

THE PORTRAYAL OF HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS  
IN SIX OF WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOVELS

by *1264*

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Sustained heterosexual love is not portrayed in William Faulkner's novels.<sup>1</sup> Love is usually a passion of the sexually awakened and soon subsides. Yet the dying<sup>2</sup> or the absence of love is not a major concern in Faulkner. In almost all of Faulkner's major works, love is not thematically considered. Only at the beginning of his career, in Soldier's Pay, and toward the end of his writing, as in The Wild Palms, did he directly, thematically treat love. The critical question which arises is -- how are heterosexual relationships portrayed in the general absence of a portrayal of heterosexual love? Are there any patterns in the portrayal of heterosexual relationships?

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<sup>1</sup>Leslie Fiedler presents the thesis that the American novel has never depicted normal and mature heterosexual love in Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960); cf. pp. 309-315, 443-449 for discussions of Faulkner.

Irving Howe notes that "seldom in Faulkner's work do we find a mature recognition of the possibilities in the relations between men and women--possibilities, I might specify, of fulfilled love and tragic complication. And a writer unable to summon the first of these is likely to have trouble in reaching the second" in William Faulkner: A Critical Study (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 141.

Howe points out three exceptions to Faulkner's usual treatment of the sexes, but these cases are not examples of sustained love. Lee Goodwin in Sanctuary is burned at the stake by a mob. Jack Houston in The Hamlet is murdered by Mink Snopes. Gavin Stevens' platonic, idealistic love for Linda Snopes, in The Town, causes him to marry, in The Mansion, another woman, keeping a promise he made to Linda.

<sup>2</sup>For a study of the patterns of other failures in Faulkner's works, consult Walter J. Slatoff's Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1960 ).

In this study of heterosexual relationships in Faulkner, six novels will be considered, first of all, as representative of different chronological stages in Faulkner's development. Mosquitoes (1927) and Sanctuary (1929, 1931)<sup>3</sup> are early novels; Light in August (1932) and Absalom, Absalom! (1936) are from the height of Faulkner's most mature and prolific period; and at the end of that same middle, prolific period are The Wild Palms (1939) and Go Down Moses (1942).

The patterns discernible in Faulkner's portrayal of heterosexual relationships do not always neatly fit into periods within his writing, but a study of two novels at a time which were written in close sequence will immediately show certain general changes or patterns in Faulkner's emphasis and attitudes. Mosquitoes and Sanctuary are both examples of Faulkner's early emphasis on female protagonists and his serious, sometimes scathing concern with female sexuality. With Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner turns from a concentration on the female to a focus on dominant, tragic male figures. He writes about how dominant forces within Southern culture, and not women, determined these male protagonists' lives. The Wild Palms and Go Down Moses, representative of the later part of Faulkner's middle period, will be the last two novels considered in this study because they illustrate a completion of Faulkner's gradual change from a basically serious and critical approach to an accepting, humorous or humorously satirical treatment of

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<sup>3</sup>The first version of Sanctuary was composed in 1927; the revised version was composed in 1929 and published in 1931. Cf. Melvin Backman, Faulkner: The Major Years, A Critical Study (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 41.

problematic male-female relationships.<sup>4</sup> The advance to a humorous, accepting approach to heterosexual relationships, from an earlier serious, sometimes outraged, approach, shows a maturity in Faulkner's thought which, to this writer's knowledge, is not artistically or thematically surpassed in his late works.

These three patterns of change show a general shift from a concentration on the female to a concentration on the male: (1) the change in character emphasis is from female protagonists to male protagonists, (2) the change in thematic interests is from a concentrated concern with female sexuality to a portrayal of the male's grappling with the forces of the "outside world," and (3) the change in mood is from a serious, often outraged, portrayal of the female's role in the relationship to a humorous, although uncomprehending, "acceptance" by the male of the heterosexual relationship.

Illustrating these changes and also revealing Faulkner's tendency to avoid depicting a true male-female conflict are several narrative devices.

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie Fiedler in Love and Death in the American Novel, pp. 320-324, and Irving Howe in William Faulkner: A Critical Study, pp. 141-144, note that the misogyny in Faulkner's works is directed against the woman's sexual knowledge and actions. Fiedler points out that Faulkner changed his attitude toward women in his late works, The Town and Requiem for a Nun. Howe suggests (in two sentences) that Faulkner's "inclination toward misogyny need not always be taken too literally or solemnly," p. 143, because of the humor often involved in the depiction of women. This study varies with both Fiedler's and Howe's views, with regard to the timing of Faulkner's change in attitude toward women.

As I Lay Dying (1930) is an exception to this broad pattern.