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FAULKNER'S "CRIMINAL" UNDERWORLD IN *LIGHT IN AUGUST* AND *SANCTUARY*

Faulkner's career-long flirtation with the detective genre results in his creation of a number of underworld communities, mostly concerning prostitution and bootlegging, his two general symbols of corruption. *Light in August* offers a two-chapter glimpse into this world while *Sanctuary* is Faulkner's most extended analysis of how the underworld functions in relation to respectable upperworld society. Indeed Faulkner embeds his underworld into the very fabric of the upperworld community, collapsing distinctions. In its own grotesque way, the underworld imitates to the point of parody the value of respectability that governs the upperworld, while the upperworld enables the underworld in a peculiar symbiosis. Hypocrisy characterizes both realms, especially when the two worlds interpenetrate. The diner in *Light in August* and the Old Frenchman Place and Miss Reba's Memphis house of pleasure in *Sanctuary* become laboratory sites where Faulkner explores colliding worlds that have more in common than they may appear. Faulkner strongly suggests that the open and honest criminality of the underworld is less contemptible than the avoidance and tolerance practiced by respectable middle-class gentility.

A major and effective strategy on Faulkner's part is to create an elaborate pattern of character pairings and doublings that blurs value distinctions between upright and immoral behavior. Introduced to the diner that fronts for a brothel by his dour and brutal foster father, Simon McEachern—whom readers have already been conditioned to despise because of his doctrine-driven parental style—Joe finds a

surrogate father figure in Max the proprietor-pimp from Memphis. Even though Max's primary concern is protecting his business from exposure, he treats the innocent Joe with more kindness, even if caustically applied, than Joe has ever known from McEachern. Max allows the relationship between Joe and Bobbie to develop, so long as it's on her time, and he incorporates Joe into his rural entourage of small-time criminals. Only when Joe whacks McEachern at the schoolhouse dance does Max act against Joe since Max's operation is now threatened with collapse. Despite the punches Joe takes from Max and another henchman as the gang prepares to flee back to Memphis, Joe adopts for life the smoking mannerisms and flair for sarcasm of Max. Much of Joe's surface identity is formed by his short-term visit to the town's underworld. Later in his life Joe will branch out into bootlegging, his side business during his stay at Joanna Burden's home (*LA* 55, 87, 113), although Faulkner only vaguely mentions Joe's operation or his product manufacturers or suppliers. The point is Joe retains a life-long connection to the underworld after his initiation into it by Max and Mame.

Max's wife, Mame, a version of a Reba Riversesque madame but on a much smaller scale, also treats Joe with a distant kindness that parallels the pathetically unsuccessful attempts by his foster mother to win Joe over emotionally. Mame's function is to maternally oversee the Memphis-imported waitress/prostitutes during their tours of duty in Max's diner. While Mame with her "diamondsurfaced respectability" (*LA* 175) is sympathetic to Bobbie's well-being, she is equally concerned with the profit motive, knowing that their business "wont last forever. These little towns wont stand for this long. I know. I came from one of them" (*LA* 193). When the crisis over Joe's actions arises, "bitching up" Max's sweet "little setup" (*LA* 219), Mame stuffs a bill into the semi-conscious Joe's pocket, seed money for his upcoming fifteen-year odyssey.

Mame's point that the small town will overlook the brothel so long as nothing occurs to overtly violate its alleged sanctity is well taken. Joe's assault on McEachern and his connection with Max's establishment will force the local authorities to take action against an illegal operation they have known about all along. That the town can comfortably co-exist with an outrage in its midst is exemplified nicely by McEachern's own attitude in the scene where he takes Joe to lunch

(dinner) at Max's because the "dinner there is cheap." McEachern takes the occasion to proffer a moral lesson to Joe on what "to avoid and shun," although he leaves Joe confused about what is the "matter with it." The champion of piety and righteousness believes in avoidance himself as he replies to Joe's query: "that is the business of the town and not of yours" (*LA* 175). It is indeed a business of the town's, even if Max is not a member of the Chamber of Commerce, and McEachern acquiesces to the prevailing hypocrisy—the "outrage to credulity: these two as husband and wife, the establishment as a business for eating, with the successive imported waitresses clumsy with the cheap dishes of simple food" (*LA* 178)—until Joe and, indirectly, McEachern will cause a scandal that cannot be ignored. The same pattern will hold in *Sanctuary*. Until Popeye murders Tommy at the Old Frenchman Place and later murders Red in Memphis, Lee Goodwin's and Miss Reba's respective businesses are tolerated and accepted as public services. Everyone looks the other way until propriety dictates otherwise.

While not on the register of historic sites in Mississippi, the Old Frenchman Place, an antebellum plantation gone to ruin, provides a fitting site where the rural underworld, its big city connection, and self-proclaimed respectable society cross paths. Horace Benbow, Gowan Stevens, and Temple Drake will sojourn with the alleged riffraff, and Horace, Temple, and Popeye will all have occasion to visit or take up residence at Miss Reba's, the other site where citizen pillars take a walk on the wild side.

Horace Benbow, the idealistic attorney who has left his wife, stumbles across the bootlegging gang at the Old Frenchman Place dramatized indelibly by the opening scene when Benbow and his polar opposite, Popeye, squat for two hours at the spring. Despite his Oxford, England (not Mississippi) education, the novel reveals that Benbow is no match for Popeye, even if we accept Faulkner's biography of Popeye in the last chapter in which a doctor proclaims that, mentally and physically, Popeye will never develop beyond five years old (*S* 308).

Indeed Benbow is no match for any of the novel's other males with whom Faulkner pairs him. Benbow's assumptions and principles—that upperworld institutions, "law, justice, civilization" (*S* 132) actually function as intended—keep handicapping his effectiveness as

a criminal attorney. Benbow fails to understand that his client, Lee Goodwin, who “wouldn’t talk” (*S* 115), believes in a code of silence and in the law of the jungle (*S* 115, 131, 270–79). Benbow is unaware that his counterpart, District Attorney Eustace Graham, to whom Benbow’s own sister, Narcissa, betrays his case, has no qualms about acting upon Narcissa’s information. Since Faulkner keeps these machinations behind the scenes, we can only speculate on how Temple Drake shows up in the courtroom as a defense witness to recite perjured testimony that dooms Lee Goodwin. Or the role of the “Memphis Jew lawyer” (*S* 282) sitting at the defense table on the second day of Goodwin’s trial as Benbow’s surprise and silent partner, presumably the same lawyer that the beaten-up Sen. Snopes rants about. This mysterious stranger says nothing, but readers grasp that he is in complete control of the proceedings. With all these forces arrayed against him, no wonder that Horace fails to vigorously defend his client. Only once does Benbow compromise his rigid morality in paying off Snopes for the information that Temple is in residence at Miss Reba’s. Of course, this affair backfires on Benbow when his star witness is taken from him and produced at the trial coached to the ears to shift the murder trial to a rape trial, sealing Goodwin’s fate, then whisked away by the Drake family. Horace meekly returns to his deadening life in Kinston with the bitter knowledge of the capricious reality of his ideals, that the collaborative community efforts by the upper- and underworlds easily undermine law, justice, and civilization.

A second accidental upperworld visitor to the Old Frenchman Place is Jackson debutante and Ole Miss freshman, Temple Drake, along with her hapless date, Gowan Stevens. Temple suspects almost immediately that she is in danger among this gang of underworld men who do not recognize her status as interdict sexual partner, who do not hold with Southern gyneolatry, and whose anti-romantic/anti-chivalrous inclinations render Stevens, the champion of upperworld values, absurd. Even her feeble-minded protector, Tommy, feels stimulated by Temple’s presence. Although Temple tries her time-tested strategies toward men on Popeye, Van, and Lee, who designate all women as potential or acting prostitutes, her attempted manipulations fail abysmally. The process now begins where Faulkner posits the Judge’s daughter’s as a latent prostitute. When Van and

another man carry the drunken and beaten Stevens into Temple's makeshift boudoir, Van shouts "'Open the door... we're bringing you a customer'" (S 72). In the same scene, Ruby accuses Lee of wanting to "'finish the trick Van started'" (S 75). While Ruby preserves the Belle's virginity on that Saturday night, the next morning features the notorious scene that later led Faulkner to ruefully exclaim, "I'll always be the corncob man." When Popeye transports Temple to Miss Reba's, the house becomes a kind of finishing school for Temple's education as a quasi-prostitute, albeit one with only one—or one-and-a-half—clients. Despite Ruby's attempts at reality instruction about the world Temple has fallen into (S 55–63), Temple adapts only after her traumatic and grotesque experience. Readers share Horace Benbow's shock when we meet a transformed Temple in her new boudoir at Miss Reba's.

The third underworld visitor to the Old Frenchman Place is Gowan Stevens, hapless suitor of Narcissa Benbow Sartoris, a local boy whose thirst for whiskey starts the whole fiasco that results in Temple's captivity. A self-proclaimed "Virginia gentleman" (S 68) who apparently majored in drinking at the University of Virginia, Stevens fails at both holding his liquor and protecting Temple's virtue precisely because he's always too drunk to function when the times to defend Temple arise. Stevens is first paired with Van, who makes the most dramatic effort to seduce Temple and who easily overpowers the ineffectual Stevens at every turn. For Van, Stevens is just one of Temple's "customers," and Van hopes to be another although Ruby's strategies will prevent that. Although Stevens departs the Old Frenchman Place and the text at the end of chapter 10, readers find a replacement of him at Miss Reba's in the person of Red, Popeye's "stunt double," let us say, whom Temple describes as looking like a "college boy" (S 235). While Red claims no fear of Popeye, "that dopey bastard" (S 239), Red fares even worse than Stevens since Popeye murders him.

Although the denizens of the Old Frenchman Place maintain a patina of respectability as seen when Lee Goodwin shaves and dons a "frayed tie" (S 104) before notifying the sheriff of Tommy's murder, the church-going Miss Reba takes great pride in the impeccable respectability of her establishment as a place that caters to a cross-section of Memphis's professional male elite:

“Anybody in Memphis can tell you who Reba Rivers is. Ask any man on the street, cop or not. I’ve had some of the biggest men in Memphis right here in this house, bankers, lawyers, doctors—all of them. I’ve had two policecaptains drinking beer in my dining-room and the commissioner himself upstairs with one of my girls.” (*S* 143)

Reba proclaims this to Temple who is beginning the process of adaptation to her new environment, one that will eventually make her another of Miss Reba’s “girls.” All social levels pass through Miss Reba’s, from the innocent country rubes, Virgil and Fonzo, through the class-indeterminate Senator Clarence Snopes to Horace Benbow who follows Ruby’s and Snopes’s tips to depose Temple in his defense of Goodwin.

Miss Reba sees herself as a family woman, a mother, with many family responsibilities just like her upperworld double, Narcissa, and her underworld pairing, Ruby Lamar Goodwin. Miss Reba stills grieves over her dear departed, Mr. Binford, and she fiercely maintains the reputation of her house as a “respectable shooting gallery” (*S* 255), as she tells her madame friends, violated by Popeye’s turning it into a “peep-show” and “French joint” (*S* 255, 258) with Red and Temple. Her eviction of Temple and Popeye after Red’s death shows more effective courage than we see from other characters. She efficiently quashes a budding scandal whose shock-waves could impact her business. Her maternal treatment of Temple ends abruptly when she feels Temple and her accomplices have crossed the line of propriety.

The shift in Temple from first-year college student testing society’s limits to alcoholic gangster’s moll takes place off stage during several intervening weeks. The radical change in the debutante catches Horace Benbow, and us, off guard as she hollers for gin and cigarettes (*S* 214) and tells her tale in a “bright, chatty monologue... recounting the experience with actual pride, a sort of naive and impersonal vanity” (*S* 216). Miss Reba controls Temple’s gin supply, doling it out in medicine-like dosages in a kind of behaviorist reward system. Temple’s macabre story leads Benbow into a dark night of the soul purged by a vomiting episode as he imagines his own Little Belle back home capable of following in Temple’s dancing shoes (*S* 223). As her drunken, whorish antics in the scene at the Grotto points up, Temple

has turned into Gowan Stevens as she essentially sets up Red for death rather than saving him.

While the Old Frenchman Place and Miss Reba's house function as underworld sites, courts of law are firmly upperworld institutions providing, as Faulkner puts it, a "certain clumsy stability in lieu of anything better" (S 281). Yet Lee Goodwin's trial is perhaps the strangest literary trial ever as he is convicted of both a murder and a rape he had no part in whatsoever and becomes a burnt offering on the altar of Yoknapatawpha County's sense of duty, sanctity, and communal vengeance. The trial, in Faulkner's elliptical and carnivalesque presentation, becomes the final, darkly comic site where both upper-and underworlds reveal their symbiosis, yet Faulkner leaves the conspiracy to the reader's imagination to infer. The second day of the trial demonstrates that the fix is in. D.A. Graham and the Memphis underworld attorney, who sits mockingly at the defense table, stage manage the proceedings, introducing a blood-stained corncob into evidence, producing Temple, supposedly Benbow's witness, shifting the focus of the trial from murder to rape, and arranging for the Drakes to appear to squire Temple away after her perjured testimony. The all-male jury takes a nominal eight minutes to tender a guilty verdict.

One of the more interesting aspects of this travesty of a trial is Faulkner's portrayal of Temple and her testimony before she is redeemed from her underworld sojourn back into the upperworld by her father and brothers. "[H]er long legs blonde with running" when we first meet her, Temple now sits immobile, her "long blonde legs slanted, lax ankled" (S 28, 284) as if she has been drugged, "giving her parrotlike answers" (S 286) to Graham who has clearly rehearsed Temple for her performance. She has been carefully made up and dressed for the occasion by her manipulators in a black satin dress and matching hat, buckled shoes, platinum clutch purse, and a "shoulder knot of purple" similar to Ruby's mangier shoulder ornament. (S 284, 269). Her ensemble is suggestive of formal mourning apparel, not appreciably different from Miss Reba's attire at Red's funeral, although her accessories hint of her recent semi-hooker status in Memphis. Further, Faulkner describes Temple's cosmetics for her appearance as clown-like in effect: "Her face was quite pale, the two spots of rouge like paper discs pasted on her cheek bones, her mouth

painted into a savage and perfect bow, also like something both symbolical and cryptic cut carefully from purple paper and pasted there" (S 284). Temple's symbolic and cryptic mask nicely reinforces her role as the character in whom upperworld and underworld collaborate most dramatically. The only difference in the two theaters of operations is that the underworld is slightly more overt in its corruptive practices.

Faulkner's creation of respectable criminality in *Light in August* and *Sanctuary* echoes into our own era. As he so often was, Faulkner was ahead of his time in representing the intricate alliance between the upper- and underworld communities. Arguably, the most profound study following in Faulkner's footsteps is Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* film trilogy where the Corleones present themselves as a respectable business family, olive oil importers, who happen to have a few subsidiary investments. Always very formally dressed and espousing family values, the Corleones employ a kind of deceptive doublespeak when discussing family business. References to politicians that the Don "carries in his pocket like so many nickels and dimes," to police officers who report to the family, and to media representatives "on the payroll" testify to the collusion between the gangster world and broader American society. As Michael tells corrupt Nevada Senator Geary, "Senator, we're both part of the same hypocrisy but never think that applies to my family."

The disconnect between business and family seen in Faulkner and in the Corleones continues in *The Godfather's* direct heir, HBO's series *The Sopranos*. Waste management replaces olive oil as the legitimate cover for North Jersey's mafia boss. Unlike the impeccably attired Corleones, we often see Tony in his armpit undershirt and ratty bathrobe, moving somewhat slowly because of his heavy dosages of Prozac. Tony is predicated as just another harried suburban family man with a harridan of a mother, an unhappy wife, and two feisty teenagers, all of whom cause him great "agita." While the occasional FBI search of the Soprano residence breaks down the legitimacy/illegitimacy charade, the characters have no real trouble reasserting the comforting illusion they're just a hardworking, achieving, upper middle-class family. And North Jersey's upperworld political and social players forge mutually beneficial ties to the Sopranos. Faulkner was truly on to a significant social insight in

demonstrating how upper- and underworlds reinforce each other. Indeed, the one community doesn't exist without the other.

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