll

be wanting to kick himself the next minute” (192). The poor white Anse is a manipulative character that takes advantage of a communal safety-net that cares for all residents of Frenchman’s Bend. The community sees Anse as “a lazy man, a man that hates moving,” an inferior character that they help anyway out of a belief in communal aid, rather than any true affection for the man himself (114). Faulkner implies that Anse is undeserving of their help. However, as Julie Leyda notes, while numerous characters remark upon Anse’s custom of working his children as he rests in the shade, only Darl notes his father’s physical disability (43); “Pa’s feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy” (*As I Lay Dying* 11). The community refuses to acknowledge that deformity caused by child labor inhibits Anse’s ability to labor and rather sees him as a shiftless poor white. Paradoxically, while Darl notes his father’s disability, he also believes in Anse’s congenital laziness. While ignoring his physical impediments, they do note his ugliness, looking like “a face carved by a savage caricaturist a monstrous burlesque of all bereavement flowed” and “a figure carved clumsily from tough wood by a drunken caricaturist” (78, 163). To the other residents of Yoknapatawpha County, Anse’s sloppy look mirrors his moral and mental degradation. The Bundrens’ “failure of...hope for upward mobility—indeed a kind of negative mobility—marks the characters as white trash in the racialized and classic sense of the term” (Leyda 40). According to Faulkner, their genetic origins preclude any hope for social mobility, justifying the degradation of poor whites and the political power of the well-born Southern aristocracy.

As a whole, Faulkner portrays the Bundrens as simple, ignorant country people, but two family members go beyond simple ignorance and exhibit severe mental illness. Faulkner links symptoms of schizophrenia to the inferior intellects of poor whites. The death of his mother drives eight-year-old Vardaman into a sort of delirium, famously commenting, “My mother is a fish” (84). After catching, gutting, and cooking a giant fish from the river, Vardaman mentally confuses the body of the dead fish with his mother’s corpse. While crossing a flooded river, the family loses her casket in crossing. Vardaman screams, “catch her darl catch her darl because in the water she could go faster than a man,” then reasons, “You never got here. You knew she is a fish but you let her get away” (150-151). Even as a young boy, Vardaman displays shocking signs of mental illness, even desecrating his mother’s body by drilling holes in her casket with an auger to give her air to breathe; the Bundrens find “the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash’s new auger broke off in the last one. When they taken the lid off they found that two of them had bored on into her face” (73). Vardaman’s gruesome act makes him subhuman to the reader, lying asleep next to the desecrated casket “like a felled steer” (73). Other family members blame his affliction on being “outen his head in grief and worry,” but his actions signify a deeper mental illness that can only be characterized as disturbing and grotesque (125). Rather than a grieving young boy, Vardaman exhibits traits that mark him as a future sociopath and a threat to society.

Vardaman’s older brother Darl also displays a mental illness that becomes progressively worse throughout the narrative. Members of the community characterize him as “queer, lazy, pottering about the place no better than Anse,” with “them queer eyes of hisn that makes folks talk” (24, 125). He is also clairvoyant, accurately

imagining scenes (such as the death of Addie Bundren) while he works miles away (49). While at times Darl seems to be the most competent decision-maker in the Bundren family, he ultimately goes insane from the rigors of the journey to Jefferson and burns a hapless farmer's barn in which the Bundrens spend the night. This unprovoked destruction relates the unpredictability of poor whites and the threat they present to the infrastructure of the South. The Bundrens betray Darl to the authorities to avoid being sued for damages, sending him to a mental institution in Jackson. As they drag him away, Darl laughs uncontrollably and foams at the mouth, muttering, "Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes yes" (253-254). He describes himself in the third person in the internal monologue, asking, "Is that why you are laughing, Darl?" (254). Once the family's most competent member, Darl descends into madness and isolation from reality. By marking two brothers of the same poor family with severe mental illness, Faulkner implies that these symptoms are a result of their inferior genetic stock. This dementia is hereditary, and genetics justifies their degradation. He marks their madness with highly disjunctive syntax that starkly separates them from other sane characters, employing hallucinogenic stream-of-consciousness narratives to describe their thought processes. For example, Vardaman rationalizes, "*Darl he went to Jackson is my brother Darl is my brother...Lots of people didn't go crazy. Pa and Cash and Jewel and Dewey Dell and me didn't go crazy,*" and, "*My brother he went crazy and he went to Jackson too. Jackson is further away than crazy*" (249-252). Faulkner portrays these rural poor whites as people ever perched on the edge of madness, incapable of functioning rationally in society.

The community members also reveal an obsession with the sexuality of Dewey Dell Bundren, the sole daughter of the poor family. Early in the narrative, Cora Tull

describes her as a “near-naked girl,” displaying both tomboyish and over-sexualized traits. Dewey Dell describes her own sexual fantasy, feeling “like a wet seed wild in the hot blind earth” as the warm air “touch[es] me naked through my clothes” (63-64). She is sexually promiscuous, consumed by uncontrollable desires. Dewey Dell is, in fact, pregnant from a premarital affair with Lefe, a cotton-picking field hand, who impregnates her on the edge of the fields (26-27). Only the clairvoyant Darl knows of the pregnancy and accuses Dewey Dell, “You want [your mother] to die so you can get to town: is that it?” (39-40). The teenage mother sees abortion as the only answer to her pregnancy. She is willing to sacrifice her own mother to save herself from having the child, a product of her reckless sexuality, which would put another financial burden upon the poor family. Faulkner portrays Dewey Dell as a sensual, chaotic character who even turns on her own brother for his knowledge of her pregnancy, helping the authorities subdue him in a masculine fashion: “[Dewey Dell] jumped on him like a wild cat so that one of the fellows had to quit and hold her and her scratching and clawing at him like a wild cat” (237). Faulkner animalizes her as a vicious, unfeeling beast that betrays her own blood.

Other characters see Dewey Dell as highly sexualized, and MacGowan, the drugstore clerk, calls her “a pretty hot mamma, for a country girl” as she comes searching for an aborticent (242). He characterizes her as a smoldering figure of violence and animal passion: “She looked pretty good. One of them black eyed ones that look like she’d as soon put a knife in you as not if you two-timed her” (242). MacGowan is a sexual predator that sees the poor white teenager as easy prey, disguising himself as a doctor as a pretext to be alone with Dewey Dell. A joking figure, the clerk mocks and banters with Dewey Dell as he coerces her. As Julie Leyda notes, when the other

characters mock poor whites, they often “implicitly [justify] through ridicule their disenfranchisement and alienation from society” (38). MacGowan establishes his intellectual superiority to her and uses his mental prowess to seduce the desperate, pregnant young girl. Faulkner ends MacGowan’s internal monologue just as he convinces Dewey Dell to accompany him down to the cellar to ingest a fake medication, implying that the two characters have sexual intercourse. The pregnant teenager willingly trades her body in an attempt to destroy the fetus growing inside her, and Faulkner’s Mississippians regard her as highly immoral. Another drugstore clerk, Mosely, indignantly throws her out of his store because of her request, shouting, “Go home and tell your pa or your brothers or the first man you come to in the road...me, a respectable druggist, that’s kept store and raised a family and been a church-member for fifty-six years in this town” (*As I Lay Dying* 202). No one sympathizes for Dewey Dell and rather feels moral outrage instead, ignoring the precarious nature of her situation. Her out-of-wedlock pregnancy marks her as a pariah in the community. In another section, Faulkner reveals that Jewel Bundren is the product of an illicit relationship between Addie Bundren and a traveling preacher (175-176). Like the madness of Vardaman and Darl, in describing the illicit affairs of both the mother and daughter, Faulkner implies that all poor white women are sexually promiscuous.

As they leave the rural world of Frenchman’s Bend for town of Jefferson, interactions between ‘town people’ and ‘country people’ stress the ‘otherness’ of the Bundren family. The druggist Mosely describes them as people who struggle to navigate through the modern town, and as Dewey Dell enters the shop, “she kind of bumbled at the screen door a minute, like *they* do” (198, emphasis added). He explicitly separates

himself from the country people, marginalizing them as people who do not belong in Jefferson. He states, “You have to humor *them*,” denying the Bundrens equal social standing with the other customers (200, emphasis added). Another customer describes to Mosely the commotion the Bundrens create coming to town, bringing a rotting, foul corpse along with their ragtag band: “It had been dead eight days, Albert said. They came from some place out in Yoknapatawpha County, trying to get to Jefferson with it” (203). He calls Addie Bundren “it,” smelling like “a piece of rotten cheese,” denying the dead country matriarch even her humanity (203). The marshal warns them, “Dont you know you’re liable to jail for endangering the public health?” (204). The presence of these poor rural whites in Jefferson creates a type of social pollution that threatens the health and well-being of the normal town residents. Faulkner portrays the Bundrens as being infinitely inferior to the more affluent characters.

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Even at the age of eight, Vardaman understands his place in the social structure of the Mississippi Delta. His father refuses to buy him a toy train in town, because,

Pa said flour and sugar and coffee costs so much. Because I am a country boy because boys in town. Bicycles. Why do flour and sugar and coffee cost so much when he is a country boy...“Why ain’t I a town boy pa?” I said. God made me. I did not said to God to made me in the country (66).

Vardaman explicitly links material possession to happiness and worth in the eyes of God. Trapped in poverty, he sees his social situation as predestined and ordained by divine power. Vardaman is the seminal ‘other,’ a poor white boy cognizant of his inferiority to the residents of the town. Like all Bundrens, he has no chance of social mobility considering the rigid class structure of Yoknapatawpha County, and because “God made”

Vardaman in the country, Faulkner justifies the boy's degradation by birth, rather than merit. The distinction between 'town' and 'country' is quite significant, because at this point in the development of the New South, "the country is represented as the site of backwardness, inefficiency, and ignorance at precisely the point in history when national participation in consumer capitalism picks up steam" (Leyda 41). Vardaman realizes that his family cannot afford such luxuries as bicycles and toy trains like "town boys" can, marking the Bundrens as the losers in a capitalist system. The geography of Yoknapatawpha County describes individual prosperity, starkly demarcating the affluence of Jefferson and the degradation of Frenchman's Bend, a rural slum.

While *As I Lay Dying* portrays the Bundrens as tragicomic 'others' whose degradation results from inferior social and genetic stock, the short story "Barn Burning" treats poor whites as an ominous threat to the social structure and infrastructure of the South. They are thieving, violent, and immoral. *Harper's* magazine published "Barn Burning" in 1939, and Faulkner shortly thereafter won with it "the first O. Henry Memorial Award for the best story published in an American magazine in the previous year" (Jones 3). The story is a significant part of Faulkner's canon of the Snopes family, a clan of immoral and negatively-portrayed poor whites who rise out of degradation to become a powerful, ruthless, and influential family in Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner's "Snopes Trilogy," respectively titled *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*, chronicles the social rise of this family and describes them as a corrosive social force that threatens the fabric of Southern society. The trilogy focuses on a "Southern community beset by an invading tribe of mostly conscienceless poor whites," representing "naked aggression and undiluted acquisitiveness" (Lessig 80). Specifically,

the poor white Snopeses (through newfound acquisition of land and property) threaten the power and control of the aristocratic whites, who have worked so diligently to keep property, disposable income, and political clout out of the hands of sharecroppers. The Snopeses' embrace of capitalism causes traditional republicanism to backfire for the affluent whites, as land-ownership and political power begins to shift to certain poor whites. William Faulkner argues against this redistribution of land and power. He advocates his own conservative political views by describing the chaos that follows the social rise of poor whites; they must be kept in check by Southern institutions, such as sharecropping, that concentrates powers among the members of the virtuous aristocracy.

Knowledge of the Mississippi Delta's sharecropping system is requisite to understand Faulkner's Snopes fiction in general and "Barn Burning" in particular. As

Charles C. Bolton writes,

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While farming provided a route to economic success for many white

Mississippians, a number of whites could always be found at the bottom of the agricultural ladder, working as tenant farmers or sharecroppers, a status more typically associated with black Mississippians in the century after the American Civil War ("Farmers Without Land" 1).

By 1900, 36% of all white farmers in Mississippi toiled under the sharecropping system, but this situation was especially prevalent in the Delta: "In Faulkner's own Lafayette County, the percentage of farms operated by tenants rose from 42.3% to 65.3% between the years of 1890-1910, roughly the period whose social history Faulkner chronicles in *The Hamlet*" (Lessig 102). In his Snopes fiction, Faulkner becomes a social historian who describes the world around him, heavily based upon poor whites working the

plantation land of affluent whites, and as noted earlier, he became a tenant-landlord himself in his later years around the writing of "Barn Burning." The sharecropping (or "crop lien") system worked to keep landless farmers in "an endless cycle of landless, debt, and poverty" ("Farmers Without Land" 4). Aristocratic whites instituted this system by law in 1867, implicitly replacing black slavery with a new form of wage slavery, providing cheap farm labor while disallowing the lower classes any hope for social mobility (4). These poor whites and ex-slaves "had to deal with landlords who were primarily concerned with making profits rather than helping struggling farmers move toward land-ownership" (2). Faulkner's depictions of sharecroppers provide a microcosm for the entire southeastern United States, where the numbers of tenant farmers fluctuated between at the very least 1.5 and 2 million in the 1920s and 1930s as reported by the federal agricultural census, but this estimate "was haphazard, however, and probably grossly low" (Kirby 68).

Landlords allowed these farmers use of their land, in exchange for a share of the crop (often over half) during harvest time. Before and during the planting season, sharecroppers purchased seed, farm implements, livestock, and personal goods at the plantation commissary store, usually at inflated prices. While the sharecroppers were originally promised a substantial share of the harvest, debts incurred during the growing seasons allowed the landlords to collect a greater lien against the crops. Excepting the most fruitful harvests, sharecroppers were typically left in debt with little or no disposable income, having no choice but to work for the same landlord the next year (Duncan 91-92). This system insured that land would stay in the hands of the aristocratic whites, who would keep their political power and preclude any hope of social mobility

among the poor whites and ex-slaves. Mississippi Delta sharecroppers often had a miserably low standard of living and a great lack of material goods, far into the twentieth century: “A 1942 study by the state of Mississippi found that only 10 percent of white sharecroppers had refrigerators, while 14 percent owned radios. Landowners in the state were three times as likely to own these items” (“Farmers Without Land” 5). This system persisted in Mississippi up to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, a part of the New Deal-era reforms. Sharecropping slowly died out in the 1940s and 1950s (5). However, prior to these reforms, the mobilization and/or unionization of sharecroppers presented a serious threat to the landed aristocracy, and “tenants and sharecroppers, like the Snopeses, represented ready villains for Agrarians and New Critics alike” (Lessig 80).

Faulkner’s short story “Barn Burning” essentially describes the relationship between the sharecropper Abner Snopes and his affluent landlord, Major de Spain, told from the vantage point of Abner’s young son Colonel Sartoris Snopes (“Sarty”). Abner is acutely aware of his social situation under the crop-lien system, remarking as he approaches the de Spain mansion, “I reckon I’ll have a word with the man that aims to begin tomorrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months” (“Barn Burning” 504). Their relationship amounts to wage slavery, and it is also important to note the language of ownership that Abner employs; the affluent Major de Spain actually possesses his “body and soul” in a paternalistic relationship. The contrast between the two men’s dwellings reveals their widely disparate social situations. The de Spain mansion towers over the “poor country, a land of small farms and fields and houses, and [Sarty] had never seen a house like this before” (504). It is a geographical focal point of

affluence in Yoknapatawpha County, belonging to the aristocratic ex-soldier of the Confederacy. The sheer size shocks the sharecropper's son: "*Hit's big as a courthouse* he thought quietly" (504). Gazing upon the white-columned antebellum architecture, Abner remarks, "Pretty and white, ain't it? That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it" (506). He notes that this symbol of the Old South's aristocracy was built by black slavery, but the New South's system of sharecropping sustains the present aristocracy with the white wage slavery of sharecropping. Major de Spain's leisure class relies upon land-ownership and the labor of the lower classes to consolidate its political power and social position. De Spain furnishes his home with exorbitant luxuries, like French rugs, black servants in linen jackets, and "a suave turn of carpeted stair and a pendant glitter of chandeliers and a mute gleam of gold frames" (505). Meanwhile, the sharecropper lives in a broken-down tenant cabin, a world containing little more than livestock, farm implements, "cold food," and "harsh homemade lye" (507). The contents of Abner's wagon relates similar material deprivation, filled with "the sorry residue of the dozen or more movings which even the boy could not remember—the battered stove, the broken beds and chairs, the clock...which would not run, stopped at some fourteen minutes past two o'clock of some dead and forgotten day and time, which had been his mother's dowry" (501). The possessions of the Snopes family relate their precarious, nomadic lifestyle, looking for wages wherever they can find them. While they live in close proximity, a wide gulf exists between the living standards of the aristocratic whites and the poor whites.

Despite Abner Snopes's degradation, Faulkner does not make a martyr of the sharecropper. Rather, he portrays Abner in an exceedingly negative light as a violent man full of "outrage and savagery and lust" who beats both his children and livestock (513). He has a "wolflike independence," but this self-sufficiency does not connote personal survival in the face of adversity (502); it actually signifies Abner's bestial character, ruthlessly taking advantage of any opportunity that presents itself, regardless of the moral implications. Near the end of the story Sarty defends his father's action by shouting, "He was brave!...He was in Colonel Sartoris cav'ry!" (515-516). However, Faulkner reveals Abner's true past:

[Sarty] not knowing that his father had gone to that war a private in the fine old European sense, wearing no uniform, admitting the authority of and giving fidelity to no man or army or flag, going to war as Malbrouck himself did; for booty—it meant nothing and less than nothing to him if it were enemy booty or his own (516).

He is no war hero, but an opportunistic parasite taking advantage of the downfall of the Old South for his own material gain, in direct conflict with the war fought to preserve the power of the white aristocracy and the traditional social structure. He is a mere thief. Faulkner denigrates Abner for his lack of loyalty to a cause that, in actuality, worked to keep the poor white in degradation. Furthermore, he marks Abner as a social outcast with a crippled foot from where "a Confederate provost's man's musket ball had taken him in the heel on a stolen horse thirty years ago" (501). He is a man who lacks both compassion and loyalty.

However, Faulkner most negatively portrays Abner Snopes as a serial barn-burner, a great threat to the infrastructure of agricultural Yoknapatawpha County. He first introduces the Snopes family in the office of the Justice of the Peace, hearing Abner's trial for burning the barn of a Mr. Harris, who explains the situation thus:

[Abner's] hog got into my corn. I caught it up and sent it back to him. He had no fence that would hold it. I told him so, warned him. The next time I put the hog in my pen. When he came to get it I gave him enough wire to patch up his pen. The next time I put the hog up and kept it...I told him he could have the hog back when he paid me a dollar pound fee (499).

Abner lets his stock wander aimlessly, damaging the possessions of others, and remains too lazy to patch the pen even when given the materials. His daughters are similarly lazy, bestialized as "big, bovine," and "emanat[ing] an incorrigible idle inertia" (503, 506). Along with the dollar, he sends Harris a message along with a "strange nigger" threatening that "wood and hay kin burn" (499). That night Harris's barn burns to the ground. While it is obvious the Abner has vindictively destroyed the structure, the Justice of the Peace cannot find enough evidence to jail him. When Sarty nearly reveals the truth, Abner strikes him, and later his son thinks, "If I had said they wanted only truth, justice, he would have hit me again" (503). As Lessig explains, "the scene portrays Ab as a violent and belligerent outsider opposed to both law of the land—embodied in the kindly and fair-minded Justice of the Peace—and the local community of men and boys who have gathered to witness the trial and jeer at the defendant and his family" (87). Faulkner subtly advocates a legal system that keeps poor whites and their violent, impetuous actions in check.

This situation repeats itself after Abner establishes himself under a new landlord, Major de Spain, of an old-blood plantation family. Again Abner frivolously destroys the belongings of an affluent white, barging into the mansion and tracking manure all over the “hundred dollar” French rug with “machinelike deliberation of the foot” while demanding to meet his new landlord (“Barn Burning” 505). De Spain finds him later and demands payment from the sharecropper, saying,

It cost a hundred dollars. But you never had a hundred dollars. You never will. So I’m going to charge you twenty bushels of corn against your crop. I’ll add it in your contract and when you come to the commissary you can sign it. That won’t keep Mrs. de Spain quiet but maybe it will teach you to wipe your feet before you enter her house again (509).

Here de Spain makes a distinction between himself and the sharecropper in terms of financial worth, rather than in terms of merit, morality, or even the act of destroying the rug. A luxury that de Spain easily affords is worth more than the profit of the sharecropper’s entire life. Furthermore, it is important to note that de Spain uses his paternalistic role to punish the sharecropper for an act he sees as wrong. He loads even more of a debt upon Abner, already living in an inextricable position of indebtedness under the crop-lien system. Again Abner takes his landlord to court, and the Justice of the Peace finds that de Spain has charged him too much, yet still imposes a financial punishment of “ten bushels of corn over and above your contract with [de Spain], to be paid to him out of your crop at gathering time” (511). Rather than simply accepting the debt, Abner burns yet another barn out of revenge against the aristocratic white. Faulkner implies that poor whites are hot-headed vandals who present an actual threat

to the infrastructure of the agricultural South, and a strong legal system must be in place to keep these ruthless sharecroppers in check. Though Abner lives in grinding poverty under a sharecropping system that offers no hope of social mobility, Faulkner disallows any hope of sympathy for the immoral poor white.

However, Faulkner portrays Abner's young son Sarty in a very positive light, precisely because Sarty's internal thoughts repeatedly criticize his father's actions and rarely focus upon the material deprivation of his family. When Sarty threatens to tell the truth about the barn burning, his father beats him and threatens, "You're getting to be a man. You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (503). However, Faulkner associates Abner's blood with the inferior, immoral traits of poor whites, including thievery, violence, laziness, and deceit, and the author portrays Sarty as the Snopes family's black sheep who is endowed with natural virtue and integrity. His father is "a violent advocate of a more primitive kinship ethic which sets him stubbornly against the larger community and its naturalized laws of exclusive property rights" (Lessig 88). Abner is not a martyred sharecropper, but a corrosive social force threatening the community at large.

Much of the story devotes itself to Sarty's moral struggle of whether or not to turn in his father for the crime of barn burning. Even when the young boy first sees the de Spain mansion, he does not register jealousy or loathing, but rather sees the architecture as a place of refuge for the aristocratic whites against his destructive father: *"They are safe from him. People whose lives are a part of this peace and dignity are beyond his touch, he no more to them than a buzzing wasp...the spell of this peace and dignity rendering even the barns and stable and cribs which belong to it impervious to*

the puny flames he might contrive” (“Barn Burning” 504). Sarty does not identify with his own poor white class, but sees the lives of the affluent as the embodiment of “peace and dignity,” superior to his father. He bestializes his own father as a lowly wasp, annoying but never annihilating the aristocracy with “puny flames.” Finally Sarty tells de Spain of his father’s crime and abandons his own sharecropping family; walking away alone from the plantation, “he did not look back” (516). Sarty rises above the inferior “blood” of his family. Under Faulkner’s guidance, he leaves the immoral, vicious Snopes clan and instead embraces the honest virtue of the planter class, although it offers him no hope of social mobility. Thus, Sarty rises to a new moral level by embracing the traditional class structure as just and not rebelling against it, as his father does. Strikingly, this heightened level of insight is also an affirmation of the young poor white’s admitted inferiority to the aristocratic class. As the Justice of the Peace notes, “I reckon anybody named for Colonel Sartoris in this country can’t help but tell the truth, can they?” (500). The more virtuous residents of Yoknapatawpha County take as a matter of fact the moral superiority of the original Colonel Sartoris, Major de Spain, and other members of the white aristocracy.

In comparing William Faulkner’s early novel *As I Lay Dying* and the later short story “Barn Burning,” the treatment of Yoknapatawpha County’s poor whites becomes progressively more negative. While the Bundrens are merely inferior, tragicomic figures, the Snopes family signifies the destructive social threat that poor whites present to typical Southern moral values. By relating the sharecropper Abner Snopes’s vicious and violent nature, Faulkner implicitly advocates a strong legal system and a rigid class structure that will keep poor whites in a static social situation. The progression between *As I Lay*

Dying and “Barn Burning” clarifies the author’s personal political philosophy, which leads towards the bent of what Eugene Genevose terms the “Southern Tradition,” a form of conservatism that promotes the concentration of political power into the hands of a small minority of affluent, aristocratic whites descended from the antebellum planter class. Equating land-ownership with political power, the “Southern Tradition” precludes the political enfranchisement of impoverished sharecroppers, who have no hope of land acquisition or social mobility. In his negative portrayal of poor whites, William Faulkner argues against the capitalism and social mobility of the New South, which provides political clout to these immoral poor whites, and simultaneously champions Southern ideals that preserve a traditional, quasi-feudalistic class structure rooted in the land-ownership and political power of a small ruling class. In the famous *Time* profile by Robert Cantwell, Faulkner fashioned himself as the “social historian” of Yoknapatawpha County, but he actually takes on the role of social critic, employing fiction to justify this aristocratic “virtue” of the ruling class. However, in his rush to champion Southern ideals, Faulkner also neglects the humanity of sharecroppers and justifies the degradation and impoverishment of rural whites in the Mississippi Delta of the early twentieth century.

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