Performative Blackness In The Fiction Of William Faulkner

African-American characters play critical roles in the work of William Faulkner. Not only do they often play irreplaceable roles in the narrative — as in the cases of Dilsey Gibson in The Sound and the Fury and Lucas Beauchamp in Intruder in the Dust — but how they are treated in the works also often serve as measures of both the moral compass and very identity of the white South. Not all of Faulkner's fiction gives these characters names, however. While those nameless black characters typically have places in their story that move the plot along, it is the fact of their blackness that is most relevant. This does not necessarily mean that they are unimportant. Rather, Faulkner carefully and deliberately places these characters in his work to comment on blackness, whiteness, and the ambiguity between the two poles of the binary.

Speaking of those who dwell between blackness and whiteness, among the myriad of intertwining identities that manifest themselves in William Faulkner's fiction, there is perhaps none as multivariate and complicated as that of the working-class white person. Obviously neither black, nor afforded the full privileges of whiteness that their wealthier counterparts enjoy, this group constitutes an interesting "middle ground" in Faulkner's work. For these characters, their "blackness" can simultaneously function as a mark of shame and a badge of honor. Either way, it is essential to how they view themselves and how other characters view them.

Looking at a selection of Faulkner's bibliography, this essay will examine characters in these two groups — unnamed "bona fide" African Americans and working-class Caucasians— and make the case that their very blackness is their most important characteristic. I have chosen to look at these groups of characters jointly because their exclusion from the erstwhile antebellum planter class makes them susceptible to much of the same treatment by the characters who do belong to that group.

Before I begin, it would be prudent to make clear what precisely I mean when I write "blackness." Naturally, the term as used here does not refer to literal pigmentation of the skin, or even necessarily a specific cultural identity. My measure in this essay is based on that posited by John Duvall in his essay, "A Strange Nigger: Faulkner and the Minstrel Performance of Whiteness," part of the collection Faulkner and Whiteness. As the title of his piece indicates, for Duvall whiteness and blackness are chiefly performative in much of Faulkner's work. Characters can be "black" or "white" in the so-called literal sense, yes, but far more important to Faulkner in his criticism of his home region's racial bigotry and dissension is how characters perform in the roles which society has reached a consensus "belong" to one race or the other. For African-American characters, this ought to be simple: Those who perform those traits which are throwbacks to the days of slavery, when blacks had to be deferential and subservient to whites at the risk of death or worse, embody blackness. Those who do not exhibit such traits are not "black." This is easy to observe in the case of Lucas Beauchamp, the aging African-American farmer whose accusation of murder functions as the impetus of the plot of Intruder in the Dust. Since Beauchamp has no interest in performing or even playing into the social niceties which the white citizens of Yoknapatawpha expect him to adhere to as a Negro — like calling any white person he encounters "sir" or "ma'am" — there is a burning temptation among the rich and white people in the county to somehow make him "admit he's a nigger" (Faulkner, Intruder 18). The narrator of Intruder seems to agree that Lucas's noncompliance when it comes to

performing blackness makes him “less” black; not once does the narrator even refer to him as black. They only ever refer to him using racially ambiguous language, such as remarking that his face “had no pigment at all” (Faulkner, Intruder 7). Contrast Beauchamp with the Deacon, the black man in Cambridge, Massachusetts who immediately switches to stereotypical, minstrel-style black dialect when he is summoned by Quentin, a member of the Mississippian Compson family featured in The Sound and the Fury. Because of his familiarity with white Southerners — he can supposedly “pick out a Southerner with one glance” — the Deacon knows very well the performance they expect him to put on for their comfort. In a matter of seconds after Quentin summons him, the Deacon goes from speaking language such as “See you again, fellows … glad to have chatted with you” to “Right dis way, young marster, hyer we is” (Sound, Faulkner 64-65). Deacon does not at all shy away from this performative blackness, and it is this which in fact draws Quentin to him. I therefore concur with Duvall’s position that blackness is performative in much of Faulkner’s work.

How, then, do poor Caucasian characters also perform this blackness, if they are among the ones who expect it of the African-American characters? Duvall argues that poor whites are the only group, besides those who “exhibit sexual or gender ambiguity,” not afforded full whiteness (Duvall 94). I would take this logic a step further and say that these poor Caucasians are therefore subject to taking on attributes of blackness. In postbellum society, they do so by functioning in economic roles that blacks had been forced into when slavery was the law of the land. To Duvall, such poor white characters “are in-between characters—Caucasians who instantiate blackness in ways that complicate the southern racial binarism. These presumptively white characters come to embody black culture, where ‘black’ is not exactly race any longer, but (because it is the South) it is not exactly not race either” (Duvall 93).

With this establish, let us begin the examination of these two classes of “black” characters — again, the nameless African Americans and the poor Caucasians. A good way to begin this analysis is by focusing on two characters in Faulkner’s short story, “Barn Burning.” (This is, indeed, one of the two works by Faulkner which Duvall devotes his analytic attention to in “Strange Nigger.”) The story takes place in an earlier period than much of Faulkner’s other work, some thirty-odd years after the American Civil War, and concerns an itinerant family of poor white farmers called the Snopeses. Patriarch Abner Snopes is a veteran of the Confederate States cavalry and a serial arsonist, who appears to set fire to the property of the owner of the land he and his family till whenever there is a disagreement between them. Abner Snopes and his family embody blackness in several ways. After a judge orders that the family leave the area because Abner had set fire to the barn of his landlord’s neighbor, they move to the property of one Major de Spain, on whose land Abner has already signed a contract to sharecrop. Abner considers his condition as a traveling sharecropper to be akin to slavery, and regards this with bitterness.

Before setting off to meet Major de Spain, Abner remarks, “I reckon I’ll have a word with the man that aims to begin tomorrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months” (Faulkner, “Barn”). The way he describes this (notwithstanding the months-long qualifier) is a statement of blackness. Abner is complaining that he is in the position that he must perform as a black man, i.e. a slave who is “owned,” in order to make a living for himself and his family.

After failing to meet with Major de Spain in the house, and (possibly deliberately) tracking excrement on Mrs. de Spain’s rug, Abner steps out with his youngest son, Colonel Sartoris or “Sarty,” who narrates the story, and resentfully remarks on the house the de Spains live in. He

says to Sarty, “Pretty and white, ain’t it?” referring to the house. “That’s sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain’t white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it” (Faulkner, “Barn”). As Duvall writes, “Abner’s reading of the white house (in which appropriated African American labor figuratively is what coats the de Spain house) correctly sees that his own and other white sharecroppers’ labor (sweat) is identical to exploited black labor” (Duvall 102-103). Thus Abner is again equating his own profession with the performance of blackness. The role of “slaves” that the Snopeses play is indeed the only real way with which can Abner distinguish his own family from the de Spains. Duvall astutely notes that, toward the end of the story, the wealthy de Spain is at several points referred to explicitly as “the white man,” while neither Sarty nor Abner are termed as such (Duvall 105).

One instance of performative blackness in the story that I think Duvall overlooks can be observed in a brief moment between when Abner compares his condition to that of slaves and makes the remark about black sweat. As Sarty and Abner approach the main house on the de Spain land, the narrator notes how beholding the house is a new experience entirely for the boy. The reader is told that Sarty saw the house for the first time and at that instant he forgot his father and the terror and despair both, and even when he remembered his father again (who had not stopped) the terror and despair did not return. Because, for all the twelve movings, they had sojourned until now in a poor country, a land of small farms and fields and houses, and he had never seen a house like this before. Hit’s big as a courthouse he thought quietly, with a surge of peace and joy whose reason he could not have thought into words (Faulkner, “Barn”).

While Faulkner was certainly not an author known to shy away from daedal descriptions of setting, and likely wants to impress upon the reader the sheer opulence of the de Spains, upon reading this passage I did wonder if there were another function. I think this section can be read with an explicit slavery parallel in mind: Abner and Sarty are as slaves reporting to the “big house,” where the master and mistress would have dwelt. The property’s small house where they are to live in while in the de Spains’ employ is, then, comparable to the slave quarters on an Old Southern plantation. The two poor Caucasian characters are then doing precisely what slaves would have done in the past: entering the threshold of their master in order to discern precisely what he would have them do. They are thus fulfilling the capacity of a black characters to the de Spains’ “whiteness.”

Granted, Abner’s behavior on entering the household is not at all what one would expect out of most enslaved African Americans in the antebellum era. (That the African-American population has exceeded forty million is a testament to the fact that most of them were aware of the potentially fatal consequences of forcing their way into the “big house” and ruin the “mistress’s” possessions.) But he is indeed punished for the misdeed as a slave would have been, albeit in a much less corporal manner.

In any event, the only black character in the story (unless one wants to consider Abner, who in Duvall’s reading literally dons blackface before his arsons in an attempt to divert suspicion from himself) is the “Negro” a servant whom Sarty and Abner encounter when they first come up to the big house. Like most of Faulkner’s characters known only by their racial designation, the Negro performs the precise role which his society would expect of him. The Negro is essentially a latter-day enslaved person. He exhibits no interests outside of fulfilling the wishes of his master and mistress, and speaks in typical African American vernacular. When Abner tries to enter, the Negro says tersely, “Wipe yo foots, white man, fo you come in here. Major ain’t home nohow” (Faulkner, “Barn”). Interestingly, Abner takes the time to call the man a “nigger”

before forcing his way into the home. Why do both men choose to voice the other's racial designation — "white man" and "nigger?" Perhaps they themselves recognize the similar, if not identical, realm they occupy in the South's racial hierarchy, but are trying to convince themselves that it is their outward appearance which ultimately matters more. But, in Faulkner's fiction, this is usually not the case.

Another instance of poor Caucasians performing blackness can be found in Faulkner's 1930 novel, As I Lay Dying. This book is the story of the Bundrens, a destitute rural family similar to the Snopeses, and their journey to honor their dead mother's final wish to be buried in her hometown of Jefferson. The novel is told from various characters' points of view, most of them belonging to the Bundren family. While there are no black characters that I can recall of in the novel and far fewer references to the history and legacy of slavery than in "Barn Burner," there are nevertheless ways the Bundrens perform blackness a la Abner Snopes.

First, I propose that Anse Bundren, the curmudgeonly head of the family, forces the others into performing blackness essentially by treating them as slave laborers. Anse Bundren may, unconsciously, be attempting to perform the role of a "full" (wealthy) white man, a position he has never and will never be afforded the opportunity to occupy. He is painted as a lazy, selfish figure who would much rather have others do his bidding — at no charge to himself, much like a latter-day slaveholder. As rationale, he offers the flaccid excuse that if he sweats too much he will die because of an illness he briefly contracted when he was twenty-two, which his own family does not even fall for (Faulkner, Dying 11). The first mention of Anse comes in the third section of the novel, narrated by his son Darl. The scene places Anse on the porch, idly taking in chewing tobacco as he observes his son Jewel construct a coffin for Anse's wife, Addie (Faulkner, Dying 8). To me, this immediately calls to mind the image of a languid antebellum planter watching his chattel do his work for him, which I think is compounded by the fact that Anse is sitting with his much wealthier neighbor, Vernon Tull. Perhaps Anse feels as if his own status, his own wealth, is elevated by the mere association with Tull.

Anse views his children as commodities, and despite his own reluctance to work, desires to keep close tabs on how and for whom they work. For example, he disapproves of his son Cash's ability to make his own wages through the use of carpentry. The first section he narrates opens with a diatribe against the new road that has been built where they live; it is evident that Anse is no proponent of what we would term "progress." Besides thinking that God never meant for man to travel by road such as the one near the Bundren residence, Anse thinks it "aint right" for allowing Cash to learn a trade: "Making me pay for Cash having to get them carpenter notions when if it hadn't been for no road come there, he wouldn't a got them; falling off of churches and lifting no hand in six months and me and Addie slaving and a-slaving, when there's plenty of sawing on this place he could do if he's got to saw" (Faulkner, Dying 22). Clearly, Anse believes that Cash's skill would be better put to use around the house, notwithstanding that Cash can make money that he could choose to go to that same household if he worked jobs for someone else. Cash's rather auspicious name lends credence to this idea of Anse as a type of slaveholder. In the antebellum period, slaves were purchased with cash, and Anse would much rather have the labor produced by his Cash benefit no one but himself.

The Bundren children do not leave their father's household and forge lives for themselves, though, as with Cash's case, they are demonstrated to have both the desire and the means to do so. Though not necessarily related to performance per se, it is also worth noting that Vardaman, the youngest Bundren, briefly remarks that his brothers resemble slaves. (Three out

of the four uses of the word “nigger” are found in this short section late in the novel.) Vardaman notices that Jewel’s “back was red,” and tells him, ‘“Your back looks like a nigger’s, Jewel” (Faulkner, Dying 129). While Vardaman could be referring to Jewel’s back simply appearing darker, it makes just as much sense to conclude that he means his brother’s back resembles that of an enslaved person whose hide has been scarred by a slave owner's whip. And of course, Anse, as the head of the family, is the closest any of the Bundrens have to a slave owner. In any case, I think the reading of Anse as a kind of slaveholder is sound, and only further demonstrates that “blackness” can be less of an immutable racial characteristic and more of a state one can achieve through performance in Faulkner’s work.

Yet I would be remiss if I were to go without mentioning the way that characters who do not exist in either of the groups I have examined here perform blackness. Cambridge Yankees, for instance, consider Quentin Compson to be performing blackness when they simply hear him speak with his natural accent (Faulkner, Sound 79). And there are certainly more nameless black characters and many more working-class Caucasian characters whose functioning blackness could benefit from closer scrutiny among readers and scholars of Faulkner.

Ultimately, what does the notion that race is ultimately a matter of performance mean for Faulkner’s fiction? It is, of course, not a question which scholars can definitively answer. Although I am an adherent to the belief that authorial intent matters much less than an individual reader’s interpretation, I hold that, quite simply, Faulkner more than likely wrote this into his work to demonstrate the folly in believing that a person’s race is the quintessential element of how they see themselves and how other see them. Perhaps he meant to demonstrate that all the bluster and blatherskite his predecessors and contemporaries spouted about “natural” differences between the races was farcical, that it really was but sound and fury that signified nothing. Faulkner may have been much more “progressive” than some scholars afford him credit for.

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