

OUT OF THE MIRE: FAULKNER'S DUALISTIC VISION OF WOMEN*

Gail L. Mortimer

Critics of Faulkner have long recognized that his characterizations of women tend to reflect a mythic or primitive imagination. Rather than being fully rounded figures, his female characters are often stereotypes, incarnations of such qualities as fecundity, ideal beauty, serenity, sexual desire, death, or evil. Because we view them only through the (often troubled) consciousness of his male characters and narrators, these characters attain a degree of reality determined by the quality of the male's awareness that they exist, and they embody characteristics that are essentially projections based on his own needs and anxieties. It is often not possible to determine whether particular perceptions of women should be assumed to be true only for the fictional character or for Faulkner as well. What we can discern is that men in Faulkner's stories who are aware of women are typically troubled by them, and the images in which their perceptions are conveyed to us share important similarities.

Faulkner attributes to some of his characters a relative indifference to the presence of women. Young boys and old men, for example, experience them as vaguely irritating figures who can, nevertheless, with varying degrees of success be kept at the periphery of their lives. Faulkner makes it clear that this freedom from a

* This is a revised and expanded version of an essay that originally appeared in *The Female Imagination and The Modernistic Aesthetic*, edited by Gilbert and Gubar for Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, and in *Women's Studies*. Vol. 13, N 1 and 2 (1986): 149-161.

troubling awareness of women is based in the freedom from sexual involvement with them. It is the young and middle aged males who are tormented in his fiction, and when we encounter such a figure who, uncharacteristically, appears not to experience anguish around women, his capacity for aloofness is invariably linked to sexual enervation — V. K. Ratliff, the sewing machine salesman, who is celibate, and Flem Snopes, who is impotent.

Far more commonly Faulkner's protagonists are brooding, troubled men whose encounters with women tend to leave them feeling baffled or helpless. Characters such as Gavin Stevens, Quentin Compson, Horace Benbow, Harry Wilbourne, and Joe Christmas are consciously preoccupied with such issues as racial guilt, the passage of time, death, war, and the deterioration of Southern values, yet they are alike in seeing women as embodying threats somehow basic to their senses of identity. It is their own projection onto women of the ambiguities and dilemmas that torment them that creates the anguish they experience in women's presence. These characters are susceptible to extraordinary degrees of anxiety when they confront women closely, anxiety far surpassing what would seem objectively to be justified. Linguistically this anxiety is expressed in imagery that is quite consistent from novel to novel, imagery suggesting the precise nature of the anxiety women generate.

My purpose in this paper is to focus on a particular kind of image that allows Faulkner to suggest simultaneously both the most positive and the most horrifying of masculine responses to the feminine. In his use of bodies of water and of vases or urns as emblems of women, Faulkner is able to combine the attraction and the repulsion felt by his male characters, to suggest both the smooth, alluring surface of the beautiful object and the awareness that a somehow threatening reality lies beneath.

The linkage of women with water is, of course, pervasive in myth. Faulkner's particular use of it, however, confirms that woman's sexuality is what makes her threatening. When a woman is not being perceived as sexually dangerous, she may be described as a pond (quiet, contained), a pool, or other smooth-surfaced body of water. This is true of Narcissa, Horace Benbow's sister, even whose name evokes the image of a pool: "he let himself slip, as into water, into the constant serenity of her affection again" (FD 183).¹ Women who *are* sexually threatening — which is to say, available and nearby — are likened to bodies of water in turmoil. It is notable that in *Flags in the Dust* after Narcissa Benbow has had an encounter with Bayard Sartoris that frightened her precisely because it awoke sexual feelings,

the narrator tells us that she has regained her characteristic peacefulness: "He [Bayard] was now no more than the shadow of a hawk's flight mirrored fleetingly by the windless surface of pool, and gone; where, the pool knew and cared not..." (FD 188-89). In contrast, Caddy, Quentin Compson's sister in *The Sound and the Fury*, is imaged as a river when her brother begins to believe that incest between them is possible. He becomes obsessed with her and then with death; they come to mean the same thing to him. Faulkner tells us that he loved death "as a lover loves and deliberately refrains from the waiting willing friendly tender incredible body of his beloved, until he can no longer bear not the refraining but the restraint and so flings, hurls himself, relinquishing, drowning" (TSAF 411). At the last, of course, Quentin does drown himself in a river. In *The Town* Eula Varner terrifies Gavin Stevens by her proximity: "[She was] still not moving: just standing there facing me so that what I smelled was not even just woman but that terrible, that drowning envelopment" (T 95). Harry Wilbourne looks into Charlotte Rittenmeyer's eyes in *The Wild Palms* and feels himself "to be drowning, volition and will, in the yellow stare" (WP 39). As I have argued elsewhere, the raging flood in this same novel is a highly comic enactment of man's helplessness in the presence of the overwhelming feminine threat of engulfment.² Throughout Faulkner's stories any woman felt to be sexual occasions similar imagery.³

But if in the notion of woman as a body of water Faulkner expresses her apparent fluidity and a consequent anxiety about the eruption of her placid surface into something threatening envelopment or annihilation, in a complementary image he emphasizes the smooth outer surface itself. With the image of the urn or vase, he transmutes the anatomy of woman into an emblem of desire, an object of contemplation, and a work of art. As David Minter has argued in his biography of Faulkner, the urn is an overdetermined image in which a number of Faulkner's concerns imaginatively converge.⁴

To begin with, the urn or vase implicitly signifies for him the ideas considered in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", one of Faulkner's favorite poems. The philosophical problem of living within time — the question of whether it is better to be suspended somehow outside of time or to live within time, decaying — preoccupied Faulkner to such a degree that early in his career he came to see his writing as essentially an attempt to transcend time, to leave a "scratch" on "oblivion".⁵ He viewed artistic effort as an attempt to

deny mutability and decay by creating a hint, a trace of something that can survive time precisely because it is never quite fully embodied:

nothing served but that I try by main strength to recreate between the covers of a book the world as I was already preparing to lose and regret... desiring, if not the capture of that world and the feeling of it as you'd preserve a kernel or a leaf to indicate the lost forest, at least to keep the evocative skeleton of the dessicated [sic] leaf.⁶

To be finite and tangible in Faulkner's world is to decay, and so he viewed his art as an attempt to evoke a world rather than to define one. Art became a way of evading the disappointment and loss inherent in living within time by stepping aside from time, suspending existence somehow, freezing the moment. As readers we are most familiar with this preoccupation of Faulkner's in his creation of "frozen moments" in which his characters appear as if in tableaux, apparently free of time and, hence, change.⁷

The "Ode on a Grecian Urn", of course, celebrates just such a suspension of life at what Faulkner believed to be its most perfect — at the height of a moment of desire, just before a kiss — by depicting lovers reaching toward one another, never to kiss and never to be disappointed by a reality that could not help but fall short of the desire itself:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal — yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!⁸

These last few lines, especially, became refrains echoed both throughout Faulkner's fiction and in his relationships with women. He repeatedly told a lover, Meta Doherty, that his greatest concern about their relationship was that they should not allow it to end "shabbily", that is, in a way unworthy of the beauty of the relationship as they had originally envisioned it. Once, asked to describe his ideal woman, Faulkner made clear that the evocation of the perfect object existing in the mind — whether the object of art or the object of one's love — is more desirable than its definition or embodiment in some tangible form; too complete a delineation kills what it attempts to create:

Well, I couldn't describe her by color of hair, color of eyes, because once she is described, then somehow she vanishes. That the ideal woman which is in every man's mind is evoked by a word or phrase or the shape of her wrist, her hand... And it's best to take the gesture, the shadow of the branch, and let the mind create the tree. So, that's why I couldn't begin to describe my ideal woman, which of course I have.⁹

Whether he is speaking of an idea or reality which he hopes to translate into fiction or a woman who seems the idealized vision of his desire, Faulkner alludes to "vague shape[s]" of perfection¹⁰ within his imagination of which the actual book or the actual woman can only at best be approximations. David Minter discusses this "'dilemma of desire'" at some length, the realization that achieving what you desire inevitably disappoints you because it is never equal to the perfection of the desire itself — the "bright shape" that it took when it was desire alone.¹¹ When Faulkner was asked by a student whether he ever went back and worried about things he had written earlier or wished he had done them differently, he responded that there really wasn't time to think about that: "'The best thing is to write another book and do it, because it takes only one book to do it. It's not the sum of a lot of scribbling, it's one perfect book, you see. It's one single *urn* or *shape* that you want to do.'"¹² The urn or vase embodies Faulkner's concerns as a literary artist and as a romantic idealist about women by perpetuating a moment of ecstasy and desire in the story told through its surface images, by the fact of its existence as an object of art and beauty existing through time without changing, and by being a container which "holds" (both inside and on its surface) or symbolizes meanings of importance to Faulkner.

At times, in interviews and in his writing, Faulkner would refer to a work as if it were a vase that he had made; in doing so, he would elaborate on the basic image by characterizing himself as an old man — sometimes an emperor, sometimes an "old Roman" — clinging to the vase as a symbol both of immortality and desire. I am reminded of William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", which responds to some of the dilemmas posed in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn". There the narrative voice, the soul of an old man "sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal", longs to take some eternal form, to metamorphose into a beautiful object of art:

such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;¹³

The following passage offers striking evidence of the convergence in Faulkner's imagination of these various images. Faulkner wrote an introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* dated August 19, 1933, in which he discussed the writing of this, his favorite among his novels:

There is a story somewhere about an old Roman who kept at his bedside a Tyrrhenian vase which he loved and the rim of which he wore slowly away with kissing it. I had made myself a vase, but I suppose I knew all the time that I could not live forever inside of it, that perhaps to have it so that I too could lie in bed and look at it would be better; surely so when that day should come when not only the ecstasy of writing would be gone, but the reluctance and the something worth saying too.¹⁴

Notice his concern with passion and desire ("the ecstasy of writing") on the one hand and the permanence of the created object, on the other, with what is necessarily ephemeral and what he hopes will be in some sense immortal.

David Minter connects these images to one final one, that of Caddy, the sister who serves as the imaginative center of *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner referred to Caddy as "my heart's darling" and "the beautiful one",¹⁵ and when he wrote at times about the evolution of *The Sound and the Fury* into a full-fledged novel, he tended to sound more like a lover than a writer speaking of his craft: "I loved her so much I couldn't decide to give her life just for the duration of a short story. She deserved more than that. So my novel was created, almost in spite of myself,"¹⁶ In a later version of the passage about the old Roman we have already looked at, Faulkner wrote, "I said to myself, now I can write. Now I can make myself a vase like that which the old Roman kept at his bedside and wore the rim slowly away with kissing it. So I, who never had a sister and was fated to lose my [first] daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl."¹⁷ The novel, the vase, and the girl are here thoroughly commingled, symbolically equivalent. Minter writes that Faulkner associated Caddy "with Keats's urn, which he in turn associated with life and with art — with life because it depicted love that was dreamed

yet denied, felt yet deferred; and with art because it epitomized form".¹⁸ He sums up the symbolic functions of the urn/vase image:

the vase becomes both Caddy and *The Sound and the Fury*; both 'the beautiful one' for whom he created the novel as a commodious space and the novel in which she found protection and privacy as well as expression. In its basic doubleness the vase is many things: a haven or shelter into which the artist may retreat; a feminine ideal to which he can give his devotion; a work of art that he can leave behind when he is dead; and a burial urn that will contain at least one expression of his self as an artist.¹⁹

The vase/urn, as we have seen, is an image whose meanings go well beyond the representation of the female body; it involves Faulkner's notions of art, desire, and immortality as well. It is ironic, then, that Faulkner should parody these same meanings in his use of the image in his portrayal of Horace Benbow in *Sanctuary* and *Flags in the Dust*. Horace, as critics have long noted, is a Prufrockian figure, inept, feeling passion to be a burden. He returns to Mississippi from World War I brooding about death, the meaning of war, and the serenity symbolized for him by his sister Narcissa. He has taken up the hobby of glass blowing, and as if to emphasize the special fragility of the enterprise — the precision needed to stop at the instant of perfection — Faulkner takes care to relate that the many vases Horace creates are all broken, incomplete, or imperfect in some way. Horace has even set his cabin on the boat from Europe afire trying to blow one of the vases. Eventually, after "four mishaps", he

produced one *almost perfect* vase of clear amber, larger, more richly and chastely serene and which he kept always on his night table and called by his sister's name in the intervals of apostrophising both of them impartially in his moments of rhapsody over the realization of the meaning of peace and the unblemished attainment of it, as Thou still unravished bride of quietude. (FD 19091, emphasis mine)²⁰

The idea of keeping a vase on a night table links Horace with Faulkner himself in the passages about *The Sound and the Fury*. These quotations are interesting in what they reveal about Faulkner's variation on the (I believe) paradigmatic vase in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". He has built into his use of the image evidence of its *inability*

to remain the image he desires; it subverts the very messages it might otherwise have conveyed. As an emblem of the object of art, for example, an object whose value for Faulkner is implicit in its suspension in time, its perdurability, Faulkner's vase, he tells us, has an edge *worn away* with kissing. And he depicts Horace as a maker of *glass* vases that throughout the novel are stressed as being innately fragile, both imperfect to begin with and breakable.

As an image of woman, too, the vase/urn at times undermines its apparent original meaning. Like his other images of women that emphasize their idealized selves, the vase suggests a smooth and serene perfection, the approximation, as Minter reminds us, of some "vague shape" of the feminine in Faulkner's mind. In this regard, it resembles the marble statues and fountains that Faulkner found so haunting when he traveled through Europe, especially those in the Luxembourg gardens in Paris. But the statues differ from vases in one important respect: their solidity as marble enables them to epitomize unambiguously the perfection of the shape of the feminine.

The vase/urn is a more fitting image for conveying Faulkner's concerns because of its interiority; Faulkner is never entirely free of the awareness that a surface overlies an underside of things, felt to be at least potentially corrupt and corrupting. He has Horace confess to his sister that he finds life and people "all sort of messy: living and seething corruption glossed over for a while by smoothly colored flesh; all foul, until the clean and naked bone" (FD 337). Faulkner explicitly associates women with both physical decay and offensive smell in the imaginations of his most troubled protagonists, such as Quentin and Jason Compson, and Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. The striking consequence for his imagery of women is the frequency with which we find a juxtaposition of what is clean, smooth, pure, and desired with the eruption of something ugly, enveloping, and corrupting. At the center of desire, we find disgust. Joe Christmas has difficulties with women that are part of quite basic dilemmas involving his sense of identity, but the ways in which his perceptions evolve reveal modifications of imagery that are characteristic of Faulkner. When Joe is forced to recall something he has long repressed, the fact of menstruation, we are told that he runs away:

In the notseeing and the hardknowing as though in a cave he seemed to see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect. Each one was cracked and from each crack there issued something liquid, deathcolored, and foul.

He touched a tree, leaning his propped arms against it, seeing the ranked and moonlit urns. He vomited. (LA 177-78)

What seems interesting to me about this passage is not simply Joe's disgust with the feminine, which is obvious enough, but the fact that these "suavely shaped urns" draw him near and then reveal themselves to be imperfect. They fail to keep the promise of perfection implied by their shape, fail to have been equal to the desire.

In *Flags in the Dust* and *Sanctuary* Faulkner juxtaposes the ideas of what is smooth, pure, and desired and what is potentially corrupting in image patterns contrasting Narcissa Benbow and Belle Mitchell. Narcissa is continually associated in her brother's mind with serenity and peacefulness and is imaged in smooth surfaces; Belle, with whom Horace Benbow is sexually involved, is associated with turmoil and danger and is imaged in terms of darkness and smells. Horace's relationship with Narcissa has clear incestuous overtones yet remains chaste. Her unattainability is the source of much of Horace's fascination with his sister (as is true of Quentin Compson's fascination with Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* and Henry Sutpen's ostensible fascination with Judith in *Absalom, Absalom!*). What we saw earlier as Faulkner's interest in the idea of suspending desire, deferring it, an idea symbolized and "frozen" in the images of the lovers on the urn, is inherent in a relationship with one's sister because of the taboo of incest. Some of Faulkner's characters live continuously within an incestuous desire continually deferred; theirs is a desire that is desire *because* it is incestuous and thus forbidden. Horace refers to the vase and his sister alike as "still unravished bride[s]" and thinks of the vase that he names after her as "*chastely serene*" (FD 190, emphasis mine): "his sister beyond the lamp from him filled the room with that constant untroubling serenity of hers in which his spirit drowsed like a swimmer on a tideless summer sea" (FD 189).

The passages about Belle are quite different. They suggest that even when she is out of sight, her sexuality pervades the air Horace breathes: "beyond the black and motionless trees Belle's sultry imminence was like a presence, like the odor of death" (FD 228); "somewhere, everywhere, behind and before and about them pervading, the dark warm cave of Belle's rich discontent and the tigerreek of it" (FD 223). The comic dimensions of this association of smell and sexuality are suggested in the repetition in both novels of scenes where Horace walks home from his weekly trip to the train

station carrying a dripping container of (to Horace) repulsive-smelling shrimp, all because Belle adores them: "I have done it for ten years. And I still do not like to smell shrimp. But I wouldn't mind that so much; I could stand that: it's because the package drips. All the way home it drips and drips... I... thinking Here lies Horace Benbow in a fading series of small stinking spots on a Mississippi sidewalk" (S 56).

More characteristic than this complete separation of the two kinds of imagery is Faulkner's juxtaposition within a single image of the two elements I have isolated: an apparently benign surface and a destructive reality beneath. In *Sanctuary* Horace becomes entangled in the expectations and needs of three women; he envisions them all together "and himself like one of those furious and aimless bugs that dart with sporadic and unbelievable speed upon the surface of the stagnant water as though in furious escape from the very substance that spawned them" (S 254). Most of the elements of male anxiety in the presence of the female are evident in this passage: women as water, as the source of life, as somehow corrupt; male as trying to escape, as anxious and furious, as drawn toward the surface of something that will trap him. What the narrator in *Flags in the Dust* says of Horace as he feels the lure of sexuality seems true of several of Faulkner's protagonists and perhaps of Faulkner himself: "the world was opening out before him... filled with shadowy shapes of dread and of delight not to be denied" (FD 223-24).

In her account of her longtime love affair with William Faulkner, Meta Carpenter Wilde (nee Doherty) suggests that he indeed felt a profound ambivalence toward women, that they represented both "shapes of dread and of delight". His letters and poems to her are alternately very carnal and deeply romantic; he tended to make allusions to the physical and to the ideal in some fairly startling combinations. Ms. Wilde expresses her bewilderment at one manifestation of this duality in Faulkner's imagination. He tended, as he apparently did with other women with whom he became involved, to treat her as if she were still a young girl on the *verge* of sexuality. The difference in their ages, she writes, had for him

strangely widened. Although he made love to me as a man to a woman, there were times when he saw me as being far younger than I was. A girlchild. With one flourish of his mental blue pencil, he would edit out all the facts of my life since Memphis... I don't remember making an effort to play my assigned part

at these times, for, if anything, I was confounded by his need to turn me into a sweet, tremulous girl.²¹

David Minter has analyzed this trait in Faulkner, quite accurately, I believe, as essentially Faulkner's attempt to turn Meta back into "an acceptably pure shape — that of a young girl".²² Minter concludes, "The move of a young girl through puberty to sexuality seemed to [Faulkner] almost to epitomize the Fall".²³ Although Faulkner associated sexuality with passion and idealism, he also experienced in it a sense of sin and a fall into physicality. After a long separation, the lovers were reconciled, and Ms. Wilde writes: "I had almost forgotten until our renewed intimacy Faulkner's curious physical tidiness when he was with me. He was obsessed with keeping from me the grossness of his physical self, running the water in the bathroom to cover the evidence of his animality, bathing each time we made love."²⁴

But perhaps the most telling evidence of a bifurcation in Faulkner's imagination between the carnal and the idealized is found in a letter he wrote to Ms. Wilde in 1939, when she was married to someone else. Here the vase image which earlier he had extolled for its symbolization of the beauty of art and of woman is itself transmuted. She writes about his letter, "He protested that he didn't see me enough and that it was bad, physically, to live as he was now. He knew that he should find a girl ('a physical spittoon,' he phrased it), but although he had tried, he was unable to".²⁵ And this, to a former lover!

There is at least one other variation in Faulkner's stories on imagery expressing both the coherence and apparent benignity of a surface and the disruptive reality beneath. When Faulkner writes about highly sexual women, he tends to use images which, quite apart from their overt content, imply the threat of bursting; an apparently placid surface threatens to (or actually does) collapse or break, revealing some unnameable, terrifying substratum. Eula Varner in *The Hamlet*, even in her early teens, is described in terms of her burgeoning thighs and breasts and the narrator's inability to imagine how her clothes can contain them: "[She emanated] that outrageous quality of being, existing, actually on the outside of the garments she wore..." (H 101). She and other women seen as sexually intimidating also generate images of grape arbors (notice the names Dewey Dell and Lena Grove): "her entire appearance suggested some symbology out of the old Dionysic times — honey in sunlight and bursting grapes, the writhen bleeding of the crushed fecundated vine beneath the hard

rapacious trampling goathoof" (H 95). Horace Benbow is preoccupied with Belle's daughter, Little Belle, as the girl goes through puberty and begins to spend time with boys: "Each spring he watched the reaffirmation of the old ferment, the greensnared promise of unease... Little Belle's voice would seem to be the murmur of the wild and waxing grape itself... the delicate and urgent mammalian ripeness of that curious small flesh" (S 14). Again, we find Horace "thinking of the grape arbor, of the murmur of young voices darkening into silence and into the pale whisper of Little Belle's small white dress, of the delicate and urgent mammalian whisper of that curious small flesh in which was vatted delicately a seething sympathy of the blossoming grape" (S 145).

I find further corroboration for the idea that these images convey anxiety at the prospect of surfaces collapsing in a reference that Faulkner makes to *Madame Bovary*. Twice in *Sanctuary* Faulkner has Horace recall the scene in the novel in which black liquid spills out of the dead woman's mouth onto the white burial gown. In one of the versions Horace is dreaming about his mother. She is talking to him, and he tries to look away:

But it was too late. He saw her mouth open; a thick, black liquid welled in a bursting bubble that splayed out upon her fading chin and the sun was shining on his face and he was thinking He [Popeye] smells black. He smells like that black stuff that ran out of Bovary's mouth when they raised her head. (S 60)

What is worth observing here is that Faulkner has elaborated on the description of this awful moment in *Madame Bovary* by adding precisely the detail that the liquid first forms a bubble and then bursts through. It is the momentary coherence of the bubble that Faulkner adds to his recollection of the novel; no mention of a bubble appears in Flaubert's narrative.

With such imagery in mind, we find greater significance in some of Faulkner's descriptions of Horace Benbow's glass vases. Whenever Horace completed a new vase, he would bring it to his sister and name it: "And as he finished them and before they were scarce cooled, he must bring them across the lawn to where she sat... in his stained dishevelled clothes and his sooty hands in which the vase lay *demure and fragile as a bubble*" (FD 228, emphasis mine). The importance to Faulkner of the idea of fragility seems unmistakable; as I suggested earlier, his imagined vases differ from the Grecian urn

of Keats's poem in their inherent tenuousness. What the urn/vase — and the grape, the bubble, the body of water, and so on — connotes, it implicitly also subverts. Evoking the shape of a woman, these images convey the idea of a surface/shape attracting a man and then entrapping or enveloping him. The reality of proximity to a woman threatens something loathsome. It is little wonder that a powerful sense of blurred personal boundaries accompanies the anxiety Faulkner's troubled protagonists experience when they have been too close to a woman: smells and sounds that they cannot escape (consider the interiority of these senses); feelings of drowning; panic; vomiting; collapse.

What my consideration of these image patterns suggests is that a particular kind of character in Faulkner's stories experiences women in archaic ways. Faulkner projects onto his different characters a decidedly limited number of attitudes toward — and experiences of — women. To a few of his characters, women are fairly innocuous, if not benign. To others, especially the artist figures he often created early in his career, they represent an ideal, a perfection probably impossible to attain; Faulkner was in many respects a deeply disappointed romantic. But to others, women, as both “shapes of dread and of delight”, convey an irrefutable knowledge of the physical. It is no coincidence that precisely those characters who are obsessed about the passage of time, about mortality and death, find in women too immediate an experience of the physical, unavoidable reminders of personal deterioration, decay, and death.

When characters are viewing women in these ways, their perceptions become terribly anachronistic. It is startling to realize that parts of passages by Faulkner could, *mutatis mutandis*, have been written by some of the earliest of the Christian Church Fathers. Jerome, Tertullian, Ambrose, and Augustine share what Mary Daly has called “a strongly disparaging attitude toward women, at times even a fierce misogyny”.²⁶ Tertullian writes of “the uncleanness of the generative elements within the womb, the filthy concretion of fluid and blood, of the growth of the flesh for nine months long out of that very mire”.²⁷ Faulkner's narrator in *Light in August* laments “the temporary and abject helplessness of that which tantalized and frustrated desire; the smooth and superior shape in which volition dwelled doomed to be at stated and inescapable intervals victims of periodical filth” (LA 173). And like the Church Fathers Faulkner associates women with the presence in the world of evil. At the end of *Sanctuary* Horace writes to his sister, philosophizing about women and evil: “Not that there is evil in the world; evil belongs in the world:

it is the mortar in which the bricks are set. It's that they [women] can be so impervious to the mire which they reveal and teach us to abhor; can wallow without tarnishment in the very stuff in the comparison with which their bright, tragic, fleeting magic lies'" (S 282). Faulkner's passages are characterized by the expression of disgust or dismay, it is true, but also by their mention of the idealized vision of women ("the smooth and superior shape", "their bright, tragic, fleeting magic") that draws men towards them. For those like Tertullian, nothing redeeming was to be found in the character of woman to offset her supposed guilt in bringing about the Fall.

One of the more appalling things that Tertullian wrote about women, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out some years ago, was to define them as "*templum aedificatum super cloacam*" ("a temple built over a sewer").²⁸ There is a notable coincidence in Faulkner's having chosen for the name of his most depraved woman character "Temple Drake". The plot of *Sanctuary* revolves around the rape and accelerating corruption of Temple, who succumbs to lust and becomes one of the most morally reprehensible characters Faulkner was ever to create. Her capacity for evil — for almost no reason she causes an innocent man to be hung — so awes Faulkner that he only seems able to suggest Horace's utter bewilderment at her depravity. There is a kind of silence surrounding Temple, as if Faulkner could not begin to imagine plausible motivations for her, as if he and Horace alike share a horrified fascination at what she might be capable of next. Faulkner has another woman in the novel accuse her of being willing to "crawl naked in the dirt and the mire" to get a man to call her "whore" (S 105). But the male characters all seem to be mute around her. She is thoroughly amoral, rather like Flem Snopes in the Snopes trilogy, but the amount of brooding she occasions suggests that she is even more dangerous than he because she is a woman and her appearance draws men toward her and (so the novel implies) to their deaths. I mention Temple and her apparent inscrutability because Faulkner reinforces the contrast between her appearance and the evil reality as well as the sense of being unable to account for her maleficence by emphasizing images of surfaces in his descriptions of her. At the very end of the novel, bored and apparently indifferent to the havoc and pain she has caused, Temple sits on a bench in the Luxembourg gardens with her father. As she has done often in the novel, she looks at herself in her compact mirror, "a face in miniature sullen and discontented and sad", and then her eyes wander "across the pool and the opposite semicircle of trees where at sombre intervals the dead tranquil queens in stained marble mused..." (S 290). The "dead tranquil queens" are the marble

statues Faulkner found so beautiful. What seems remarkable about this passage is that at the end of a novel in which this woman character appears to have quite baffled Faulkner in his attempt to suggest her thorough corruption, he should summon so many images of the idealized woman. The calm surface of pool, the contained image in the compact mirror, and the statues — as we have seen²⁹ — suggest *non* threatening women. Faulkner creates a palpable tension between what the images convey and what we as readers know has gone on in the novel. We leave the novel nearly as exhausted with trying to fathom the human capacity for malevolence as the ineffectual Horace Benbow. As Horace wrote in his letter to Narcissa, Temple represents the quality in women that enables them, in his view, to be “impervious to the mire which they reveal and teach us to abhor” (S 282).

I close with the final stanza of John Keats's “Ode on Melancholy”, a poem which, like much of Keats's work, explores issues that preoccupied Faulkner. It is hard to believe that Faulkner did not have this stanza, and the fifth through the eighth lines in particular, in mind as he created some of the imagery this paper explores. The concerns are the same: the convergence of beauty and sadness, mortality felt most poignantly at the moment of ecstasy, “aching Pleasure”, “Beauty that must die”.

She [Melancholy] dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.³⁰

Both Keats's poem and the Faulknerian imagery we have considered suggest that in the midst of keenest joy — in the abandon of the act of love — there is a painful awareness of physical vulnerability. As others in our culture have often done, Faulkner responded to this “wakeful anguish of the soul” by projecting onto the Other, woman, images expressing his horror of mortality, deterioration, and death.

Notes

- 1 References to William Faulkner's novels will appear in parentheses in the text along with the relevant page number. The following abbreviations are used to indicate the novels (original dates of publication are listed before the publication data of the edition used): FD = *Flags in the Dust* (1973; New York: Random House, Vintage, 1974); H = *The Hamlet*, 3rd ed. (1964; New York: Random House, Vintage, 1972); LA = *Light in August* (1932; New York: Random House, Vintage, 1972); S = *Sanctuary: The Original Text*, ed. Noel Polk (New York: Random House, 1981); TSAF = *The Sound and the Fury* (1929; New York: Random House, Vintage, 1954); T = *The Town* (1957; New York: Random House, Vintage, 1961); WP = *The Wild Palms* (1939; New York: Random House, Vintage, 1964).
- 2 Gail Mortimer, "The Ironies of Transcendent Love in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*", *The Faulkner Journal*, 1, N 2 (Spring 1986): 30-42.
- 3 There are several dimensions of awareness through which this overwhelming sense of engulfment is experienced: panic, a feeling of helplessness, a visual blurring of boundaries, smells that convey the message that envelopment has already occurred (smells of honeysuckle and wisteria plague Faulkner's more tormented protagonists). The implication is that sexual closeness creates at once tension, fascination, and panic that Faulkner's male characters must be vigilant in defending themselves against.
- 4 David Minter, *William Faulkner: His Life and Work* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins, 1980), esp. pp. 99-103.
- 5 James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate, eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 227 and 253; see also Minter, p. 240.
- 6 From a manuscript in the Beinecke Library, Yale University; quoted in Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 531-32.
- 7 See, for example, Darrel Abel, "Frozen Movement in *Light in August*," *Boston University Studies in English*, 3 (1957), 32-44; Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of *Light in August*," *Partisan Review*, 24 (1957), 519-38; V. S. Pritchett, "Time Frozen," *Partisan Review*, 21 (1954), 557-61; and Karl E. Zink, "Flux and the Frozen Moment: The Imagery of Stasis in Faulkner's Prose," *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 285-301.
- 8 This and future references to the poem are from *Keats: Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 209-10.
- 9 *Lion in the Garden*, pp. 127-28.
- 10 In "Elmer", William Faulkner Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; quoted in Minter, pp. 56-58.
- 11 Minter, p. 64.
- 12 Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-58* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 65, emphasis mine.
- 13 *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), pp. 191-92.

- 14 Jill Faulkner Summers Private Archive; quoted in Blotner, *Faulkner*, pp. 811-12.
- 15 Faulkner in the University, p. 6.
- 16 From Maurice Coindreau's introduction to his French translation of *The Sound and the Fury*; rpt. in translation in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 19 (Summer 1966), p. 109.
- 17 In James B. Meriwether, "Faulkner: Lost and Found", *The New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 5, 1972, p. 7.
- 18 Minter, p. 56.
- 19 Minter, p. 102.
- 20 The final phrase, of course, is a close paraphrasing of the first line of "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness".
- 21 Meta Carpenter Wilde and Orin Borsten, *A Loving Gentleman: The Love Story of William Faulkner and Meta Carpenter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 77.
- 22 Minter, p. 163.
- 23 Minter, p. 109. Joseph Blotner tells us that as he realized his daughter Jill was beginning to grow up, Faulkner once said sadly: "It's over very soon. This is the end of it. She'll grow into a woman." *Faulkner*, p. 1169.
- 24 Wilde and Borsten, p. 279.
- 25 Wilde and Borsten, p. 244.
- 26 Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 89.
- 27 Tertullian, "On the Flesh of Christ", chap. 4, in *The AnteNicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, American Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm Eerdmans, 1978), Volume 3, pp. 521 ff.
- 28 Quoted in Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 156. As de Beauvoir writes, "the flesh that is for the Christian the hostile *Other* is precisely woman... The aversion of Christianity in the matter of the feminine body is such that while it is willing to doom its God to an ignominious death, it spares Him the defilement of being born" (p. 156).
- 29 Another interpretation of these surface images is possible, of course. Faulkner may be emphasizing Temple's moral vacuity, her complete shallowness. In a letter he wrote to his Aunt Bama early in 1928, Faulkner refers to a woman he wants her to meet: "We all wish you would [come down] [sic]. I have something — someone, I mean — to show you, if you only would. Of course it's a woman. I would like to see you taken with her utter charm, and intrigued by her utter shallowness. Like a lovely vase." In *William Faulkner Collections*, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; quoted in Minter, p. 92.
- 30 Keats: *Poetical Works*, pp. 219-20.