

Black Magnolias

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Prose

Faulkner's (De)Construction of Race in *Flags in the Dust*

by Latonya L. Agard

Is there a fascination with "blackness," with race in literature written by white Southern writers? If so, how does it operate in their texts? Toni Morrison analyzes these and similar questions in her text *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison notices blackness as a great void in nineteenth century American literature by white authors such as Herman Melville and Edgar Allen Poe. She finds that the figure of the African American in these early texts is amazingly absent, but an "Africanist" presence, she argues, can still be detected as the basis upon which the race, or category, of whiteness is defined. Similarly, racial hierarchies pervade Southern literature written during the decades directly following the Civil War. White writers--perhaps even the entire society--of the post-bellum South did not exclude the African American from their texts. Instead, they seemed to have been consumed by their constant deliberation on what to do with, what to make of, and how to portray the former slave population and their descendants.

Recent criticism on the novels of William Faulkner illustrates that he, like many white Southern writers before him, employed the use of stereotypes to portray black characters. However, it should not be overlooked that Faulkner's depiction of white characters hinges upon a particular set of stereotypes as well. The figure of the former plantation owner, the white mistress (the light of the South), and the heroic Civil War soldier all find themselves positioned as stock characters--with small variations, of course--in Faulkner's novels. Whether or not William Faulkner believed in these stereotypes is not the debate that I wish to entertain in this project. I do, however, intend to illustrate how and to what end Faulkner engages these and other fictional figures in his novel *Flags in the Dust*. Unlike some of his later works, Faulkner's *Flags in the Dust* has been given little, if any critical attention. However, when critics like Thadious Davis and Erskine Peters analyze the text, they find that Faulkner does little to challenge the dominate racial stereotypes that were employed by many other white Southern writers. I find, though, that in this novel Faulkner does question the concept of a racial hierarchy in his presentation of both the white and black characters. Although it is not as apparent as it is in his later works such as *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, racial definitions, categories, and demarcations are manipulated in *Flags*. In the beginning of the novel, Faulkner presents his readers with the stereotypical figure of the powerful, controlling white man, wielding his power over everyone beneath him in the social code of the New South, especially the racially "other" blacks. Along the way, however, the power distinctions between the characters in the text deviate from the 1920s and 1930s Southern cultural ideal. This is so apparent that by the end of the text, the social code of white over black, male over female has all but collapsed, leaving such arbitrary relationships in complete disarray. Thus, in *Flags in the Dust*, the power differences between the archetypal Southern white figures and their antithetical black archetypes shift between what we expect in a 1920s Southern text to something akin to complete role reversals. By its end, then, the novel suggests that the racial divide between white and black is sometimes indeterminate. And, whether by Faulkner's intention or not, the text, thus, grapples with the concept of race: how it functions as the founding principle of difference

upon which the social code of the South is predicated and the precarious nature of such a social system. The proceeding discussion, therefore, argues that in *Flags in the Dust* Faulkner presents an ambiguous portrait of both white and black characters. This is presented most clearly through the figures of Simon Struther, Old Bayard, and Miss Jenny.

II. Racial Stereotypes in Southern Fiction

What do I mean when employing the terms "racial stereotypes" with respect to white-authored Southern fiction? Quite obviously, I refer to stereotypes and social conventions based heavily on the system of chattel slavery. Although there are a number of racial literary stereotypes used during the early twentieth century, there are four particular literary figures that I intend to discuss: the older, upper class white male; the black male; the black female; and the older, upper-class white female. Without question, this stereotype of the Southern white male represents the controlling figure of the text; he is the protector of wife and children, sisters, brothers, states, and nations. His attitude toward his slaves/servants is paternalistic, but does not tolerate subordination of any kind. Moreover, his social and economic stature is questioned neither by himself nor by others. In *Flags in the Dust*, the figure of Old Bayard attempts to fit into this mold of Southern masculinity, as do *The Sound and the Fury's* Jason Compson and *Absalom, Absalom's* Thomas Sutpen. In contrast, the two prominent stereotypes of black males in Southern literature during this period were the docile Sambo figure and the animalistic black rapist. The first of these, the Sambo, is traditionally represented as completely harmless to the white-male dominated status quo: subservient and child-like, he is happy with his inferior status. In *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha World and Black Being* (1983), Erskine Peters points out that much of Southern literature composed by whites during Reconstruction employed usage of the Sambo stereotype to depict the African American male (20). The objective, as Peters argues, was to present African Americans in such a way that they provided an outlet for "humor and local color" to the plantation novel (20). Presented in this fashion, the black male poses no threat, is but a comical distraction from the real business of society. He may lie and steal a bit, but he is easily controlled and needs this guidance from his master. To elaborate further, in *Demonic Vision: Racial Fantasy and Southern Fiction* Alan Rose cites a vivid description of this figure by Stanley M. Elkins:

Sambo, the typical plantation slave was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being. Although the merest hint of Sambo's "manhood" might fill the Southern breast with scorn, the child, "in his place," could be both exasperating and lovable. (14)

Indeed, a number of white Southern writers such as Thomas Nelson Page invested in the use of the Sambo figure in their romantic depictions of the African American

population inhabiting the South. Thus, the black man is seen as less than white, less than human, in need of guidance, instruction, and chastisement. This, in such a rendition of the Old South, is just the natural way of things. The benefit of such a pleasant, peaceful depiction of Southern race relations would undoubtedly have been to eradicate the accusations of social injustice by non-Southerners and to further indoctrinate the younger population into a system of racial oppression.

In stark contrast to this childlike caricature of the black male, the bestial, rapist stereotype also found its place in the social consciousness of the South and is reflected in much of Southern fiction written during this era. Unlike the harmless Sambo, this animalistic depiction of the black male seeks nothing short of defiling the icon of Southern grace: the white woman. Joel Williamson discusses this obsession in *William Faulkner and Southern History*. In the "Biography" section of his text, Williamson points out that by the turn of the century much of the white population in the South believed that blacks were "becoming bestial" (156). This is more strongly emphasized when we consider how Williamson describes the sentiment of the South regarding the black male:

Freed from slavery, for a full generation, black people in the 1890s were falling over the edge of civilization. The retrogression was everywhere apparent. [but,] nowhere was it more clear or threatening than in the alarming increase of rapes and attempted rapes by black men upon white women. Most of all, the retrograding black male was after white women. (156, 157)

Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman* (1905) reiterates this idea throughout, using the physical characteristics of apes and other animals to describe the blacks who inhabit the novel. Even more strongly, this ideology is born out through the narrative sequence: the rape of a white woman by a black man infuses white men into anger and is the catalysis for the active role of the Ku Klux Klan in the South to protect the honor of white women and preserve the purity of the race. The portrait of the black female in Southern literature by white male writers during this era also operated between two poles: the Mammy and the sexually promiscuous young woman. For the Mammy figure, her womanhood is the core of her being, for she is the nurturing element in Southern fiction, mothering the children of her master/employer better and longer than her own. Diane Roberts' *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* defines this cultural/literary figure:

[H]ers is the shiny, acceptable face of black servitude. In her uncomplicated fidelity and passive Christianity, the Mammy validates a repressive social order that insists she remain subordinate and that she enjoy it...[A]s represented in southern ideology [she] is not a woman but a symbol of self-sacrificial motherhood, celebrated for denying not only her gender but her race. (41)

Thus like the Sambo figure, the Mammy is essentially an asexual being, without the thought, need, or desire for sexual contact.

The figure of the young black woman, however, occupied another place of service in the minds of the white South. Sexually insatiable, the young black woman became, in the imagination of the white South, a sexual construct: an "erotic object, [a] repository of fantasies about 'Negro' sexuality" (Roberts 69, 74). Thomas Dixon Jr. also lights upon this in *The Clansman*, as does Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Thus, we have two representations of black women that, in turn, help to define the stereotype of the older, upper class, Southern white lady: she is everything they are not, a prize on a pedestal. Until marriage, her virginal state is unquestioned, unlike that of her young black counterpart. She is Bakhtin's "classical body": "elevated," "estranged from her own physicality" (Roberts xiv). In *White*, Richard Dyer provides a good analysis of the social myth of sexual purity of the white female:

The white woman...[is] not supposed to have such drives in the first place.... The model for white women is the Virgin Mary, a pure vessel for reproduction who is unsullied by the dark drives that reproduction entails. (29)

The icon of the South, the white lady represents all that is good, graceful, beautiful, and loyal in Southern culture.

III. Culture-Bearers of the Old South in *Flags in the Dust*

As stated earlier, not much work has been done to analyze Faulkner's interrogation of the race question in *Flags in the Dust*. Both Peters and Davis contend that Faulkner merely regurgitated the literary stereotypes when painting the portrait of the respectable, yet deflated Sartoris family against a backdrop of comical black characters. To a certain extent this is true, for *Flags* does indeed have all the makings of a romantic tale of the South. The opening and ending scenes of the novel prove this perhaps more than any other sections of the text. Will Falls brings Colonel Sartoris back to life in his tale of the young Southerner daringly outwitting and escaping capture by the Yankee troops. At once, the reader is back in time, stuck in the glory of the South and the "War of Aggression" by the Northern states. And, as readers, we remain in this block of time full of romance, Southern courage, strength, and beauty. Our last vision of Yoknapatawpha is a "windless lilac dream, foster-dam of quietude and peace" (433). Thus, Faulkner frames his tale of this Southern family, wounded by war and time, in the greatest myth of the white South: beauty, peace, and tradition destroyed by the invasion of the North, the Great Lost Cause, and its defendants.

Thus, the myth of the glory of the Old South provides much of the fabric of this text. Like the opening passages, much of *Flags in the Dust* hinges upon the legend of the Sartoris men and the Southern tradition by which they lived. Throughout the novel, we see a number of the characters breathe life into the Sartoris ghosts. Miss Jenny, for example, is absorbed by her memory of a particular Carolina Bayard, so much so that she constructs her own myth of his greatness:

She had told the story [of his death] many times, and as she grew older the tale

itself grew richer and richer, taking on a mellow splendor like wine; until what had been a hair-brained prank of two heedless and reckless boys wild with their own youth, was become a gallant and finely tragical focal point to which the history of the race had been raised from out the miasmatic swamps of spiritual sloth by two angels valiantly and glamorously fallen and strayed, altering the course of human events and purging the souls of men. (13-14)

But, Miss Jenny is not alone in her absorption with the Sartoris past. It pervades the lives of almost everyone in the novel. Young Bayard's character is haunted by the death of his brother and by his own desire to transcend the lofty reputation of the Sartoris men who fought in the Civil War, a little "two-bit war, young Bayard rejoined, that was so sorry that grandfather [Sartoris] wouldn't stay up there in Virginia where it was even" (258). And speaking of war heroes, one of Old Bayard's main problems stems from his being too young to fight in the Civil War and too old to fight in World War I. So he's effectively stuck outside the myth of the great Sartoris men, without the opportunity to attain the kind of greatness his father and grandfather did. His most moving haunting occurs when he decides to enter the upper room of the house, "a fitting place for dead Sartorises to gather and speak among themselves of glamorous and old disastrous days," and open the chest, a Pandora's box holding the strength of the family legend (93). I use a lengthy quote from the text to reiterate just how important the past, its legacy and its tradition impacts Old Bayard's life:

The ghosts fell away and from the chest there rose a thin exhilarating odor of cedar, and something else: a scent drily and muskily nostalgic, as of old ashes, and his hands rested for a moment upon a brocade garment...[He] held the rapier upon his hands for a while, feeling the balance of it. It was just such an implement as a Sartoris would consider the proper equipment for raising tobacco in a virgin wilderness...And [he] held it upon his two hands, seeing in its stained fine blade and shabby elegant sheath the symbol of his race only the instrument had become a little tarnished in its very aptitude for shaping circumstance to its arrogant ends. (94, 95)

Thus, we see Old Bayard's existence in stark contrast to the portrait of his forbears that he envisions through their war attire. He has neither the uniform of a soldier, nor a soldier's sword, the ultimate symbols of power for the rebellious Confederate South. Or perhaps the phallus he does possess is just too weak, "tarnished" for the task of social prominence set before him.

And yet, Old Bayard intends and attempts to uphold the glory of the Sartoris family name. It is in this sense that Old Bayard's character illustrates Faulkner's reliance upon the stereotypical conventions of the day. Faulkner accomplishes this first by using physical descriptions of Bayard. Within the first few pages of the novel, we see him walking with a "stiff erectness" so impressive other men on the street "saluted him with a sort of florid servility" (8). In this scene alone, Bayard's social status in the town is

established. His very manner of walking commands some level of respect from the other town citizens.

Moreover, Old Bayard's interaction with his servants illustrates his preoccupation with propriety, place, and power. In *Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context*, Thadious Davis describes Bayard as part of the patriarchal social code of the New South in which "servants inherited from a previous generation validate[d] a family's standing" (85, 87-88). As stated earlier, the place of the white male in such a system is always on top, in control, and such is the relationship that Old Bayard seeks in his relationship with the Struther family of servants. With them, he is at once abrasive, demanding absolute obedience. For example, when Elnora tells him that no one has been to the house before he arrived, his harsh reply clearly reveals his decided relationship with his house keeper: "Why in the hell cant you niggers tell me the truth about things. Or not tell me anything at all?" (13). For Old Bayard, there is a clear demarcation separating him from the black servants he employs. Likewise, he seeks to demean Caspey when he attempts to step outside of the space designated for him in the South. When faced with such an outrageous claim, Old Bayard reacts in classic Southern fashion: he knocks Caspey to the ground, making the separation between them not only figuratively apparent but physically obvious as well (86).

Like her nephew, Miss Jenny also seeks to preserve the Southern tradition to which she is accustomed. She is the soul of the white South, enduring its devastation and living to tell about it. She seems to fit aptly into the "Confederate Woman" stereotype defined by Diane Roberts: "she [is] a figure in crisis, she bears the burden of New Southern nostalgia" (2). Her loyalty to the memory of the Old South borders on the fanatical, and she questions the men who gripe about their losses incurred in The War. To her, the women bore the brunt of the battle, the hunger, the abasement of having hide out in "nigger cabins while drunken Yankee troops" destroyed the material proof of the family's glory (54). Her devotion to the symbolic order in the South even becomes comical when she recounts her dissatisfaction with Young Bayard's first wife and her housekeeping capabilities:

[She] ought to've been spanked, hard...There wasn't a sign of anything that looked or smelt like a stove in the whole place. I didn't offer to help 'em. I told Caroline that I didn't know anything about that sort of house-keeping, because my folks were so old fashioned they cooked food at our house. (55)

Quite obviously, there is a clear code of social ethics working here for Miss Jenny. The place of women, their obligation in marriage, their need for correction by their husbands all operate logically for Miss Jenny. She navigates the marriage between Narcissa and Young Bayard to help settle him down, believing the love and attention of a good lady would heal his wounds. In her world, this is the way things ought to be.

Moreover, she actively seeks to emphasize the social difference between whites and blacks in *Flags in the Dust*. As Roberts states, the symbolic role of the white woman

