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## The Fraternal Fury of the Falkners and the Bundrens

But we have it on high authority that a man's worst enemies shall be those of his own house and family.<sup>1</sup>

TODAY, MOST READERS AND CRITICS CONSIDER *Absalom, Absalom!* to be William Faulkner's greatest novel. Indeed, many judge this work, which has an act of fratricide at its core, to be the most significant American novel of the twentieth century. The thematic of fraternity weaves in and out of the text, becoming a metaphor for the Civil War, black-white relations, and American concepts of identity and democracy. Why was Faulkner so drawn to the story of brothers who love and yet hate each other? On a grand level, he surely saw the story of children who come to be enemies as a metaphor for the strange realities of Southern culture, where the most intimate forms of communal life were permitted between black and white on many levels, but never in terms of formerly sanctioned matrimony and legal transmission of family name and property. In several narratives, but most especially in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner tells the story of two boys, inseparable as children, who must sleep in separate beds once they approach manhood, beds on two distinct levels that signify social position but also racial hierarchy. He would later expand this to bi-racial sets of brothers, as in the tale of Tommy's Turl in *Go Down, Moses* which uses the biblical myth of Joseph to underscore the horror of brothers enslaving their own brother. Fraternal conflict became a shifting, unmoored metaphor for many aspects of his region's tragic racial history, which so often involved sexual crossing of the color line. We now know that Faulkner knew of the black family his revered great-grandfather had sired, and that he made profound use of this in *Go Down, Moses*, often through the metaphor of fraternal struggle.

All of this grew out of Faulkner's own tortured relation with his own brothers. Although biographers have thus far virtually ignored the

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<sup>1</sup>James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

other Faulkner boys, a careful reading of Faulkner's earlier work, from *Soldiers' Pay* up through *Absalom, Absalom!*, reveals the thread of fraternal struggle weaving a fiery path through the center of the narratives. Faulkner began this thematic in an effort to come to grips with his resentment of his brothers, but he came to see fraternity as a crucial factor in Southern and American culture; all men come to a sense of their masculine identity not only through their relation with their fathers, women, and children, but also with each other, and for the majority of men, that means their relation with their blood brothers.

The specifics of family position shape most writers, but it was particularly the case for Faulkner. As he told Malcolm Cowley, "I am telling the same story over and over, which is myself and the world."<sup>2</sup> His brother John said, "I have never known anyone who identified himself with his writings more than Bill did . . . . Sometimes it was hard to tell which was which" (213). Faulkner admitted that Quentin Compson was a self-portrait but had little to say about Jason, Benjy, and their models. Still, his narratives again and again ponder differences between brothers, and seem to validate Frank Sulloway's assertion that "siblings raised together are almost as different in their personalities as people from different families."<sup>3</sup> Siblings are also locked in a battle for family resources—key among them, parental affection. In nature in general, as Darwin demonstrated, recurring conflicts stimulate adaptations that increase the odds of coming out on top. The first *mythic* example of this comes with the first biblical murder—that of Abel by his elder brother, Cain. The Old Testament, in fact, is rife with stories of sibling rivalry, often focussed on the eclipse of an older son by a younger. Faulkner perhaps knew the Bible better than any other writer of his time, and employed its structures in his works repeatedly, especially those that dealt with fraternal rivalry. Although several of his early pieces explore fraternal relations, his first truly mythic and profound use of the subject came in his second masterwork, *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 185.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Sulloway. *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics and Creative Lives* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), p. xiii.

Neither the Falkner nor the Bundren brothers appear to be unusual in their fraternal struggles. Many factors insure that siblings will differ from one another, and there is always competition for familial resources. In nature in general, firstborns are more assertive, "socially dominant, ambitious, jealous of their status, and defensive" (Sulloway, p. xiv). The family environment dictates how sibling rivalry finds expression. No one can hurt us like family members, and when these hurts go unassuaged, they "undermine respect for authority, laying the foundations for a revolutionary personality" (Sulloway, p. xv). The result is "sibling strategies." As children develop, their various unique interests and abilities begin to distinguish them one from another, and eventually they begin to occupy "niches;" one may become recognized for athletic prowess, as John and Jack Falkner were; whereas others, as William and later, John did, may manifest artistic talents. One sibling might prove useful in mediating arguments (as Caddie Compson does). These differing "niches" mean that the children have varying access to familial resources. As Sulloway further demonstrates, siblings do not necessarily follow a set script according to actual birth order: "In terms of personality, every firstborn is a potential laterborn, and vice versa" (p. xv). One can see, actually, that Faulkner simultaneously had the expectations of a first born, but the actual status—and therefore the resulting "strategies"—of a laterborn, as he was eclipsed in so many ways by his brothers. Although he struggled to compete with them in athletics, in romantic pursuits, in hunting, fishing, in military valor, and in the riding of horses and the flying of airplanes, it was only in art that he proved to have an edge,

Freud's associate Alfred Adler theorized that if firstborns are unable to regain parental favor, they decide to rebel. The second born "behaves as if he were in a race, is under full steam all the time, and trains continually to surpass his older brother and conquer him."<sup>4</sup> As a result, secondborns are "rarely able to endure the strict leadership of others" (p. 380). Youngest children, however, never occupy the "throne" of the eldest, are thus not subject to dethronement, and especially if they are the

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<sup>4</sup>Alfred Adler. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from His Writings*. Ed. and annotated by Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher. New York: Basic Books, 1956, p. 379.

baby of the family, are prone to become pampered and lazy (Dean Faulkner was the family favorite and a fine athlete, but was not known as an exceptional student). Often, however, they are the most likely to rebel against familiar patterns and are quite creative. As Sulloway and Adler demonstrate, laterborns, and especially the lastborns, translate their desperate need for familial resources into creative and original activity—such as painting and writing, two avenues that Faulkner explored in succession.

Faulkner's critics have occasionally been drawn to his fraternal nexus, but even the best of them have wound up viewing such struggle as a variation of the Oedipal, with the brother standing in for the real enemy, the father. Richard Gray's impressive new biography of Faulkner takes this tack. Certainly recent psychoanalytical studies of Faulkner's works by Doreen Fowler and Noel Polk have been worthwhile; I can not discount Freudians—Faulkner was profoundly Freudian in much of his writing. I am arguing, however, that the Freudian tends to push out other approaches; if we are always looking at the relation between the child and the parents, then we tend to ignore, as Freud himself did, the relation between siblings. Perhaps because Freud was a firstborn himself, came to see the younger Adler as a rival, and certainly would not have welcomed a challenge to his master-theory, he showed no interest in birth order or sibling rivalry.

Psychoanalytic theory, following Freud, has often held that children have hidden urges to kill family members, including siblings—the “Cain complex”—but asserts that this is really a displacement of Oedipal rage. In his pariah status within the family before he began his writing career, Faulkner, the firstborn, became functionally a laterborn, and therefore rebelled through his art, where he practiced aesthetic fratricide rather than patricide. We need not read this as a variant Freudian pattern. One can argue that Faulkner, in fact, did not kill his brothers but instead created a special “niche” for himself through art, albeit art fashioned from his inner torments. Doing so would thus be “offensive” rather than “defensive” in Darwinian terms, in an attempt not to annihilate rivals but to gain scarce resources. Further, he seems to have sought release from quite conscious guilt over this feeling through the “therapy” and possible resolution of writing.

At first, Faulkner did not face this need. As eldest son and, for a time, the largest child, he enjoyed privilege and power. Even as boys, however, the brothers gave signals of the rivalry that would come later. One of the most interesting involved a homemade airplane (planes would later function significantly in the lives of all the Faulkner boys and in Bill's fiction in particular). Little Bill once talked Jack and John into building a plane, which, he "casually announced," Jack would fly. When their grandiose plans for a biwing get scaled down to a one-wing, Jack became "apprehensive"—later, he wrote. "Bill had a ready reply, but somehow it seemed to lack conviction; after all, it was my neck that was to be laid on the chopping block of progress and invention." Little brother Dean is brought in to watch. The launch over the edge of a deep ditch isn't accomplished easily, and eventually Bill takes Jack's place in the cockpit, getting only barely scratched as the plane slides down to the bottom of the ditch.<sup>5</sup> In this vignette, we see Faulkner acting out a fantasy against the intimate world of "boy culture," which possibly involved a subsumed fratricidal urge, which he subsequently inverted onto himself. On another occasion he shot "Johncy" with a b-b gun, perhaps unintentionally.

As the family grew older, Jack and Johncy followed the usual Faulkner mold and developed into strapping youths, Johncy was praised for his good looks, while William got teased by their father for having "snake-lips" (Blotner, p. 51). William was short—only 5'5" at maturity—like the men in his mother's family. He was consequently unable to excel on the athletic field, so suffered when Murry spent much of his time watching the athletic exploits of Johncy and Dean, who had a closer relationship with their father. Murry always saw his eldest son as a failure, even after the novels started appearing—he once advised an Ole Miss coed not to read William's *Sanctuary*.

Before the war, Faulkner's love for his neighbor Estelle Oldham was thwarted by the opposition of both their families—no one thought wastrel Bill could support Estelle in the style she deserved, so she was encouraged to marry the dashing and successful Cornell Franklin. But his brothers were part of the picture too; stung by Estelle, William left Oxford

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<sup>5</sup>Murry Falkner, Jr., *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1967), pp 55-61.

to join his friend Phil Stone in New Haven. Jack once had the temerity to date Estelle, although nothing came of it, and she soon married Cornell. Faulkner must have been enraged to learn that Johncy had driven the bridal pair to the church.

Drifting from job to job, Faulkner seized eagerly on the opportunity for military action when the first World War broke out. Unable to qualify for service in the United States, he eventually was accepted into the RAF flight school in Toronto. The war ended, however, before he could see combat, and indeed, he probably never even flew a plane. Nonetheless, Faulkner returned to Oxford wearing an unauthorized officer's uniform, replete with combat decorations. He swaggered around the square accepting the salutes of enlisted men, telling tales of crashing in France, sometimes adding a mythical wound and a plate in his head. Meanwhile, Jack had seen heroic service in France, where he was severely wounded. For a while he was listed as missing; eventually, Jack returned to receive a hero's welcome in Oxford, making a mockery of Faulkner's pretense of European service. William's necessarily hidden feelings of jealousy erupted later, in his fiction. In *Mosquitoes*, perhaps thinking of his abandonment by Estelle, Faulkner wrote, "Lucky he who believes that his heart is broken: he can immediately write a book and so take revenge . . . you don't commit suicide when you are disappointed in love. You write a book."<sup>6</sup> I propose Faulkner also took this tack with his brothers; rather than collapse in furious despair over his eclipse by them, he sought an anodyne in writing, destroying surrogates for them in his fiction. The moment of Jack's triumphant return to Oxford thus becomes transformed in William's first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), when Donald Mahon returns to Georgia virtually a vegetable, blind and mostly mute. Private Julian Lowe, who accompanies Mahon on the train, seethes with envy, much as Faulkner had. By novel's end, Faulkner the artist "kills" Mahon, while Lowe, long-vanished from the narrative, seems to have found success out in California. On the other hand, Mahon also represents Faulkner's projection of *himself* as wounded, tragic hero, since Mahon is figured as a returning RAF flyer, replete with wings. Thus we see Faulkner splitting aspects of himself and his brothers into various characters rather than

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<sup>6</sup>William Faulkner. *Mosquitoes* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), p 228.

settling for easy direct equivalents, and this decision would result in productive models for his later work, and indeed, American literary modernism, in several ways.

The development of the thematic of fraternity is more remarkable in Faulkner's first Yoknapatawpha novel, *Flags in the Dust* (1974), an accomplished narrative detailing with the return from the World War of Bayard Sartoris, a pilot who witnessed the aerial death of his twin brother, Johnny, a figure who had always superseded him, both at home and abroad, in terms of native ability, jocular friendships, and heroics in general. Since this in many ways echoed William's experience with his younger brothers Jack and Johnny, it is no accident that Bayard's twin—who dies—is named John. In *Flags*, the tombstone Faulkner creates for John Sartoris has a biblical inscription on it from Exodus 19:4: "I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself."

In one of the book's most telling scenes, Bayard takes John's belongings from a chest—one of many moments in Faulkner where a trunk or chest becomes a virtual "ark of the covenant." After burying his face in Johnny's jacket, he ritually burns the objects, which significantly include a New Testament, so this is a doubly blasphemous act. Before the book's end, we see that Bayard feels responsible for John's death, and perhaps even desired it. He atones for it through desperate drinking and reckless driving; after the latter activity leads to the death of his grandfather, Bayard's suicidal test-pilot career leads to his own crash.

Still, some readers might feel that Faulkner has not really developed Bayard's hidden animus toward John sufficiently, when they encounter this passage late in the novel: "Then again something bitter and deep and sleepless in him blazed out in vindication and justification and accusation; what, he knew not, blazing out at what. Whom, he did not know: You did it! You caused it all: you killed Johnny,"<sup>7</sup> a quite confused and confusing statement that nevertheless suggests the love-hate he feels for his dead twin, who is clearly also a double.

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<sup>7</sup>William Faulkner. *Flags in the Dust* (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 359.

In his memoir, Jack Faulkner brags on John as handsome and smart, and possessing more degrees than Bill (who had none). Jack's seeming preference for the friendly, optimistic John over brooding, often silent William was quite usual in Oxford. These facts must have had much to do with the latter's creation of the similarly depicted Sartoris twins and Bayard's covert rage against his brother. By the time Faulkner wrote these two early novels, Jack, the war hero, was long-gone from Oxford, following a career as an FBI agent, but Faulkner still seethed over his eclipse as a supposed RAF veteran. When Faulkner realized these emotions could not be expressed verbally, he turned to using them in fiction, discovering that the personal could be transcended through the transformation of experience and fraternal fury into art. Eventually, this became Faulkner's constant impetus, certainly in his historical fiction, which builds in so many cases on Falkner family history, but also in the novels set in the contemporary moment, for he was keenly aware that the novelist can and should reinscribe his own times as well. This has been described as the mode of the scriptures by Northrup Frye, who asserts that the reinscription of history can lead to a higher form, what Frye calls redeeming history, following the German terms of *Weltgeschichte* and *Heilsgeschichte*.<sup>8</sup>

How, exactly did Faulkner translate this into art? I will here concentrate on the treatment of fraternal fury in Faulkner's 1930 masterwork, *As I Lay Dying*, which uses absurdist humor, literary naturalism, surreal juxtaposition, and modernist modes of narrative alongside passages of cosmic, poetic, and biblically inflected prose to probe the issues of grief, mourning, familial tensions, and, as a powerful subset of the latter, fraternal rivalry.

After the initial development of dueling brothers as impetus and then theme in the early novels, Faulkner provided an even more focussed treatment in two books confined to the arena of familial struggle, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and its pendant, *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the first products of his so-called "Great Phase." The former book, a radical prose experiment and, ostensibly, a story about the decline of a proud,

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<sup>8</sup>Northrup Frye. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 47.

aristocratic Southern family, also featured the twin obsessions Quentin Compson has with his sister's body and death. However, a closer look reveals that this book is also about brothers—three of them this time—and they are rivals for the scarce commodity of maternal love, especially as their father is a cold, remote, and brooding intellectual, and their mother a whining, self-centered hypochondriac. Although all three brothers in turn narrate the book (with the powerful help of a fourth section, told through the consciousness of a caretaker, Dilsey), they tell their stories in isolation. And in fact, only rarely in the book do they interact in any way or talk to each other. Jason obviously hates and envies his talented older brother Quentin, and has nothing but scorn for their idiot brother, Benjy; eventually he has the latter castrated and finally, institutionalized. Quentin, by contrast, rarely speaks to or about Jason or Benjy, perhaps because of his obsession with his sister and the archaic code of honor that her hymen signifies but also perhaps because he has little love for his brothers. Thus the separation of the brothers' narratives speaks eloquently of their distance from one another.

The book forces us to participate in fraternal hatred; Jason, the mother's favorite, Faulkner declared to be the most evil character he had ever created.<sup>9</sup> Benjy, the initial narrator and the locus of Faulkner's gloss on Macbeth's "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," is devastatingly victimized by Jason but also has to sacrifice his pasture for Quentin's Harvard education and Caddie's wedding. If we remember that Benjamin of the Old Testament was sold into Egypt by his brothers, we see Faulkner once again musing, as he would repeatedly do, on the ubiquitous biblical plot of brothers engaged in fraternal and sometimes deadly struggle.

In *As I Lay Dying*, these issues dominate the entire narrative, which centers on the desperate struggle between two brothers to control the disposition of their dead mother's body. Their journey to her burial site in Jefferson is ostensibly led by their father, Anse; however, like Murry Falkner, he has no final authority in the family; it is the sons who must decide the issue, and the sons who either want or had the true affections

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<sup>9</sup>James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds. *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 146.

of the mother, who scorned her mate. Eventually, the one son *who has had combat experience in World War I*, Darl, is deemed mad, is physically attacked by one of his brothers and a sister, who scream "kill him!" and is, like Benjy, sent to the asylum in Jackson. Since Jack Falkner was the only sibling at this point to have experienced combat, and because William resented the attention Jack garnered as a wounded veteran, it is hard not to see Darl as a projection of Jack. At the same time, however, as was true in *Soldiers' Pay*, Faulkner increasingly tends to have characters represent different, even opposed tendencies and concepts. Darl as metaphysical dreamer and neglected child clearly reflects much of Faulkner's self-identity as well, just as Donald Mahon represented, because of his RAF experience, both William and Jack Falkner. Similarly, as André Bleikasten has noted,<sup>10</sup> Cash represents the novelist as carpenter, a reference Faulkner made many times in interviews over the years, while Darl is the novelist-poet (Bleikasten, p. 90).

Thus Faulkner's figuration of Darl, as with all his banished brothers, dramatizes siblings who are feared and hated, but he also represents the artist, who from Plato onward has been characterized as imbued with the sacred fire, the uncanny, and second sight, and is therefore dangerous. Through Darl, Faulkner seems to express the agony of "knowing too much," a fatal gift that enables and burdens the artist. On at least one occasion, he suggested that madness was in fact insight: "who can say just how much of super-perceptivity . . . a mad person might have? . . . it's nice to think that there is some compensation for madness. That maybe the madman does see more than the sane man. That the world is more moving to him."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in a remarkable poem, Emily Dickinson declares, "Much madness is divinest Sense/ To a discerning Eye—/Much Sense—the starkest Madness—Tis the Majority/In this, as All, prevail—/Assert—and you are sane—/Demur— you're straightway

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<sup>10</sup>André Bleikasten, *William Faulkner's "As I Lay Dying."* Trans. Roger Little (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 90.

<sup>11</sup>Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blower, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958* (New York: Vintage, 1965), p. 113.

dangerous—/And handled with a Chain—.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout *As I Lay Dying*, Darl’s eyes mark him as different, and in the novel *per se* he is mainly an observer, and a feared one; he seems to penetrate into people’s inner beings with his gaze. The farmer Tull describes him as having “queer eyes . . . that makes folks talk . . . It’s like he had got into the inside of you, someway. Like somehow you was looking at yourself and your doings outen his eyes.”<sup>13</sup> At novel’s end, the “majority”—indeed every member of the family—agree that Darl’s to be “handled with a Chain.” Compare this entry in John’s Faulkner’s memoir; he describes William wandering in town: “Most of our townsmen let him be. If he saw them and spoke, they returned his greetings. If he did not, they thought merely that he was making up another story . . . As to his greatness . . . They . . . had seen him grow up, and though, to them, he was a little strange, he was not enough different to be great.”<sup>14</sup>

The “majority” against Darl includes not only Cash and Jewel but also Vardaman, who at various points obsessively says, repetitively, “Jewel is my brother,” “Cash is my brother,” or “Darl is my brother.” Significantly, however, it is Vardaman who sets up the betrayal of Darl by the family when he tells Dewey Dell he saw Darl set fire to Gillespie’s barn. Dewey Dell and Jewel hate and fear Darl, probably because of his “second sight,” and are of course opposed to him in their preference for the physical and tactile over the metaphysical. But ultimately, it is Vardaman and Cash who decide Darl’s fate.

Several critics in the past have used Faulkner’s mother’s remark that Jason in *The Sound and the Fury* made her think of her husband, as a way of reading the novel as obliquely Oedipal. But this elides the fact that after all, *The Sound and the Fury* is not *au fond*, an Oedipal drama, but rather a fraternal struggle, albeit one with overtones of sexual rivalry and

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<sup>12</sup>Paul Lauter, et al., eds., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 2nd ed. 2 Vols. I (New York: D.C. Heath, 1994), 2895-2896.

<sup>13</sup>William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (New York: Random House, 1930), p. 119.

<sup>14</sup>John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence* (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), p. 256.

dominance when Caddie (but it is Caddie, not the mother) gets figured in. This all becomes clearer if we examine the basic framework of *As I Lay Dying*, where the family geometry of the Bundrens becomes much more exposed than that of the Compsons. Faulkner always said the Bundren saga was a *tour de force*; perhaps the ease of its writing came from the restatement of the fraternal rivalry that figures in *The Sound and the Fury*, and the relative freedom to explore the issues more brazenly that came with wearing the mask of "poor white trash."

The story, detailing the efforts of the Bundrens to bury their mother forty miles away in Jefferson, as she requested, could have been told matter-of-factly in a few pages. They attempt to cross a flooded river and almost lose their mother along with the mules that drown, but go on with a new team, only to have her body threatened again in a fire that, it turns out, one of them sets in a neighbor's barn, where the coffin reposes for the night. As Faulkner said, "I simply took a family and subjected them to the two catastrophes of human life, fire and flood" (Gwynn, 87). What makes the story soar above its inherent simplicity, however, is Faulkner's refusal to treat it as trivial in any way; his poetic prose, with its ingenious syntax and various levels of consciousness, becomes a hypnotic and strangely beautiful labyrinth, as it explores, via fifteen narrators and fifty-nine discrete monologues, a spectrum of human grief, loss, hope, and anguish.

Amazingly, the book *simultaneously* functions as a darkly comic absurdist novel; but in both these registers it exudes a highly sacral aura created by Faulkner's biblical stylistics, while drawing on the comic dimension of the uncanny. Further, this is hardly a traditional novel about death and funerals; heaven is mentioned only three times, first in a joke by Peabody when he is summoned to the Bundrens' to treat Addie: "I thought maybe they have the same sort of fool ethics in heaven they have in the Medical College and that it was maybe Vernon Tull sending for me again, getting me there in the nick of time, getting the most for Anse's money like he does for his own" (p. 40). Later, Anse summons up the sacred to get Tull to help them: "I give her my word . . . It is sacred on me. I know you begrudge it, but she will bless you in heaven" (p. 133). Cora, who feels that Addie has "never been pure religious," in a typically righteous lecture reminds Addie that "there is more rejoicing in heaven

over one sinner than over a hundred that never sinned" (p. 158), even though she feels Addie's only true sin has been favoring Jewel.

The word Hell, by contrast, is invoked eighteen times, thirteen times by Jewel and three times by Peabody, who seems to view the Bundren's "damn mountain" as Hellish: "There is a little daylight up here still, of the color of sulphur matches. The boards look like strips of sulphur" (p. 42). Indeed, Peabody's view of nature and Anse rings of the doomed, the apocalyptic: he claims that "nobody but a luckless man could ever need a doctor in the face of a cyclone" (pp. 40-41). In all his images of the cosmos, Peabody reflects on the nature of a harsh God who stands behind nature, who therefore predetermines the bleak lives of the folk. Elsewhere, Death in Life is presented as a serio-comic affair; Dewey Dell's early statement about Anse, "He looks like right after the maul hits the steer and it no longer alive and dont yet know that it is dead" (p. 58) is confirmed by Addie's speech: "He did not know that he was dead, then. I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood full and motionless: a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame" (p. 165). Tull too comments on Anse, combining Peabody's wasteland image with Addie's sense of a dead man: "His eyes look like pieces of burnt-out cinder fixed in his face, looking out over the land" (pp. 30-31). Anse's nonentity status suggests not only the fated quality of his children's destinies, but also, clears the field for the drama of fraternal struggle.

The crux of this struggle involves Darl and Jewel, but a third brother, Cash, operates as mediator, commentator, and finally, as judge. Their birth order has been Cash, Darl, then Jewel. The collision course these brothers run is prefigured in the geometry lesson of the first narration, which is by Darl, as he proceeds up the path in the field, in single file with Jewel, who follows fifteen feet behind. Despite this leading edge, Darl has to admit that "anyone watching us from the cottonhouse can see Jewel's frayed and broken straw hat a full head above my own." Worse, at the cotton house, where the path "circles . . . at four soft right angles and goes on . . . worn so by feet in fading precision" (p. 3). Darl loses his place by walking around, while Jewel simply steps through the

open and facing windows, covering the floor in four strides and emerging five feet ahead of Darl on the path up the bluff to the house.

This thematic of the older brother's displacement occurs over and over in Faulkner's work, and he imparts a transcendent aura to such narrative constructs by imbuing them with biblical language and inferences. Cain is the first older brother to be displaced by a younger, and he retaliates by performing not only the world's first murder but the first act of fratricide. Other brotherly sets that replicate this displacement of the older by the younger include Moses and Aaron; Esau and Jacob; the set of older brothers opposed to their younger siblings, Joseph and Benjamin; the prodigal son and his older brother; and Absalom and Amnon, the latter pair providing a biblical model and title for Faulkner's greatest work, and the ultimate expression of his thematic of fraternal fury.

Before mythic embellishment, however, must come the frame. After the opening tableau, the concentration on the first three brothers is signaled by the sound of the adze: "Chuck. Chuck. Chuck." Addie—whose name can be divided into two words, add and die, has done just that, reproduced and died. The adze produces three "chucks": Addie produced/bore/"chucked" these three sons into the world, and now they must reconfigure themselves back into individual identity. Dewey Dell and Vardaman get left out of this configuration, probably because Faulkner sees women as fully possessed of identity inherently, and Dewey Dell as possessed, period, because of her pregnancy. Vardaman has yet to shape his identity, and thus escapes the dilemma of his brothers.

This central narrative is framed by a series of geometric conceits on Faulkner's part. Primary here is the image of the circle, a figure that expresses the family's journey from home to Jefferson and back again, but also a progression from the metaphysical realms of catastrophic rupture and loss, agony, and madness back to the security of stable familial life, replete with a new Mrs. Bundren presiding over an electronic hearth, made possible by her graphophone.

If one conceptualizes the circle of narrative as a union of these fifty-nine spokes into a narrative wheel, the idea of the "unspooling" of

narrative that Faulkner uses as a metaphor in a number of his works makes better sense. Further, because we have virtually achieved "full circle" at novel's end with order seemingly restored and the mother replaced, the number fifty-nine may also be read as one short of sixty, the completion of the circle of a clock. In light of Darl's musings on the meanings of "was" and existence, and his yearning for wholeness and completion, the fact that the family achieves reintegration only after he is removed becomes more poignant. Also, the "subtraction" of Addie and Darl will be replaced by the new Mrs. Bundren and presumably, Dewey Dell's unborn child.

The circle image takes on new meaning when Faulkner has Darl observe Dewey Dell descending from the wagon: "She sets the basket into the wagon and climbs in, her leg coming long from beneath her tightening dress: that lever which moves the world, one of that caliper which measures the length and breadth of life" (pp. 97-98). The dress is tightening because of the external movement of her limbs, but it is also tightening, as Darl alone knows, as her pregnancy advances (internal). Thus this image (a very natural and realistic one) expands with the comparison of her legs to a caliper, an instrument that moves in circles. This instrument is associated with metaphysical poetry because of Donne's great poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in which the twin legs of the compass are compared to the union of lovers; the first foot (the poet's beloved) stands fixed while the other (the lover) traces a circle. Although he ranges widely, she inclines toward him, though fixed. "Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begunne."<sup>15</sup> In terms of Darl's predicament, we may further observe the parallel between his knowledge of Addie's adultery and Dewey Dell's pregnancy, and his rejection by both women. Dewey Dell is in this sense the antitype of Addie's type. When Darl refers to the lever that moves the world as a limb of the caliper, he is both creating an obscene joke and a tragic commentary on his life. The two limbs of the caliper converge at the female sex and do indeed measure the length and breadth of the phallus ("the length and breadth of life"). At the same time, the relation of this

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<sup>15</sup>M. H. Abrams, et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 4th ed. 2 Vols. I (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 1070.

caliper to the child who proceeds from it poignantly underlines Darl's failure to find self-definition through his mother; moreover, Dewey Dell's pregnancy is a repetition and thus a visualization of Addie's adultery and pregnancy with Jewel, whom Darl believes supplanted him forever in Addie's affections. As the caliper inscribes a circle, the child Dewey Dell bears will inhabit the private circle of birth with her. Hawthorne, one of Faulkner's sources for this novel, similarly situates Hester and Pearl within the secluded circle of this relation, apart from the larger realm of Puritan society, and Pearl's failure to emerge from this "enchanted" space in relation to Puritan society is not corrected until the "spell" is broken by Dimmesdale's kiss of acknowledgment in the final scaffold scene. Darl, however, will never receive a kiss either from his father or mother, and thus goes mad within the prison of unconfirmed, unloved, and unformed self—thus the suggestiveness of his incomplete name, a fragment of a "darling." Addie's lack of moral "firmness" has precluded any "justness" in Darl's attempt to trace the circle of self; like the dissolving sun at the time of Addie's birth, his identity keeps losing its circumference.

Paradoxically, the internal reality examined above has a grander spatial element, leading as it does to Darl's musing on this "lever" that makes the world move through sexual desire and procreation, a process he has yet to participate in himself, as far as we know. Here, we might consider the fact that the three adult Bundren brothers seem to have no mature sexual relations with women. Cash and Darl speculate on Jewel's nocturnal activities, it is true, and with a certain degree of sexual wisdom; however, none of them are married, or have ever had a girlfriend, at least as far as the text presents them. Cora's daughters, inappropriately dressed for their watch over Addie's dying, are clearly decked out to attract the attention of these three eligible bachelors, who appear, however, to take no notice of them at all. So situating the brothers makes their relation to their mother more crucial, and suggests it has hampered their masculine sexuality from unfolding normally. Certainly Darl's memory of masturbating at night, while wondering if Cash was doing it too, is suggestive here as well. Blotner reports that there was talk in Oxford that all the Falkner boys were too close to their mother (p. 19).

The sacred symbol of the circle thus functions as a metaphysical unifier but also as a realistic image of the Bundrens' journey in the figure

of the wheel. These two aspects are joined when Addie dies, just as a wheel of the lumber-laden wagon Darl and Jewel are driving breaks some miles away. There are a number of biblical vectors at play in this construction as well, which work interchangeably with Cash's rhetoric of geometric planes, angles, and "balances." In the Bible, Solomon refers to the "wheel broken at the cistern," which was usually interpreted as the heart as a wheel circulating blood.<sup>16</sup> In the figure of the wheel we see the geometry of the family (Figure 1). Addie, as rim and hub (center and unifier), is surrounded by her progeny and Anse, who in his ineffectiveness, is really more like one of her children. He seems in many ways to be reminiscent of Faulkner's father. Murry Falkner was the oldest son in his generation; dutiful and obedient, he never complained to his father even when his railroad job was taken away, and obeyed him in all things.<sup>17</sup> Maud was not happy with Murry and on her deathbed told William she hoped she went to a heaven where she wouldn't have to talk to her husband (Minter, p. 7). Murry was remembered by Jack as cold—"his capacity for affection was limited" (Faulkner, *Bill*, p. 12). Even this cursory assembly of facts should indicate that the Falkner sons never saw their father as a threat, in terms of the mother's love—rather, the threat came from each other. This is precisely the situation in *As I Lay Dying*, in which Anse Bundren is understood to be despised by his wife, who is the real power in the family constellation.

Cash, as eldest, thus stands in opposition across the wheel from Anse (at the bottom) for he is the true, if initially inactive, patriarch, whose energy, commitment, and talent support the family financially, and ultimately, through paternal guidance. On the right side of the wheel, we find Jewel and Dewey Dell, whose similar names indicate their affinities, which are primarily sexual; they are representative of the female and male life force respectively (as shown through their strong identifications, respectively, with cows and horses).

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<sup>16</sup>George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 58.

<sup>17</sup>David Minter, *William Faulkner, His Life and Work* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 6.

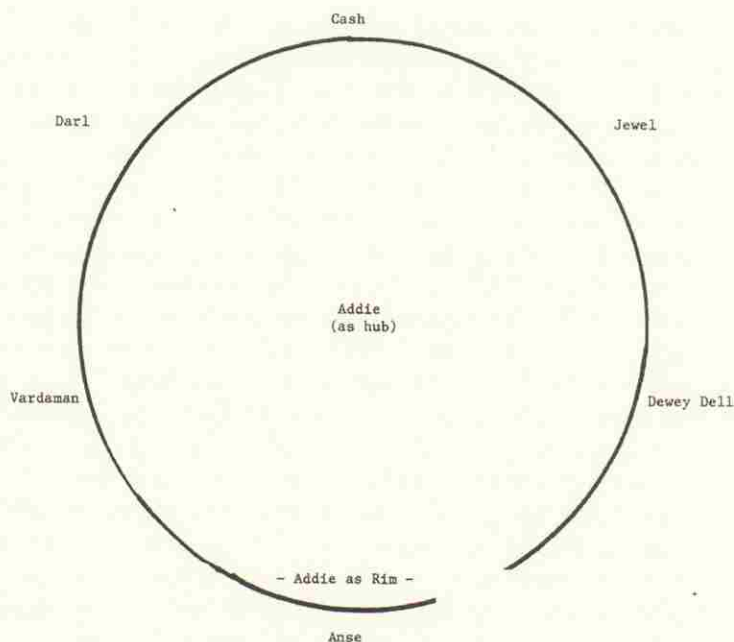


Figure 1

On the left we find Darl and below him Vardaman—as grieving figures whose respective madness and emotional turbulence make them akin, as their names suggest; both have been rejected by their mother. Indeed in a scene set in an orchard, they both listen to the coffin and seem one in their mystical feeling that Addie has lived on and must be hushed.

This diagram also places Darl and Jewel across the wheel from each other, with Cash interposed as intermediary. Vardaman and Dewey Dell thus relate horizontally as well, as children outside their elder siblings' realm of fraternal struggle, and as figures individually isolated within the family because of Vardaman's neglected state as the last of "Anse's" children and Dewey Dell's obsession with her pregnancy, which

none of the brothers save Darl realizes. Dewey Dell is the obverse of Caddie—here, her “honor” never becomes a signifier for anyone but herself, although she speculates on whether Anse will want to kill Lefe, the father of her child, a projection that surely causes most readers to laugh as they consider the man who “dasn’t sweat.”

The wheel is always a signifier for the journey. The number forty recurs time and again in the novel. Addie’s section, obviously the key to the rest of the novel, is episode forty of fifty-nine. Forty has no special significance in the circle metaphor we have described, but it represents the completion of the narrative circle—not in terms of events, but in our understanding of events. Addie’s section uncovers the meaning of many of the book’s mysteries; we arrive at her monologue as thirsty for meaning as a desert nomad arriving at an oasis (which figuratively would be round). In this way, Addie’s journey, which bears parallels to the book of Exodus, ends for the reader here, as we emerge from the wilderness of our confusion through her revelations.

Similarly, the forty miles from Jefferson represent the units Addie’s corpse must mark off before it can achieve the eternal “quiet” that she so desires through the completion of both her revenge on Anse and reunion with her father’s family—and thus achieve separation (a final one) from the current family that has so oppressed her. Forty thus stands for a circle of imprisonment, but also, upon completion of the forty years/miles, deliverance, as it was for the Israelites upon reaching the promised land. The number forty also signifies the number of days and nights Noah and his family spent in the ark upon the flood, another biblical myth resurrected here in the Bundrens’ trial by water. Although we are never sure exactly what value Jewel’s horse represents in the complicated exchange Anse works out with Snopes for the new team of mules, we do know that he had the eight dollars he took from Cash’s clothes (the money saved to buy the graphophone) and a “chattel mortgage on my cultivator and seeder” (probably considered worthless by Snopes) and he says, the money he had saved to buy his teeth. Since we later learn that Snopes sold the team for \$50.00, this makes the value of the horse in the trade more or less \$40.00, as Armstid suggests when he learns that Anse has bought a new team: “How far do you aim to get with a forty dollar team?” (p. 180). Clearly, the horse is a surrogate for Addie.

We never learn how much Jewel paid for the horse, but we do know that he worked at night with the aid of a lantern. The manuscript reads, "it was October then, almost three months since it began" but in the typescript and the printed novel this is changed to "November, five months since it began" (p. 226). We learn via Cash that Jewel earned the horse by cleaning up "forty acres of new ground Quick laid out last Spring" (p. 128). Thus the unit of exchange/unit of bondage once again is forty. Faulkner did not include this number in the early manuscript form of this passage<sup>18</sup>; moreover, there Cash says "he cleaned out that ditch that runs from Quick's barn. down across his new ground and round across his used pasture." The Freudian significance of these passages is striking. We know that Jewel is the progeny of Addie's illicit affair with Whitfield, which was conducted in the woods. Moreover, Cash, earlier thinking that Jewel is having an affair with a married woman (and we note that if this were the case he would be replicating unknowingly the sin of his natural father Whitfield), deplores: "A fellow kind of hates to see . . . wallowing in somebody else's mire . . ." (p. 125; Faulkner's ellipsis). The idea of cleaning up the ditch or the field has the symbolic effect of paralleling Jewel's termination of his overly strong attachment to Addie. The night of the day that Jewel brings home the horse, as Addie weeps by the sleeping Jewel, Darl knows that Jewel is not Anse's son; but Addie weeps because she knows that Jewel had to break free of her through the surrogate figure of the horse. The number forty thus symbolizes our confusion as readers; Addie's life; the value of the horse that is her surrogate; and quite literally, the distance the Bundrens must travel to fulfill their promise to their mother, to get her "home" to her people, their time in the "wilderness."

You might well be saying to yourself at this point, "Fine—but what does this have to do with fraternal fury?" Here we must remember that the Exodus concerns more than merely the journey of a people out of bondage into freedom; it also details the constant struggle between brothers over who shall lead these people, and to what end. The debate of Moses and Aaron represents the larger argument between Jahweh and his stiff-necked people. God sets this situation into motion, appointing Aaron as priest, presumably because Moses has a speech impediment. Over the

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<sup>18</sup>William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying: Holograph Manuscript and Carbon Typescript*, introduced and arranged by Thomas L. McHaney (New York: Garland, 1987).

years, however, Aaron falls into corruption and error, as power becomes more of a drug for him. Simultaneously, Moses becomes more proficient in speaking with the people, and gradually fills the dominant role of God's anointed leader. Aaron and Miriam are older siblings of Moses; therefore, the eventual triumph of Moses over Aaron (indeed, in some accounts of the myth, God has Moses kill Aaron) represents yet another example of a younger son securing the blessing that ordinarily would have been the elder's. Further, the brother particularly "gifted" with the persuasive voice eventually must give way to his younger brother, the one who lacks the powerful voice but absolutely possesses heroic stature. In *I Lay Dying*, those brothers, sworn enemies, and rivals for the disposition of their mother's body, are Darl and Jewel. Darl, who has more monologues than any other character in the book, in some ways represents the most anguished, expressive, and therefore appealing character, and is certainly the most seductive, in terms of making us accept his interpretations, at least until Addie's monologue. Students almost always feel betrayed when Darl proves mad and is locked up in Jackson. But a careful reading of his speeches together apart from the others reveals a gradual but unmistakable pattern of emotional and mental deterioration

Conversely, Jewel has only one speech in the book. It tells us, however, everything, in its expression of Jewel's frantic desire for seclusion with Addie on top of the Bundren mountain and his unabiding hatred for his siblings—and especially Cash, who Jewel well knows is his only real rival for Addie's love:

It's because he stays out there, right under the window, hammering and sawing on that goddamn box. Where's she's got to see him. Where every breath she draws is full of his knocking and sawing where she can see him saying See, See what a good one I am making for you. I told him to go somewhere else. I said Good God do you want to see her in it. It's like when he was a little boy and she says if she had some fertilizer she would try to raise some flowers and he taken the bread pan and brought it back from the barn, full of dung.

And now them others sitting there, like buzzards . . . that goddamn adze going One lick less . . . until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is. If it had just been me when Cash fell off of that church and if it had just been me when pa laid sick with that load of wood fell on him, it would not be happening with every bastard in the county coming in to stare at her because if there is a God what the hell is He for. It would just be me and her on a high hill and me rolling the rocks down the hill at their

faces, picking them up and throwing them down the hill faces and teeth and all by God until she was quiet and not that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less and we could be quiet. (pp. 14-15)

Jewel's contemptuous reference to Cash as bringing Addie manure in the family bread pan bears echoes of Abel's sacrifice of a lamb in Genesis, which eclipses his older brother Cain's offering of crops in the eyes of the Lord. Jewel's reference to Addie's hands as roots dug up that won't get clean unconsciously underlines not only her hidden sin but also her importance in providing his roots, his sense of who he is. The "goddamn adze going One lick less" ironically comments on Addie, whose name so closely resembles "Adze" and thus reveals not just the more obvious fraternal rage he feels for Cash but, lying beneath that rage, his anger toward Addie for deserting him. Finally, the repeated phrase "if it had just been me" reveals this rage extends into hatred of the entire family, all rivals for Addie's attention and love. Clearly, the "it" Jewel wishes had been "me" is God, making Jewel's utterance not only a murderous wish for the death of his siblings and father, but an assault on an unjust God as well—Cain's mistake. The macabre imagery Jewel employs of his mother and him on a high hill (the Bundrens, remember, live on such a hill), with rocks, faces, and teeth being cast down in a heap, recalls both the childish game "King of the Mountain," often played out between siblings; Moses, "the man of the mountain"; but also the Freudian family romance, now expanded from the wished-for death of the father to include those of the siblings as well. We have seen that Faulkner employs the fantasy of a brother castrating another in *The Sound and the Fury*, and the separate teeth that are hurled off the mountain along with the bodies they come from in Jewel's fantasy suggest projected castration of brothers and the father (Freud, we remember, identified male dreams of losing teeth as forms of castration anxiety). Eventually, Anse remarries and gets his new teeth, a sign of potency and generation that the brothers have yet to access.

In his book on birth order, Sulloway illustrates the Darwinian impulses of sibling rivalry by using the example of the cowbird chick. Its mother deposits it in the nest of another bird who has laid eggs. The cowbird, hatching first, is equipped with a notch in its back which it employs to lift the eggs up and out of the nest, and thereby it reigns supreme (Figure 2). Jewel's speech uncannily echoes this manifestation of

natural selection and provides an equally effective metaphor for Faulkner's fraternal fury. Like the cowbird, Jewel doesn't belong in Anse's "nest," but has been accepted, and now wants to eject his step-siblings.

Initially, however, it is Darl who prevails in the maneuvering that begins as Addie lies dying. Well aware of the hidden romance between Jewel and their mother, Darl cleverly succeeds in taking Jewel away from Addie's bedside; when she dies, therefore, both are far from any dying blessing. Darl nevertheless uses his "second sight" to describe the scene, although he and Jewel at that moment are struggling with the broken wagon wheel in the mud, a powerful symbol of the implications of Addie's loss. Darl comments more prosaically on Jewel in a speech that follows the latter's: "a head taller than any of the rest of us, always was," again noting Jewel's biological difference; it also echoes Jack and John's height advantage over William. The unusual verb "peakling" also refers back to Jewel's "King of the Mountain" Freudian fantasy.

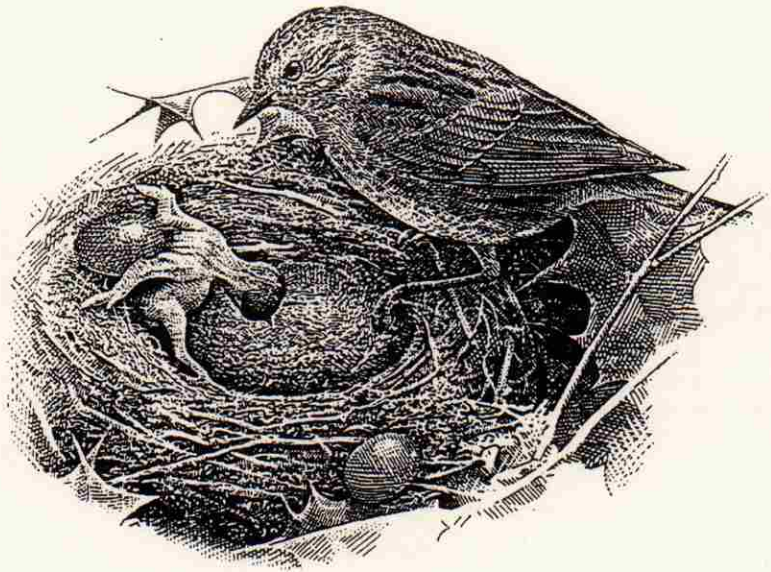


Figure 2

Cora Tull thinks Darl loves his mother more than his siblings do—certainly more than “that Jewel, the one she labored so to bear and coddled and petted so and him flinging into tantrums or sulking spells, inventing devilment to devil her . . . . A Bundren through and through, loving nobody, caring for nothing except how to get something with the least amount of work” (p. 21). A good rule to follow with Cora as narrator is to believe exactly the opposite of what she says. The “devilment” she mentions obviously forms part of the sado-masochistic relation Jewel and Addie relish, which he later transfers to his horse, which he alternately abuses and caresses, calling him, as we have seen, “you sweet bastard,” a phrase Addie no doubt employed toward Jewel in her consciousness. In this aspect, Jewel and Addie again closely resemble Pearl and Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*, as several critics have noted. Pearl seemingly is “bewitched” by Chillingworth as an infant, and fiendishly torments her mother at several points in the narrative. But she was clearly modeled, in fact, on Hawthorne’s own beloved daughter, Una, whom he described as having a quality that “almost frightens me . . . I know not whether elfin or angelic, but, at all events, supernatural. She steps so boldly into the midst of everything, shrinks from nothing . . . seems at times to have but little delicacy, and anon shows that she possesses the finest essence of it; now so hard, now so tender; now so perfectly unreasonable, soon again so wise. In short, I now and then catch an aspect of her, in which I cannot believe her to be my own human child, but a spirit strangely mingled with good and evil, haunting the house where I dwell.”<sup>19</sup>

Jewel fits this description well, and his fratricidal fantasy is no fluke; killing is mentioned many times in the narrative, by a multitude of characters. The marshall warns the family that using the cement to treat

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<sup>19</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter: An Authoritative Text: Backgrounds and Sources; Criticism*. 2nd ed. Ed. Sculley Bradley, et al (New York: Norton, 1978).

Cash's leg will "kill him" (p. 194). Dewey Dell realizes Darl knows about her affair with Lefe; she soundlessly questions, "Are you going to tell pa are you going to kill him?" (p. 26); Darl senses this, reporting "She just keeps on saying Are you going to tell pa? Are you going to kill him?" (p. 35). When Anse complains to Jewel that his horse will have to be fed, Jewel replies, "Not a mouthful. I'll kill him first. Dont you never think it" (p. 129). Misunderstanding the nature of the doctor's visit, Vardaman accuses Peabody of having "kilt" Addie. The latter, after she finds she is pregnant with Darl, states, "Then I believed that I would kill Anse" (p. 164). Dewey Dell has a dream in which she kills Darl (p. 115) with the same knife that Vardaman had used to kill the fish; when she and Jewel attack Darl prior to sending him to Jackson, Jewel shouts, "Kill him. Kill the son of a bitch," (p. 227), an ironic and doubled assertion in light of Addie's infidelity.

The family's hatred for Darl seems extreme, perhaps; however, as at least one critic has noted, this novel has a markedly "Old Testament" ambience, and we read in that document, "If thy brother, the son of thy mother . . . entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers . . . Thou shalt not consent unto him nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him . . . But thou shalt surely kill him . . . because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of . . . Egypt . . . the house of bondage." (Deut. 13, 6-10). Aaron is 123 years old at the time of his death on Mount Hor, which God decrees. Moses, who dies that same year at the top of Mount Nebo (again, a death ordained by God), is 120 years old, so Aaron is three years his senior. In many accounts of Aaron's demise, Moses is ordered to kill him by God.

To further expand on these parallels between Exodus and the Bundrens: Darl, the most abstract and otherworldly of the brothers, who narrates more monologues than anyone else, has affinities with Aaron—both have the priestly facility with language, both have "visions," and both, after all, seek to circumvent the purposes of the holy journey. It is Aaron who encourages the people to construct and worship the Golden Calf. Cash, like Moses, initially speaks monosyllabically, elliptically, and seems as wooden as his creations. Over the course of the novel, however, as the family goes through their trials, which are so strongly reminiscent of those

encountered by the Israelites, he grows in both intellectual projection and verbal facility, to the point that he is easily able to take over the commanding narrative voice after Darl has been removed from the circle of the family. As Faulkner was obviously figuring the Exodus into his mythic structure, it would be surprising if he had not thought about the Aaron-Moses relation as he worked out the Bundren destiny. Again, splitting of models occurs; Jewel has some characteristics of Moses, but ultimately Cash leads the group. It is Cash who makes the decision to remove Darl from this world; as ultimate leader of the family, judge and arbiter, Cash perhaps reflects a kind of ideal for Faulkner of fraternal relation. Like the Buddha, he has achieved detachment without withdrawing. His undoubted love for Darl becomes superseded by his regard for order and stability, by his conventional respect for property and law, and by the demands of his new patriarchal position. A reluctant leader, he has nevertheless had to return to his fated position, for he is, like Faulkner, the eldest son. Although he was displaced for a time by a favored younger sibling who enjoyed the status of a returning veteran from Europe (Darl/Jack), and more often, by a still younger favorite of his mother who is handsome, athletic, and forceful (Jewel/John), he ultimately prevails, partly because he has the skills that translate into vital familial support (carpentry/writing) but also because of his hard won wisdom, apparently acquired through suffering, self-imposed silence, and eventual acceptance of the mantle of the patriarchs, rightly his from the start. It is indeed Cash who ultimately leads the Bundrens back from exile, whole again and in possession of a new link to the outside world, the graphophone.

But this comes at the cost of his brother. Cash, searching for assurance that he has done the right thing, muses at the end of the book, in an apparent flash forward: "[E]verytime a new record would come from the mail order and us setting in the house in the winter, listening to it, I would think what a shame Darl couldn't be to enjoy it too. But it is better so for him. This world is not his world; this life his life" (pp. 249-250). The language here proves revealing: Cash says "Darl couldn't be," not "be here." Even more telling, "This life his life," easily read as "this life = his life" inadvertently suggests that Darl's vision of life is too terrifying to be admitted, and that this is the real reason for his exile from the family. In light of Faulkner's often bleak view of human existence—at least in the

early novels—it seems likely that in this instance the banishment of Darl bears some resemblance to his own experience within his family.

Why have critics missed this? Perhaps because the book's earliest readers, the left-leaning set trained by the social activism of the thirties, set a standard for interpretation designed to elevate Faulkner's bizarre scenario into a kind of humanist didacticism. Irving Howe, for instance, claimed that "In no other work is he so receptive to people, so ready to take and love them . . . The book is a triumph of fraternal feeling . . ." <sup>20</sup> In a sense, this assessment is right, but the *kind* of feeling Faulkner actually focusses on is fraternal fury, not fraternal love.

The Bundren saga appeared in 1930; William's protracted duel with John continued for three more decades. After his initial successes as a writer, William sought to go beyond contemporary standards of masculinity and to replicate the refined, aristocratic, and chivalric world of his ancestors. Certainly his purchase of run-down Rowan Oak was an attempt to assert the revival of the ancient patrimony, with him in its castle. John too enjoyed this pose, as a photo of his extended "plantation mode" family reveals—replete with servants who were no doubt considered "one of the family."

However, Faulkner's remarks to Harold Ober indicated the burden his father left him after his death, and his continuing fraternal feud: "I have been trying for about ten years to carry a load that no artist has any business attempting: oldest son to widowed mothers and inept brothers and nephews and wives and other female connections and their children, most of whom I don't like and with none of whom I have anything in common, even to make conversation about" (*Letters*, p. 153). Faulkner's characterization of family life as constant struggle—particularly against brothers he didn't like—situates the domestic as a battlefield, a Darwinian realm where all too often, rivalry trumped love; however, time and time again, Faulkner would find all these troubles to be endlessly useful for the construction of his alternate world of fiction.

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<sup>20</sup>Irving Howe. *William Faulkner*. 2nd edition, rev. (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 189.

During the thirties, Faulkner was writing yet another book about fraternal rivalry; but instead of just having one brother die, he finally took the step of creating a character who kills his brother. As *Absalom!* was set against a larger narrative of Civil War, always a conflict characterized as "brother against brother," but also against a complex narrative of racial love and hate, epitomized by the white and black brothers, Faulkner was perhaps seeking to force the issue that had haunted his personal life into a new dimension, to finally exorcize it by making it into the stuff of overwhelming fiction, a novel that would in many ways encapsulate the most troubling and enduring issues in American democracy.

It was therefore unbelievably devastating when his baby brother Dean died in a fiery crash, just as William was in the middle of the writing of *Absalom!*. Jack Falkner comments: "I doubt if anything ever happened to Bill that hurt him as much as Dean's death—he held himself responsible . . . He had financed Dean's flight instructions and the flight school . . . and had given him . . . the Waco" [his airplane] (Falkner, pp. 132-133). The rivalry between William and Jack, and then increasingly, William and John, had never extended to Dean, whom Faulkner loved best, perhaps because he was ten years younger and never posed a threat for the affections of their mother in the same way the others did. What Jack doesn't mention, however, is that Faulkner had actually written such a "script" in John Sartoris's death, and the tombstone he set over Dean had the same inscription as that of John Sartoris. Art had become life; hidden guilty wishes had found an unexpected fulfillment. I once asked a friend, a fellow Faulkner aficionado, which of his novels she thought the greatest. She said she didn't know if *Absalom!* was the greatest, but it had impressed her the most, because she said, "It's the most anguished." And indeed it is; as I have suggested, we must now think of the book in another way too, one that intersects with the most despairing moment in Faulkner's life.

After the catharsis of these events, Faulkner directed his fraternal explorations into an investigation of racial struggle, particularly in *Go Down, Moses* and *Intruder in the Dust*, but *Absalom* remained the greatest expression of both his personal demons and the national preoccupation with fraternal rivalry that had been a metaphor for the war, and for the problems of "the brother in black."

During the 1940s, as Tom and Judith Bonner's forthcoming critical biography of John Faulkner will reveal more fully, John developed into a talented writer, and was no mere imitator of his brother. William, however, was immensely irritated by his brother's artistic competition, primarily because he clearly used it to gain favor with his mother, just as William had. It must have been equally galling to Faulkner that John inadvertently intruded on his greatest triumph, the winning of the Nobel Prize. Jimmy Faulkner told me that *The New York Time's* feature article included a picture of John rather than William. Ultimately, despite his animus toward John, Faulkner decided to invest his nephews with patriarchal authority that he was not prepared to relinquish to his brothers. In Faulkner's fiction, the recording of births, deaths, and marriages in the family Bible is a sacral task, one designated for the patriarch—the oldest male in each generation; Old Bayard is shown fulfilling this function in a memorable scene in *Flags*. Before he died, ailing, Faulkner decided to give the Falkner family Bible directly to his nephew Jimmy, the elder of John's two sons; Jimmy told me that Faulkner saw him and his brother as the sons he never had. Doing so meant that Jimmy, rather than John or Jack, would record William's eventual death, and that the mantle of patriarch would never fall on either of his rivals' shoulders.

Faulkner's brothers gained leverage against him in his later years by opposing his principled stands against racial oppression. When night callers cursed and threatened Faulkner, John reports, "None of us agreed with Bill's views; we said 'It serves him right. He ought to have known this would happen,'" and in fact John wrote letters to the Memphis papers opposing William's stands without naming him. Faulkner told an editor that John once said that if a black child was forced on the Oxford schools, he would stand in the door with a gun (Blotner, p. 618). Jack too deploras Faulkner's racial stands in his memoir, and it is clear that Maud Falkner sided with her younger sons on this issue.

Faulkner ruthlessly appraised his own failures over the years, and was acutely conscious of the guilt he felt at hating his kindred. His great predecessor Walt Whitman transformed his homosexuality from a "problem" into a generative impetus for his art, and a creative metaphor for America, the love of comrades. Similarly, as Faulkner wrote out much

of his resentment of his brothers, he discovered that the problem of fraternity could function as a metaphor for the South, its racial paradoxes, the Civil War, and other large issues of American democracy. Faulkner said he wanted "to perform something bold and tragical and austere;" I would argue that his heroic confrontation of Southern racial history will ultimately be seen as the chief proof that he attained his goal; but surely his imaginative and desperate struggle for manhood, which was fought on many grounds, but perhaps most centrally in his conflicts with Southern history, also speaks to a central issue of contemporary society, and fraternity has much to do with masculinity.

The story of the Bundrens and their response to their mother's death had an ironic echo many years later, when Maud Butler Falkner died. Jack worked for the FBI in Memphis after the war and so was able to attend their mother's funeral in 1954. As he reported, "Bill and John and I returned to her room, and one after the other, *in the order in which she had given us life*, we leaned over the bed and for the last time kissed the dear forehead in death as each had done so often in life" (Faulkner, p. 189—my emphasis). As in the first pages of *As I Lay Dying*, birth order is an axiomatic fact in Southern culture, but always has an ambiguous and shifting quality. Yes, William kisses Maud first, but John, as the youngest surviving son, kisses her last. When we pair this scene with William's late life transmittal of the family Bible to Jimmy, we see that as with the Bundrens, even death cannot quench the flames of fraternal fury.





