

Reading William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* as a Poverty Narrative

Kazuhiko GOTO*

INTRODUCTION

One morning Jem and I found a load of stovewood in the back yard. Later, a sack of hickory nuts appeared on the back steps. With Christmas came a crate of smilax and holly. That spring when we found a cokersack full of turnip greens, Atticus said Mr. Cunningham had more than paid him.

“Why does he pay you like that?” I asked.

“Because that’s the only way he can pay me. He has no money.”

“Are we poor, Atticus?”

Atticus nodded. “We are indeed.”

Jem’s nose wrinkled. “Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?”

“Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest.” (Lee 23)

Any discussion about the poverty-stricken U.S. South immediately reminds me of the passage, quoted above, from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is, of course, not because the passage conveys the most vivid image of the southern poor writhing in hopeless destitution (that could be found in Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* or *God’s Little Acre* or one of their numerous analogues) but because it exemplifies one way that a work of literature deals with poverty, or rather it shows that literature has its own way of depicting poverty.

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*Professor, Rikkyo University

Since the turn of the millennium, American literary criticism, apparently following the sociologists, has asked how can poverty be visualized in a land often considered to be wealthy. How can it be conceptualized as a fourth category of the social marginalization (following race, ethnicity, and gender)? Gavin Jones wrote in 2008 that “despite the strong interest of sociologists in the poor, and despite periodic moments of public consciousness of the nation’s neediest, the subject of poverty has remained a partial blind spot in the broader culture, unable to be seen directly or for long” (2). Somewhat earlier, Roxanne Rimstead, another proponent of this critical territory, put out the call to address this in literary studies: “It is time for both an ethical and an esthetic reassessment of what it means to keep looking away from the poor in literature and what it might mean for intellectuals to join ‘ordinary people’ and focus more critically on the place of poverty in literary and popular culture” (15). This reverberates with the criticism made much earlier by democratic socialist Michael Harrington in his influential book *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962): “The millions who are poor in the United States tend to become increasingly invisible. Here is a great mass of people, yet it takes an effort of the intellect and will even to see them” (2).

However, poverty—far from being invisible—has always been felt and witnessed by those who experience it (even by the literary six-year-old “Scout” Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*). Hence the paradox arises, as is pointed out by sociologist and activist William DiFazio: “It is hard to imagine that the poor are invisible because after all the poor are everywhere” (136). The paradox can be explained fairly readily. When a society’s dream is admiration of the rich and a desire to be like them, then the other polarity must be repudiated. When the poor are repudiated and thereby given the status of a qualitative minority, they become less visible. More than forty years ago, in *The Affluent Society* (1958), the famed Keynesian institutionalist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote: “We ignore [poverty] because we share with all society at all times the capacity for not seeing what we do not wish to see” (252). Particularly in the United States, with its pronounced ideology of social fluidity and equality of opportunity, along with its doctrine of individualism, observers have tended to “downplay poverty as a problem of social structure by rooting its causes in the flawed character or in the immoral behavior of individuals” (Jones 2). Rimstead has put it clearly: “The social practice of discursive marginalization and symbolic violence, blaming, naming and erasing the poor, construct them as inherently inferior and thus naturally outside of the community, the state, the nation and even cultural repre-

sentation itself" (5–6).

Given that poverty is, after all, a socioeconomic phenomenon rooted in and derived from the very basic nature of liberal capitalist society, I feel obliged to make these inquiries, despite the risk, as Ruth L. Smith has pointed out, that "liberal society cannot make itself answerable to the poor without threatening its own institutions and disordering itself" (225).

Is it necessary, then, for a work of literature to visualize poverty by isolating it rigidly as a socioeconomic problem inherent in our societal system? And is it morally necessary for a literary critic to unmask lamentable blind spots in a society's intrinsic structure by criticizing literary texts for not indicting such a deplorable society? Does one have to be a social critic in order to be a literary critic? Are these critics arguing that literature is not confronting the problems of poverty, that it is insufficiently socioeconomic in outlook?

I think it is sufficient for a literary text to address itself to the problem of poverty or to generate a space or an atmosphere in which poverty is undeniably felt, as in the brief and plain conversation initiated by Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Scout usually behaves like a tomboy, but this time she is in an exceptionally pensive mood, as she recalls "a load of stovewood in the back yard," "a sack of hickory nuts . . . on the back steps," "a crate of smilax and holly" on Christmas, and "a crokersack full of turnip greens" in the spring, delivered by Mr. Cunningham, the father of her constantly lunchless classmate. They are payments to her father for his legal service. Her older brother Jem, who is a little more knowledgeable, "wriggles his nose," perhaps because he already knows the social function of the concept of "poor white trash," which differentiates himself and his family from a deplorable element. But Jem relearns, with the help of his father's reticent but appropriate responses, that the difference between the Cunninghams and the Finches is not absolute but relative, because they are both poor, and that, therefore, the Cunninghams are not "deplorable" but just hit by the Great Depression more directly because they are farming people, and further that both the Cunninghams and the Finches are of the same community and both share the sufferings of the period. What *is* deplorable is not the particular members of the community themselves but their economic plight.

My aim in this article is to appreciate how a literary text can focus on poverty, not as a particular socioeconomic phenomenon, but as a universal potential fate that could befall anyone anywhere at any time. This allows the reader, not through sociostatistical analysis, but through literary texture, to vicariously navigate the experience of poverty.

I have chosen William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to analyze because it is a "poverty narrative" (Rimstead 4) that does not foreground poverty as a problem. Each of its multifocal narratives is contributed by one member of the Bundrens, an impoverished (that is, unexceptional) farming family in the South in the late 1920s. Their own consciousness never centers on a socio-genetic question of why they are poor but simply adheres to their honest and unaffected desires to live their lives.

THE BUNDRENS—LET US NOW PRAISE THEM

A MAN AND HIS WIFE

In my previous readings of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* I did not consider it as a "poverty narrative," even though the author's native land and literary locale actually was suffering from economic impoverishment in his time. I have reread it now keeping in my mind "poverty" as a keyword. After this reading, my mind is not filled with the throat-tightening, stomach-convulsing visuals of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Street* but rather with images or mental tableaux of rustic people who live in poverty simply because there is no other way possible for them.

Anse Bundren, paterfamilias, is usually so lazy and indolent as to be almost cataleptic. Nevertheless, he always persists in getting his own way. Despite being a poor farmer, he is obviously a parody of a plantation- and slave-owning, gallant and dashing, southern patriarch, similar to the one that Faulkner epitomized in the character of Colonel John Sartoris in *Flags in the Dust* and *The Unvanquished*. At the same time, Anse Bundren is more substantial and finally more effective as a patriarch—for his wishes always take precedence over his family's—than his contemporary aristocratic equivalents, including "Mr. Compson" (or his son Jason after his death) in *The Sound and the Fury* and Roth Edmonds in *Go Down, Moses*.

Anse Bundren's physical description is singularly appropriate for a main character in a poverty narrative, as Faulkner's emphasis by this time had shifted from the aristocrats of *The Sound and the Fury* to the southern poor: "Pa's feet are badly splayed, his toes cramped and bent and warped, with no toenail at all on his little toes, from working so hard in the wet in homemade shoes when he was a boy. Besides his chair his brogans sit. They look as though they had been hacked with a blunt axe out of pig-iron" (Faulkner 11); "Since he lost his teeth his mouth collapses in slow repetition when he dips. The stubble gives his lower face that appearance that old dogs have"

(17); “Pa lifts his face, slack-mouthed, the wet black rim of snuff plastered close along the base of his gums” (76); “I noticed then how he was begining to hump—a tall man and young—so that he looked already like a tall bird hunched in the cold weather, on the wagon seat” (170). Anse is indeed the epitome of poverty, probably because he is the oldest in this family and, therefore, has been most thoroughly permeated with it. The longer a person is immersed in a life of poverty the more it may acculturate him to it and the more it may scar him physically. If this is the case, Anse’s physical appearance might be one that his children will be more or less destined to assume later in their own lives.

A sense of poverty oozes, not just out of a body and a soul already gnawed away by poverty, like Anse’s, but also out of those who are being gradually and implacably encroached upon and overwhelmed by it. Anse’s wife, Addie Bundren, was at one time a country school teacher and a woman of untamable passions:

I would look forward to the times when [my pupils] faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own for ever and ever. (170)

When she decided that the time was ripe for her to carve out a new life for herself, she “took” Anse as her husband, as no other timely offer was made and as chances were slim for an intelligent woman with insufficient financial backing to find a partner in this farming society. But her married life with Anse never quenched her thirst for finding the true meaning of life. Instead, it doomed her desire to live and relish to the fullest what a life could give.

In this time of financial depression and in this poverty-stricken land, Addie, like other women, has no other way but to endure until her end. “It’s a hard life on women, for a fact,” neighbor Vernon Tull testifies, remembering his own mother, who “worked every day, rain or shine; never a sick day since her last chap was born until one day she kind of looked around her and then she went and taken that lace-trimmed night gown she had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest and put it on and laid down on the bed and pulled the covers and shut her eyes” and died (30).

As Addie lies dying, she is covered up with her quilt, “hot as it is, with only her two hands and her face outside” (8). Her struggle as a wife and mother through a life of poverty is probably best symbolized by her hands clutching the upper hem of her quilt. Jewel, her third and most beloved son,

born from a premeditated illicit relationship with Reverend Whitfield, notices them, in his typically taciturn way, as “laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn’t get them clean” (15). Darl, Addie’s second son, is a more common equivalent of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, who loves a woman of his family (mother for Darl and sister for Quentin) so dearly that he is finally deranged by the knowledge that she deviated from his traditional conception of sexual ethics. He profusely describes the same hands: “The hands alone still with any semblance of life: a curled, gnarled inertness; a spent yet alert quality from which weariness, exhaustion, travail has not yet departed, as though they doubted even yet the actuality of rest, guarding with horned and penurious alertness the cessation which they know cannot last” (51).

The passion of Addie’s days of youth has seemingly all evaporated through her life spent with Anse in overwhelming poverty. If its remnants are to be found anywhere on her body, they are found only in her eyes, as Dr. Peabody expresses: “She looks at us. Only her eyes seem to move. It’s like they touch us, not with sight or sense, but like the stream from a hose touches you, the stream at the instant of impact as dissociated from the nozzle as though it had never been there” (44). Addie *is* Addie at the core of her personality through to the end, but it seems as if her life has been gradually and irrevocably consumed, and her passion for it finally dried up to the core, by her never-winning battle with poverty.

TO LIVE POOR AND YOUNG

The younger Bundrens have not shown any tangible mark of poverty on their bodies yet, although Cash, the oldest of Anse and Addie’s children, is predicted by Dr. Peabody to “limp around on one short leg for the balance of [his] life” (240) because his broken leg did not receive immediate medical treatment. Anse, desperate to travel to Jefferson on the pretext of carrying out Addie’s deathbed wish to be buried in the land of her birth, decides to apply raw cement directly to Cash’s fractured leg to give it more stabilization on the jolting wagon. This is just one exemplary picture of the sordid life of this needy family.

Throughout the novel there are a variety of nuanced descriptions of the younger Bundrens’ connection with poverty, as they are “processing” it as a continuing fact of life rather than coping with it as a problem. Take, for example, a scene in which Darl recollects his sexual awakening:

I used to lie on the pallet in the hall, waiting until I could hear them all asleep, so

I could get up and go back to the bucket [to drink a gourd of water from it]. . . . After that I was bigger, older. Then I would wait until they all went to sleep so I could lie with my shirt-tail up, hearing them asleep, feeling myself without touching myself, feeling the cool silence blowing upon my parts and wondering if Cash was yonder in the darkness doing it too, has been doing it perhaps for the last two years before I could have wanted to or could have. (11)

The Bundrens apparently live in a “dog-trot” cabin, a house with a fairly simple structure consisting of two log cabins with a central breezeway between them under a common roof, as is clearly shown in its description: “Tilting a little down the hill, as our house does, a breeze draws through the hall all the time, upslanting” (19). The dog-trot cabin is historically common in the South, as is a “shotgun” cabin with a similar structure, and typically lived in by the impoverished populace of the region (Luce 16). Because of its structural traits, it would be extremely difficult for a resident of the house to secure a private space. As a boy attaining puberty with healthy sexual urges, Darl would sneak out of the bedroom, which in all probability was not allocated solely for his use but shared with younger siblings. (Cash and Darl, the two oldest children, are nearly ten years older than the third-born Jewel [234]. Cash is two years older than Darl.) He would try to find what little time and space he could to be alone with himself. Probably he guessed right, and Cash was also doing “it” in the only way available to any young man living in a house like this, and had been doing “it,” probably somewhere similarly obscure around the house, already for two years.

Therefore, when Cash and Darl found out that Jewel, when he was fifteen, was leaving the house alone every night while having a “spell of sleeping” during the day (128), they concluded without a moment’s hesitation that he was just “rutting” (131), that their young brother was treading the same path they had trod ten years before.

As a matter of fact, Jewel was working Lon Quick’s forty acres of land alone to earn the money with which to buy one of his notoriously untamable spotted horses (134–45). This may highlight the fact that Jewel is literally a different breed from the other two; however, these three young men’s secretive behaviors of wandering away from the family at night, whether it is for earning a small amount of money or petty sexual satisfaction, share a pathetic undertone of how it is to live young and poor.

A FEMALE (IN) TROUBLE

Dewey Dell, the only female sibling, is already a couple of months pregnant—when Moseley, the Mottson pharmacist, asks how long it has been

since she missed her period, she answers “It aint been but two” (301)—by Lafe, a cotton-picking co-worker, either temporarily hired from town or returning from town for the busiest season in the farming country (60). Her fear of the exposure of her premarital pregnancy, and probably also the fear of the abortion she knows she has to procure immediately, are combined with uncontrollable urges for sexual release. So Dewey Dell too goes “out of sight of the house” and into the barn at night:

When I am out of sight of the house, I go fast. . . . I listen to it saying for a long time before it can say the word and the listening part is afraid that there may not be time to say it. I feel my body, my bones and flesh beginning to part and open upon the alone, and the process of coming unalone is terrible. Lafe. Lafe. “Lafe” Lafe. Lafe. I lean a little forward, one foot advanced with dead walking. I feel the darkness rushing past my breast, past the cow; I begin to rush upon the darkness but the cow stops me and the darkness rushes on upon the sweet blast of her moaning breath, filled with wood and with silence. (61–62)

The highly metaphorical nature of Dewey Dell’s narrative, which allows one to read multilayered meanings in it, indicates neither her capacity for abstract thought nor sheer lack of it. Rather its sometimes undecipherable refractivity, as it seems to increase in intensity as the novel proceeds, means that, as her clumsy effort to terminate the pregnancy is failing, panic gradually takes over her psyche. But the drastic tonal change occurs in her final narrative entry, in which she is robbed of her money for the abortion by her father: “He took the money and went out” (257). Its puerile simplicity may suggest that she is now beyond panic and plainly giving up resisting what will come. The final scene of the entire novel, narrated by Cash, depicts her sitting on the wagon seat alongside their younger brother, Vardaman, waiting for the family to leave the town of Jefferson and begin its long trip home and eating bananas. This tableau is serene and even tinged with gentle humor.

This tranquility, which her brother Darl wishes to attain but in vain, does not necessarily imply that Dewey Dell has a more nonchalant attitude toward life or lacks the delicate sensitivity Darl is endowed with, but rather that she is, as a woman, destined a priori for enduring hardship.

Everybody thinks it quite natural—never doubts its fairness—for Dewey Dell to be the one to take care of her mother while she is sick in bed (44) and of the entire family after the mother dies (51). That is, she is expected to do all the domestic drudgery besides working the family’s land side by side with the male members of the family. Her situation is not exceptional in the

contemporary historical and regional context. Jack Temple Kirby, a historian of the South, provides abundant examples of the dire circumstances facing unmarried women of impoverished farming households in the South in the Depression era. One such example closely resembles Dewey Dell's plight:

The eldest daughter of a white family of seven children in eastern Kentucky told a family story to an FWP [Federal Writers' Project] interviewer late in the 1930s: "Mammy died when I was twelve years old. She laid her burden down and I took it up." The daughter not only cooked, washed, and cared for younger siblings, but worked in the family tobacco fields as well. "I had to work awful hard, and pappy was so mean to me." After five years, at seventeen, she ran away and married, lessening her burden only momentarily. (Kirby 156)

Dewey Dell, also seventeen, may or may not marry Lafe, that is, "if he aint halfway to Texas by now, which I dont doubt," as predicted by Moseley the pharmacist (200). Similarly, in Faulkner's fiction, Hoake McCarron abandons pregnant Eula Varner in *The Hamlet* and Lucas Burch deserts Lena Grove in *Light in August*. But Dewey Dell's baby *is* coming, with or without Lafe, in six or seven months.

Kirby in *Rural Worlds Lost* argues that, although there were known even among poor women of the economically depressed South various methods for inducing abortion, usually provided by a "granny" (a southern regionalism for a midwife), many of which were hardly scientific and frequently dangerous; "there is overwhelming impressionistic evidence, however, that southern women generally accepted pregnancy joyfully (at first, anyway) or stoically and bore children until they reached menopause or wore out and died" (166). Whether she is consciously aware of this or not, Dewey Dell, as an expectant mother, is more prepared than any of her older brothers, probably more than her intellectual mother in *her* time, for a life richly seasoned with poverty.

PATHOS AND POVERTY

Even if one decides to read a poverty narrative as a socioeconomic document, the most basic response it evokes is pathos. Nothing could possibly induce more pathos than an innocent child living in penury. David L. Vanderwerken, author of *Faulkner's Literary Children*, thematizes dysfunctional childhood in Faulkner's literature, and through the process he proclaims the novelist's virtuosity in creating credible child characters. Vardaman, the youngest of the Bundrens, stands out among all the intriguing

characters of the novel among other things for his impressive one-sentence chapter narrative: “My mother is a fish” (84). Out of all the episodes centering on Vardaman, the most appealing is the one narrated by the Bundrens’ neighbor, Vernon Tull, in which Vardaman does not yet understand what death means and is innocent enough to believe that once the coffin is nailed shut, his mother, though she is actually dead, cannot breathe and will be *truly* dead. Therefore he bores auger holes into its lid to allow her to breathe. But the auger bores clear through in two of his holes and reaches into her face:

It was nigh toward daybreak when we drove the last nail and toted it into the house, where she was laying on the bed with the window open and the rain blowing on her again. Twice [Vardaman] did it, and him so dead for sleep that Cora says his face looked like one of these here Christmas masts that had done been buried a while and then dug up, until at last they put her into it and nailed it down so he couldn’t open the window on her no more. And the next morning they found him in his shirt tail, laying asleep on the floor like a felled steer, and the top of the box bored clean full of holes and Cash’s new auger broke off in the last one. When they taken the lid off they found that two of them had bored on into her face. (73)

What saves this episode from degrading into mere grotesquery is, for one thing, the fact that it is told by Tull, who always has affectionate concern for his neighbor’s youngest son, partly because he has two daughters but no son of his own.

It may not be just concern that Tull feels for Vardaman; he seems somehow fascinated by the boy, as is suggested in the scene in which he decides to help the Bundrens wade through a ford that a flood has rendered impassable for wagons, while logs from upstream are “scraping and bumping at the sunk part and tilting end-up and shooting clean outen the water and tumbling on toward the ford” (138). When Tull has arrived on the other bank, he cannot believe that he has done what nobody, even his wife Cora, could make him do a second time:

It was that boy. I said “Here; you better take a holt of my hand” and he waited and held to me. I be durn if it wasn’t like he come back and got me; like he was saying They wont nothing hurt you. Like he was saying about a fine place he knowed where Christmas come twice with Thanksgiving and last on through the winter and the spring and the summer, and if I just stayed with him I’d be all right too. (139)

The fascination Vardaman unconsciously exercises over Tull is something

essentially akin to pathos. Tull, a sonless father, feels for Vardaman, not just pity or compassion, but something more acute and more earnest, something reiterating and redeeming what he may have experienced or missed when he was himself a small and helpless son of a poor southern farmer.

Pathos resembles nostalgia. Nostalgia builds not necessarily on factual memories. What gives one nostalgia is something with a transcendental affinity with one's past. Pathos is different from pity in that it does not connote looking down on the object within its purview. Something appeals to one's sense of pathos because it inexplicably illuminates one's own experiences. When Tull sees what Vardaman has done to his mother's coffin, he may recollect the time when his own mother died after many years of onerous but fruitless toil against poverty and wearing "that lace-trimmed night gown she had forty-five years and never wore out of the chest" (30). He may regret that he was neither innocent nor desperate enough to puncture the lace-trimmed veil of death to try to revive her.

If a poverty narrative appeals to one's sense of pathos, it may be that the expressed poverty relates to one's own. Faulkner's interest in the poor in his region culminated in his Snopes trilogy, which was inspired probably less by detached observations of the socioeconomic dynamics of southern poverty than by his sense of pathos, that is, not just pity for the plight of those he saw suffering but from a scorching and even suffocating recognition of his own potential poverty.

Throughout the Yoknapatawpha saga, "the Cavalier-redneck theme" exists fairly consistently (Taylor 8). Nobody thinks that Faulkner's literary interest is restricted to "cavaliers," (ex-)slaveholding landed aristocrats; nor do they consider his treatment of "rednecks," common country folks of the same region, simply as condescension and ridicule (Doyle 293). Faulknerians recognize that his was a time when the South was "at a crossing of the ways"—as his contemporary Allen Tate stated with elegiac resignation (533). It was a historical juncture between the departing traditionalist and agrarian ways and the arriving modernist and industrial ways, when the old regime ruled by antebellum aristocrats was being replaced by the world of Babbitt or "Snopsism," a world controlled by those who located themselves more comfortably among cash-nexus principles. Walter Taylor's thesis in *Faulkner's Search for a South* is convincing when he argues that Faulkner was never quite able to part with the rapidly becoming outmoded cavalier philosophy; however, it is quite difficult for me to agree with him when he further argues that, in Faulkner's philosophical purview, the southern rednecks were a nemesis and still further that Faulkner's career was a

fatally flawed attempt to revive the patrician values of the Old South.

The reason why the “Cavalier-redneck theme” was consistently addressed throughout Faulkner’s literary career is, in my understanding, not that he never acquiesced to the inexorable historical transition of his society and that he refused to accept a losing battle of the good old order against a newly emergent chaos, but that he understood that the endless negotiation between the two opposing elements—with hegemony over or support from the black population at stake, for example—consisted of an open-ended chronicle of his native land, in which he took part till the end of his career.

This partially explains why Faulkner wrote a cavalier novel and a redneck novel by turns at the beginning of his career—from the uncompleted *Father Abrahams* to *Flags in the Dust*, from *The Sound and the Fury* to *As I Lay Dying*. Then, when he reached literary maturity, he attempted to incorporate these two elements into an organic whole. He first attempted this in *Light in August*, with the more plebeian Lena Grove–Byron Bunch plot juxtaposed, overlapped, and gradually blended with the more aristocratic Gail Hightower plot. The point is that, in Faulkner’s literary design, the cavalier and the redneck are not necessarily two independent existences in conflict, but rather two constructive and interpenetrating elements.

He further develops the cavalier-redneck theme in *Absalom, Absalom!* in the figure of Thomas Sutpen, who is the son of a redneck born and bred in the impoverished Virginian Piedmont region and who converts himself into one of the biggest landowners in the fertile Mississippi Delta. As Fred Hobson, a University of North Carolina professor of southern intellectual history, suggests, Sutpen is the personification of that famous thesis put forward by W. J. Cash, the most controversial cultural critic of the South in the 1930s—a demystifying blow at one of the most persistent southern legends about the region’s aristocratic genesis—that there were few genuine aristocrats in the South but rather only a handful of extremely robust, hard-working, cunning, and ambitious frontiersmen who were found throughout the New World who rose to wealth and prominence, thus establishing their descendants’ claim to aristocracy (Cash 8; Hobson 265–66). The Thomas Sutpen figure is extended into Faulkner’s Old Carothers McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* and is updated in Flem Snopes in the Snopes trilogy. (Don H. Doyle, a Vanderbilt University professor of southern history and author of *Faulkner’s County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*, says that “Flem Snopes is the New South counterpart to Thomas Sutpen” [294].)

The negotiability between the cavalier and the redneck not only underlies but also intensifies Faulkner’s sense of pathos for the poor primarily because

his great-grandfather, William Clark Falkner, the founder of the Mississippi Falkner clan, “the Old Colonel,” was the model for the most revered and mystified of all Faulkner characters, Colonel John Sartoris, and at the same time was the prototype of all the Thomas Sutpen variations. Taylor himself curtly summarizes the Old Colonel’s career: “A youthful runaway who arrived penniless in the Mississippi hill country in 1840, he remained to acquire land, slaves, and a fortune of \$50,000” (6). Young William Faulkner was too sensitive and too self-conscious to identify himself comfortably either as a descendant of the paragon of the southern cavalier tradition and its affluence, culture, honor, and acclaim or as a great-grandson of a once penniless waif fortuitously married into a plantation-owning family. William Clark Falkner, a Civil War hero at Bull Run but retired after being deposed in the military election, turned into a cunning and aggressive businessman, just like Flem Snopes, exploiting the postbellum economic chaos in his land. The Old Colonel, a man of legend, was never free from a dubious reputation and was finally murdered by his business partner.

The dwindling family finances during Faulkner’s childhood, at least partially due to his father Murry’s ineffectualness at business management, was also a constant reminder of his precarious personal fate. Moreover, the lethargic economic situation that had confronted not only his community but also the entire region since the end of the nineteenth century—particularly since the Panic of 1893—had the potential to smash what remained of his crumbling family pride; it could actually plunge them into poverty and into a social condition inhabited by the truly poor like the Bundrens.

CODA: TIME FOR A POVERTY NARRATIVE

William Faulkner wrote about the poor, not because he saw their life of privation as a problem inherent in his societal system, but because he was instinctively attracted by them, as Tull is attracted by Vardaman in *As I Lay Dying*. Faulkner was attracted by those in his neighborhood who were wallowing in poverty because his instinct told him that their lot could have been his and that their closeness was not merely physical. This tentative understanding of Faulkner’s attitude toward poverty evokes an intriguing association with a surprising, but nonetheless convincing, observation recently made by Ted Ownby, professor of history and southern studies at the University of Mississippi: “Until the 1930s, most white southerners who wrote about social and economic life continued the pre-Civil War tradition of writing as if poverty did not exist” (1).

Ownby's observation is surprising because southern poverty has been a cultural staple at least since the early years of the Civil War. Ownby himself refers to C. Vann Woodward, who is arguably the most preeminent southern historian, as noting a triad of defining features of southern identity that includes a "quite un-American experience with poverty" along with racism and military defeat (17). But Ownby's point is that Woodward's argument, actually proposed in 1958, although it remains valid, was not a view that was accepted by any (at least white) intellectuals in the 1930s, at least not until the famed 1938 presidential address to the American Economic Association by Franklin D. Roosevelt. "It would have been surprising for a white writer to make such a point [as Woodward's] a generation earlier, when so many white southerners were surprised and angered to hear the president describe their region as the nation's number one economic problem" (Ownby 15). According to Ownby, Roosevelt's candid statement about the South's economic plight seriously challenged, if not totally annihilated, a belief still firmly held and depended on by southern intellectuals of the 1930s, which included not only conservatives like Vanderbilt agrarians but also radicals like W. J. Cash, who believed that "the South did not have poor people: it had farming people, and farming people could never truly be poor" (Ownby 1). The idea of the South as a poverty-free land, argues Ownby, derived from a dyad of ideological illusions that dated back to antebellum days of "upper-class paternalism and yeoman independence":

Those speaking on behalf of planters claimed that paternalism took care of the sick, the children, and the old, and that slavery allowed no unemployment and no fear of labor strikes, unions, radicalism, and revolution. And, they continued, since people on the bottom rung were enslaved and not poor, the South had few worries about urban theft, violence, and prostitution. The yeoman ideal held that poor whites, as travel writers and abolitionists called them, were not actually poor; they were merely independent and leisurely people who survived easily enough on hogs and chicken, fish and game, corn and potatoes. (Ownby 1)

Then how should we evaluate Faulkner's stance on poverty, given that he was writing and publishing his version of a poverty narrative as early as 1930, before the staggering impact of Roosevelt's indictment of the southern economy in 1938 and even before the president's launching of the first New Deal in 1933? *As I Lay Dying* also antedated other influential literary works that dealt with poverty-stricken people in the states south of the Potomac and Ohio rivers. It was written before Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* in 1932 and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

that was undertaken in 1936 and published in 1941. It might be alluring for a Faulkner maniac to hypothesize that Faulkner's literary genius enabled him to know clairvoyantly that poverty would soon be coming up as the next serious trend in literature.

But my contention is that Faulkner made his literary approach to the problem of poverty, not because he sensed the increasing external social demands for confronting and solving it, but because he tried to be spontaneous and to respond faithfully to his inner drive for expressing the complex world that his awareness of his own precarious genealogical fate was constantly urging him to do. Faulkner regarded poverty as an indispensable structural ingredient of his fictional world and the poor as inevitable constituents of the Yoknapatawpha County that he created and portrayed in his second successful attempt at his own poverty narrative set there, *As I Lay Dying*.

I reiterate that the Bundrens are depicted not as human specimens of the poverty caused by southern society and its specific economic system, but simply as people who live and die in their destined habitat. Some sociologist-critics may say that my critique is merely a return to the self-deceiving attitude of southern intellectuals of the 1930s, who saw poverty not as a social condition that needed to be visualized, analyzed, and criticized but as something immutable, alongside a decadently luscious name like "fate" or "destiny," that the poor must accept and endure.

Against this charge, I say that to begin with William Faulkner lived and wrote *As I Lay Dying* in the southern intellectual climate of the early 1930s. However, Faulkner *was* different from the rest of his fellow southern writers and intellectuals in that he at least understood that poverty did exist in his region and that the South had never been a poverty-free land. Faulkner knew that poverty had always been a social problem in the South and that it had shaped the life of his family since its obscure origins, and thereby shaped his own life. The Bundrens' life of poverty is pathetic because it is so depicted as not to allow one to keep aloof from it and to soberly apply to it a scientific analysis, whether sociological or statistical. If any analysis of the poor of this land is possible, it must be far from scientific and might echo that of Dr. Peabody, himself a life-long inhabitant of the same village, when he laments the land where they are all destined to live: "That's the one trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image" (45).

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