Sins of the Father: Patriarchy and the Old South in the Early Works of William Faulkner

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Keywords
Patriarchy, William Faulkner, American literature, Southern literature
The events surrounding the Civil War and Reconstruction led to the decline of patriarchy in the Old South. With the end of the war and abolition of slavery, the social and economic foundations of the patriarchal structure began to collapse. The end of slavery eliminated the slaveholding father’s power base and effectively invalidated his rule. With this collapse, the role of the father within the family and society as a whole greatly deteriorated. The father’s continuing power loss created a situation where Southern fathers “could not help but feel dwarfed by the formidable ghosts of their forefathers” (Bleikasten 121-22). In most of
his early work, Faulkner is concerned with the father's fall and its effect on future generations.

In the years following the Civil War, the Old South came to exist on a nostalgic, mythical level. The horrors of slavery were replaced by a longing for a time untouched by war and industrialization. This Southern romanticism was a reaction against an increasing push in the postbellum South toward industrialization, a movement that subordinated Southern romanticism in favor of an industrial North. C. Vann Woodward notes that while the South began to embrace the industrial vision, “there developed a cult of archaism, a nostalgic vision of the past” (New South 154) that was embraced by thousands of Southerners grieving for the Old Order. These fundamentalists resisted the new push towards an industrialized South and worked to establish the legitimacy of the Lost Cause. Woodward reveals the emotional state of the South during this time explaining that the more deeply Southerners committed to the new order, “the louder [were] the protests of loyalty to the Old” (155).

The old order to which Southerners related was patriarchal in organization. Andre Bleikasten points out that “in the Old South the patriarchal family typified to a large extent the proper relations between ruler and ruled and so supplied the primal model for social organization and political government” (156). Thus, the father's rule over his wife and children was accepted as law and gave justification to a secondary oppression, also specifically patriarchal in its structure—that of the slave by the slaveholder. The slaveholder was father and master in one and “presided over an extended family” (Bleikasten 156) of whites and blacks, demanding the same obedience from both his children and his slaves. The notion of the extended family, ultimately, came to characterize the whole system of race and class relations in the Old South. Although the plantation slaveholders did not make up the entirety of the Southern population, “the patriarchal and paternalistic values of the ruling class permeated Southern society at large” (156).

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that plague his earlier novels. Gwendolyn Chabrier states that
"Faulkner’s children as presented in his work of this [early] period
are often doomed to be the prisoners of the narrow lives their
parents allowed them. They are portrayed as puppets, their
parents the puppeteers" (116). These fictional fathers include the
incapable Mr. Jason Compson (The Sound and the Fury),
destined to “fail at everything he touched” (Faulkner 206); Colonel
Thomas Sutpen (Absalom, Absalom!), whose success would
ultimately cost him not only his family but his life as well; Simon
McEachern (Light in August), whose tyranny would eventually
drive away his adopted son; and finally, Anse Bundren (As I
Lay Dying) whose children inexplicably stand by him despite his
neglect.

Faulkner believed that the Old South was inextricably
linked with patriarchy and that the father’s authority within
the family served as a model for many aspects of the Old
South. Consequently, Faulkner represents the failure of the
Old South through the failure of its patriarchs. The failure of
these fathers reflects an outdated culture that was striving to
survive in an increasingly modern world. In particular, their
inability to function as fathers stems from their own place
within a hypocritical and destructive caste system. However,
the majority of the blame falls upon each father, whose
dependence upon Old Southern values leaves his children ill
prepared for modernity. This results in the failure and death
of the Faulknerian family, reflecting the fate of the Old South
itself.

Fathers in Faulkner’s early work are characteristically
lost in the outdated values of the Old South. These values
range from the religious Puritanism of McEachern to the
nihilism of Mr. Compson. These men are similar in their
inability to transcend their personal crises and inherited values
to pass on any useful knowledge to their children. All they
can offer is physical and emotional abuse combined with a
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chance at life in the modern world, he manages to instill in his children the same values that have created his impotence, particularly his nihilistic philosophy. Gwendolyn Chabrier states:

the transmission of an outmoded code of ethics is a problem particularly plaguing to the twentieth-century South's upper classes, who have to adapt themselves to a value system based mainly on money rather than on... the virtues... at the heart of... the of the pre-Civil War South. (107)

This same problem exists for the Compson children whose father has raised them on ideals that are incompatible to the world they live in. Combined with Mr. Compson's nihilistic philosophy, these obsolete values leave the Compson children unable to function in the modern world. More than any other Compson child, the effects of Mr. Compson's teachings are shown most explicitly in Quentin, whose obsession with his father's philosophy eventually leads to his suicide.

Three years later, Faulkner would publish *Light in August*, telling the story of Joanna Burden, Gail Hightower, and Joe Christmas, all of whom are subjected to the outdated, puritanical values of their fathers. A common experience among children of the South, puritanical upbringing did much to alienate these children from their fathers. Chabrier explains that "(g)enerally, the child, or sometimes a grandchild, who is the recipient of a puritanical upbringing is weaned on principles and empty abstractions, not on love" (103). This accounts for Hightower's alienation from his father. In fact, Hightower's name suggests that he is unable to come down from his tower and engage with the real world.

This passing of obsession from father to child also explains the vehemence with which Joanna Burden fights for the civil rights of former slaves. Just as Hightower's romance with the past is taken too far, Joanna's fixation on race is taken to such an extreme that it leads to her death when she tries to impose her values on Joe Christmas. More than any
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other character in the novel, Joe Christmas suffers because of his puritanical upbringing, the legacy of his adoptive father. McEachern’s contempt for his adopted son Joe Christmas is shown through their first meeting at the orphanage. The father stares at the boy with “the same stare with which he might have examined a horse or a second hand plow, convinced beforehand that he would see flaws” (142). McEachern would soon begin his attempt to control his adopted son whom he is convinced can be saved only by ritual beatings meant to instill the values of “work and the fear of God” (144). The battle of wills between father and son slowly breaks the boy of any ability to function properly in society. By the time Christmas is eight years old, McEachern has already worn the boy down through intense physical and mental abuse.

The violence and ruthlessness of his father is all Christmas has ever encountered. At seventeen, his submission is complete as Faulkner presents the image of “both the man and the boy accepting [his punishment] as a natural and inescapable fact” (167). McEachern experiences every chance to correct the boy with a sense “of satisfaction and victory” (164). By the time his education is done, Christmas has become a cold man, incapable of any deep emotional relationship, even with women. In them he perceived “that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men” (168-69).

The guilt that Christmas has been taught to associate with sex pervades his first sexual encounter and other relationships with women, all of which end in violence. Christmas is the only one who doesn’t know that Bobbie Allen is really a prostitute, not his girlfriend. This doomed relationship brings about disaster not only for Christmas but also for McEachern. When he confronts Christmas at a late night dance, he characteristically damns the son for consorting with a whore and rushes headlong to his own death with “the furious and dreamlike exaltation of a martyr” (205). The irony is that McEachern’s puritanical teachings had led
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Christmas to strike out at his father in the first place. Through the character of Christmas, Faulkner reveals that the only way to escape the lessons of the Old South is to perish like the Old South itself.

The lives and deaths of Colonel Thomas Sutpen and his children provide an excellent example of this. Sutpen's values and their effects on his children in *Absalom, Absalom!* present Faulkner’s most explicit use of the father-son relationship as a metaphor for the eradication of the Old South. Sutpen’s values show the incompatibility between the values of the aristocratic Old South and the increasingly industrial New South. Sutpen attempts to solidify his position in the New South by attaining all the possessions that a Southern gentleman of the Old South is supposed to have: “I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife” (Faulkner, *Absalom* 212).

Throughout the novel, Sutpen strives to complete this design and assert his status in the postwar South. By the end of the novel, as his plantation falls down around him, Sutpen resembles Mr. Compson. In perhaps no other novel does Faulkner make so explicit the effects of the Civil War on the Old South. Before the Civil War, Sutpen thrived in a “time when ladies did not walk but floated” (24). He succeeded in acquiring a respectable wife, a male heir, and “a hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country” (26).

Sutpen’s design, like the Old South, is doomed from the start because it “reduces all human relation within it to the status of mechanical and preordained interactions” (Lensing 99). In his attempt to maintain his patriarchal and aristocratic values, Sutpen alienates and rejects his children, destroying the family that plays such a fundamental role in his design. For Faulkner, Sutpen’s failure to understand the human attachments that are at the heart of the family prove fatal:

To me, he is to be pitied, as anyone who ignores man is to be pitied, who does not
Christmas to strike out at his father in the first place. Through the character of Christmas, Faulkner reveals that the only way to escape the lessons of the Old South is to perish like the Old South itself.

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To me, he is to be pitied, as anyone who ignores man is to be pitied, who does not
believe that he belongs as a member of a human family, is to be pitied. Sutpen didn’t believe that. He was Sutpen. He was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later, because one has to belong to the human family, and to take a responsible part in the human family (Faulkner, University 80-81).

Sutpen offers no hope for a healthy relationship between himself and his male heirs. Their relationships are “of such a nature as to preclude the very possibility of an act of recognition. In a sense... the son is doomed either to be absorbed or to be expelled...” (Bleikasten, Fathers 141-42). Henry, Sutpen’s legitimate child, immediately becomes the object of tyranny. Henry’s first appearance in the novel shows him being held against his will, “screaming and vomiting” (21) as he is forced to watch his father wrestle with one of the slaves. Henry becomes an instrument that Sutpen will use to protect his vision of his family from Charles Bon. Bon, the son Sutpen refuses to recognize, is doomed to spend his life trying to gain Sutpen’s acknowledgement.

Bon feels the impact of Sutpen’s twisted sense of family even more than Henry. The dramatic influence of Sutpen’s denial is made painfully clear when Bon says, “I shall penetrate [my father’s regard] by something of will and intensity... and look not on my brother’s face... but my father’s...” (254). Bon’s need for recognition from his father leads to his seduction of his half-sister Judith, an act that he hopes will force some recognition from Sutpen. This hope is destroyed when Henry kills him. In the end, the Civil War and the rise of the New South have eradicated the world and values of Thomas Sutpen, Jason Compson, and Simon McEachern—none of whom properly educates his children for life in the modern world.

Faulkner, however, portrays one father who is able to adapt to the changing values of the New South. Despite the many similarities between As I Lay Dying and Faulkner’s other
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Faulkner, however, portrays one father who is able to adapt to the changing values of the New South. Despite the many similarities between *As I Lay Dying* and Faulkner’s other
works, the novel presents a father who is able to leave the values of the Old South behind and adapt to the rising New South. After all, it is Anse Bundren who comes out on top at the end of the novel with his new wife and a new set of teeth—the perfect symbol for the way that Anse’s values consume his family. Anse’s capitalistic selfishness consumes his family and inflicts both psychological and physical harm on his children.

In a sense, his selfishness should function as a means for his children to adapt to and survive in the modern world. Anse’s survival in the modern world comes at a great cost to his children, whom he continually ignores, endangers, and robs. Anse reveals his selfishness early in the novel. As his wife lies dying inside the house, he focuses on his own suffering: “I am a luckless man. I have ever been” (18). He forces his children to leave the bedside of their dying mother by making them feel they would do better to earn three dollars that the family desperately needs. The most evident symbol of Anse’s selfishness is the family’s journey to bury Addie, a trip that Anse claims they must make to fulfill Addie’s last wish. This supposedly unselfish act is seen most accurately by townspeople like Samson who remarks: “He set there on the wagon, hunched up, blinking, listening to us . . . and I be durn if he didn’t act like he was proud of it” (114).

The last few lines of the novel reveal that Anse has merely been serving himself. In stark contrast with the other three fathers that dominate Faulkner’s early work, Anse is able to abandon the Old Southern values. He completely embodies the industrial and capitalist values of the growing New South. The sad reality is that even though Anse has apparently adapted to life in the New South, his family still suffers like the Compsons, Sutpens, and McEacherns. Anse’s abuse of his family is significant because it reveals Faulkner’s belief that the Old South is so completely incompatible with the New South that even Anse Bundren is faced with terrible consequences.

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The children in these novels are ill prepared for modern life and their fathers are unable to sustain themselves in the
New South. In the Old Southern social order, the patriarch was closely associated with the welfare of the South. Consequently, the literal death of the patriarch presents Faulkner with an appropriate metaphor for the collapse of the Old South and its values. The deaths of Sutpen, McEachern, Coldfield, and Compson reflect the way in which the Old South gave way to the postbellum era. The Sutpen children fade away as Sutpen’s own life is taken as a consequence of his rejection of Milly and the infant girl she bears him. He dies violently at the hand of a former servant. Thus, the man who was once the image of the Old Southern aristocracy is displaced as surely as his society. Other Faulknerian fathers also disappear. In an attempt to hold on to the past, Compson locks himself in his office to read the classics. Coldfield cannot face the events of the Civil War and locks himself away in his attic. These fathers choose to ignore reality rather than face it.

The effects are particularly disastrous for the Compsons. The Compson children have known neither war nor the glory days of the Old South. They have not been forced to watch their world disappear and be replaced by a new one. They have, however, endured their cynical, defeated, and ineffectual father. Mr. Compson, “modeled on Faulkner’s own father” (Weinstein 106), brings about the fall of his family. Mr. Compson’s status as destroyer comes from his lack of parental influence. What little effort he does make as a father proves Mr. Compson unfit for the role. He leaves his children with an inherited sense of failure. Andre Bleikasten describes the relationship between Mr. Compson and his children as “an encounter of shadows, for there is neither father to be obeyed nor father to be challenged” (Fathers 127).

This same description can be applied to the relationship between Coldfield and his daughter in Absalom, Absalom!. As her father immures himself in his attic, the young daughter is left on her own. With the deaths of Compson and Coldfield, Faulkner manages to capture the way in which old Southern values were slowly and quietly replaced during Reconstruction. In Light in August, Faulkner returns
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This same description can be applied to the relationship between Coldfield and his daughter in *Absalom, Absalom!* As her father immures himself in his attic, the young daughter is left on her own. With the deaths of Compson and Coldfield, Faulkner manages to capture the way in which old Southern values were slowly and quietly replaced during Reconstruction. In *Light in August*, Faulkner returns
to his portrayal of the patriarch’s violent death. Simon McEachern meets a fate similar to Sutpen’s when he dies violently at the hands of his own son—the perfect symbol of the New Order replacing the Old.

The violent ends that await the children of these powerful patriarchs are characteristic of Faulkner’s use of the family as a metaphor for the Old South. A failure in his own life, Mr. Compson manages to pass on his own nihilism to his most beloved son, Quentin. Quentin often reflects on the negative philosophy that Mr. Compson tried to make clear: “No battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools” (Faulkner, *Fury* 48). For Mr. Compson, “the past is never lost, unfortunately; it is always there, it is an obsession” (Sartre 268). The tragedy lies in the fact that Quentin takes his father’s words to heart: “Father said a man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you’d think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune Father said” (66). This continual obsession with the words of his father imply that Quentin’s psychological state has taken a turn for the worse.

Faulkner further reveals this obsession as Quentin recounts, word for word, one of their conversations:

> Man who is conceived by accident and whose every breath is a fresh cast with dice already loaded against him will not face that final main [gamble] which he knows beforehand he has assuredly to face without essaying expedients ranging all the way from violence to petty chicanery that would not deceive a child until someday in very disgust he risks everything on a single blind turn of a card (112).

As Quentin recalls his father’s commentary on life, he is describing the events that are about to take place. He has accepted his father’s defeatist values and sees no sense in prolonging his own life.

In *Light in August*, Joe Christmas’s death also stems from the destructive values that his father passes down to
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In Light in August, Joe Christmas’s death also stems from the destructive values that his father passes down to
him. In his final and fatal relationship with Joanna Burden, Christmas is unable to maintain a healthy, emotional relationship because of his father's puritanical teachings. The son sets himself up as the aloof, coldhearted lover in opposition to the obsessed, feverish passion of Joanna. The result is Joanna's failed attempt at murdering Christmas in order to create the black lover she desires. Although she fails in this attempt, Christmas's demise is soon brought about in retaliation for Joanna's murder. With Christmas's death, McEachern's teachings have come full circle—his son has been killed and the family line has been severed. The antiquated morals that McEachern hoped would keep Christmas out of trouble have brought about his death.

Henry Sutpen also feels the burden of his father's values. Overcome by his father's obsolete aristocratic and chivalric code, Henry is driven to murder his half-brother Bon. Sutpen's only surviving son is then forced to flee the guilt of murdering his half-brother and spends the last years of his life secluded in one of the few buildings that remain on Sutpen's land. Like Mr. Compson and Goodhue Coldfield, Henry is incapable of dealing with the world and is forced to seclude himself. Ironically, Sutpen's warped relationships with his two male heirs have resulted in the murder of one, the seclusion of another, and the spinsterhood of his only legitimate daughter.

Even the Bundren children of *As I Lay Dying*, whose father is the only Faulknerian father capable of assimilating into the New South, are doomed to the violence that plagues these novels. Anse is analogous to Mr. Compson in that he neglects his children, but Anse's disregard exists on such an outrageous level that it is amazing his children even survive the quest to bury their mother. The Bundren children's journey through modernity is devastating. Even Anse's postbellum selfishness will not save his children in the New South. By the end of the novel, Darl has been locked away; Cash has nearly lost his leg; and Vardaman's future appears troubled. The fate of these children underscores the damage that Old Southern values can inflict.
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There is also the problem of paternal identification. As a part of the hypocritical social system that supported slavery while simultaneously giving their children a strict, Christian education, the Bundren family reflects the impact of the Southern social system on the family. Bleikasten explains that “if motherhood is a plain fact, a natural given of experience, fatherhood, as Faulkner’s novels suggest time and again, is not” (Fathers 116). Before the novel ends, it is revealed that Jewel is not Anse’s biological son and that Dewey Dell can offer the family a bastard but no legitimate heir. The ambiguity of the father-child relationship plays a large role in novels such as *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Chabrier points out that marriages, “often based on social and financial considerations” (102), make clear “an element of opportunism that influences the sentiments between parents and children” (102).

In the only passage that Addie is allowed to speak, she makes it very clear that she married Anse not for love but because he had “a house and a good farm” (Faulkner, *AILD* 171). Faulkner portrays the exact marriage of convenience that Chabrier claims was characteristics of the hypocritical Old South. This marriage of convenience spawns frequent infidelities, such as the relationship between Addie and Whitfield, which create problems in paternal identification that lie at the core of Jewel’s suffering. Jewel is unable to agonize in silence, however, as he is forced to endure Darl’s continual insults: “Your mother was a horse, but who was your father, Jewel?” (212). The anger that grows out of the taunting between these competitive brothers is one of the reasons that Jewel turns on Darl at the end of the novel and proposes sending him off to the asylum at Jackson.

Joe Christmas of *Light in August* also suffers from a lack of paternal identification. The identity and race of his father is never revealed to him, leaving Christmas with a hole in his identity that he is unable to fill. In Old Southern society this presents Christmas with enormous problems because skin color determines every aspect of life. Christmas spends his entire life not knowing whether he is white or black.
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Joe Christmas of Light in August also suffers from a lack of paternal identification. The identity and race of his father is never revealed to him, leaving Christmas with a hole in his identity that he is unable to fill. In Old Southern society this presents Christmas with enormous problems because skin color determines every aspect of life. Christmas spends his entire life not knowing whether he is white or black.
Faulkner's early works are filled with men like Jewel and Christmas. Caddy Compson, Dewey Dell Bundren, and Lena Grove all bear bastard children. This can be seen as evidence that the hypocritical Southern culture contributed to the destruction of the family and the Southern bloodline.

Each novel overwhelms the reader with families that will not survive. The Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury* is at the end of its line. The reader is witness to the final decline of Compson nobility, seeing their oldest son born an idiot, their most promising son drowned by his own hand, and their daughter fallen into the hands of a Nazi. Faulkner manages to assure us that the Compson line will end; their time, like the Old South's, was destined to end.

*Light in August*, the last of Faulkner's great early works, further complicates the destruction of the Southern bloodline. Christmas, the primary character and son, is the physical embodiment of mixed bloodlines whose death effectively ends the family. Other characters that portray the end of traditional Southern life are Joanna Burden and
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*Light in August*, the last of Faulkner’s great early works, further complicates the destruction of the Southern bloodline. Christmas, the primary character and son, is the physical embodiment of mixed bloodlines whose death effectively ends the family. Other characters that portray the end of traditional Southern life are Joanna Burden and Reverend Gail Hightower. Though they exist outside of society, both Joanna and Hightower “dramatize some essential aspect of the rural South in the early decades of the twentieth century” (Bleikasten, *Fathers* 130). Joanna, an obsessive abolitionist who possesses an unhealthy fixation on the race of her lover Joe Christmas, is characteristic of the sexual and racial desires that permeated Southern culture. In addition, Hightower, whose life was “a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed” (Faulkner, *LIA* 491), is symbolic of the Southern romanticism of the past. These two characters exist as extremes on the boundaries of society, yet they serve as representations of the values that marked life in the South. Faulkner makes it very clear that these values will live and die with these characters—they will not be continuing the patriarchal bloodline. Joanna is a childless spinster when she is murdered by Christmas, and Hightower’s wife has long been dead when the novel closes with him lost in “the dying thunder of hooves” (493).

It is *Light in August*’s Rosa Coldfield, however, that perhaps best illustrates Faulkner’s portrayal of the dying Southern
bloodline. The imagery invoked by her family name serves as an accurate metaphor for the end of the Old Southern agrarian culture and all of its values. The fields and the fathers that existed at the center of the Southern social order have gone cold. The way of life that revolved around the field, the plantation, and the father ended with the Civil War.

 Works Cited


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Works Cited


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**Autobiography, Patriarchy, and Motherlessness in *Frankenstein***

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The characters who populate Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* indicate the autobiographical nature of the book, particularly in its stance on the motherless daughter. In a story that reflects Shelley's own experience, daughters are always motherless, like the monster around which the action revolves. The motherless daughters in the story, much like Shelley herself, are left open to the scorn, rejection, and dehumanization which a culture raised by and for fathers heaps upon them. Thus, by his circumvention of the mother and the further undermining of the humanity of his motherless creature, Victor Frankenstein is portrayed as the patriarch who creates but cannot love and who fears sexual reproduction.