

# WILLIAM FAULKNER AND THE SEARCH FOR AMERICAN SOUTHERN IDENTITY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

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**Abstract:** The American South is the cultural root and archetype for the fictional world of William Faulkner, a prominent author in modern world literature. The theme *Faulkner and the South* has been studied exhaustively and elaborately, especially from historical and cultural perspectives. However, the issue of Faulknerian Southern identity remains a gap in the current literature, so this study sets out to address that gap. This paper is an anthropological approach to Faulkner, with two research questions: how did Faulkner interpret American Southern identity? how should a set of keywords that encapsulates Southern identity in Faulkner's writing be established? Applying anthropological theory of identity and the method of generalization and identification of cultural patterns, this study focuses on the four outstanding novels in Faulkner's legacy. These novels provide a picture of the Southern identity, wrapped up in a set of keywords whose two main pillars are burden of the past and agrarianism. The other traits - pride, nostalgia, melancholy, complex, conservativeness, indomitability - intertwine and promote each other, creating the very Faulknerian South.

*Keywords:* American literature, William Faulkner, American South, identity, anthropology

## 1. Introduction

William Faulkner (1897-1962), an American novelist and short-story writer, is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His legacy, with such masterpieces as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), is deeply rooted in the cultural milieu and historical tradition of the American South. In the Nobel award ceremony speech, the Swedish Academy, represented by Hellström (1950) stated that Faulkner "created out the state of Mississippi one of the landmarks of twentieth-century world literature; novels which with their ever-varying form, their ever-deeper and more

intense psychological insight, and their monumental characters – both good and evil – occupy a unique place in modern American and British fiction". The town of Oxford, Mississippi, where Faulkner grew up and stayed most of his lifetime, was the prototype for his mythic Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner is in love with the South, the legendary Deep South, with its all glorious yet tragic history and present-day dilemmas. He is in an important sense a Southern writer, both in literary and in biographical terms.

Faulkner and the South has been a matter of interest to scholars over the decades. Through the massive history of Faulkner scholarship, the relation between

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Faulkner and the South has been interpreted from historical, geographical, biographical and cultural, anthropological perspectives; among which, historical criticism and cultural studies appear to be the most prominent approaches.

Historical criticism of Faulkner's writing emerged quite early, at the same time when the Faulkner industry started in earnest in the 1950s. An awareness of setting Faulkner inside Southern history was informed by O'Donnell (1939), who stated that Faulkner's greatest "principle is the Southern social-economic-ethical tradition which Mr. Faulkner possesses naturally, as a part of his sensibility" (as cited in Peek & Hamblin, 2004, p. 32). The historical reading of Faulkner's fictions was further argued by Cowley (1946) whose introduction to Viking's *The Portable Faulkner* played an important role in orienting Faulkner scholarship. Faulkner was acknowledged for his "first, to invent a Mississippi county that was like a mythical kingdom, but was complete and living in all its details; second, to make his story of Yoknapatawpha County stand as a parable or legend of all the Deep South" (as cited in Peek & Hamblin, 2004, p. 32). Since *The Portable Faulkner*, Faulkner has been understood as a Southern mythmaker, and the featured voice in the Southern literary renaissance.

The list of essays, books, and projects reading Faulkner historically is extensive. The most sustained investigation in early criticism into the historical context surrounding Faulkner is conducted by Doyle (2001), a historian who spent nearly 20 years researching *Faulkner's County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*. The annual conference, namely *Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha*, hosted by University of Mississippi since 1974, offers several volumes which are particularly concerned with various aspects of historical criticism. Those typical volumes include *The South and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha: The Actual*

*and the Apocryphal* (Abadie & Harrington, 1977), *Fifty Years of Yoknapatawpha* (Abadie & Fowler, 1980), *Faulkner in Cultural Context* (Abadie & Kartiganer, 1997). A similarly exhaustive and ongoing source of essays concerned with Faulkner and history can be found in *Faulkner Journal* and *Mississippi Quarterly's* annual Faulkner number, which began production in 1985 and 1984, currently under the co-editorship of Luire and Towner and the editorship of Atkinson respectively.

The above studies offer insights into both sides of the spectrum: either praising Faulkner as an accurate historian of the South or revisiting and finding limitations in his views and representations of history. Yet alongside this array of historical criticism on Faulkner, always runs a strong impulse to seek and explicate the link between historical roots and fiction, between the "actual" and the "apocryphal", and to comment on Faulkner's use of history in his whole body of writing. In fact, Faulkner studies in other disciplines afterwards for the most part lean on historical premises, and thus owe debts to historical criticism.

Another approach to the issue of Faulkner and the South is to read his fiction from a geographical perspective. While very few studies of Faulkner's works are produced by geographers, the connection between fictional Yoknapatawpha and the geographical South has been considered interdisciplinary. The outstanding analyses of Faulkner's geography are written by Miner (1959), Buckley (1961), Brown (1962). The geographer Aiken is an important researcher in this field, with the article "Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County: Geographical Fact into Fiction" (1977) and the book *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape* (2009). Like historical criticism, this approach tends to examine the fact in his fictions, figure out how the real South and the fictional Yoknapatawpha blend and become one.

Emerging comparatively late, cultural-studies criticism proves to be most useful when applied to an author like Faulkner. More importantly, cultural studies, with its interdisciplinary essence, come closer to anthropological terms and the search for Southern identity in Faulkner's writing. Clean Brooks's studies are among the early writings focusing on Southern culture in Faulkner's novels. His books including *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (1978) state that one of the most central aspects of Faulkner's vision is "community", suggesting exploring cultural layers in the Southern community. Following that path, Faulknerian scholars offer insights into specific Southern cultural aspects, which contribute to shaping an overview on Southern identity. For instance, studies of Faulkner and racial issues bloomed after the explosion of new literary theories of race in the 1980s. Many major Faulkner scholars are interested in the various way that Faulkner represent race relations in the fictions: Sundquist (1983), Davis (1983), Weinstein (1992); Polk (1996), Duvall (1997) (as cited in Hagood, 2017, pp. 61-62; Peek & Hamblin, 2004, pp. 39-40). There is also a diverse array of critics concerned with gender in Faulkner's writing: Radway (1982), Butler (1990), Wilson (1991), Jones (2010) (as cited in Peek & Hamblin, pp. 171-173). The concerns with class, race, and gender continue to be a topic of interest in contemporary Faulkner studies. As Hagood (2017) forecasted, future trends in Faulkner scholarship would include the fields that intersect with Southern cultural issues such as indigenous studies, disability studies, whiteness studies, nonhuman studies, and queer studies.

The studies mentioned above have provided an exhaustive overview on Faulkner and the South. Apparently, an

anthropological approach could inherit significant achievements from these trends, especially those concerned with cultural and social terms. However, while exploring deeply Southern culture in Faulkner's writing, Faulkner scholarship has not identified and "named" the so-called "Southern identity" in Faulkner, and of Faulkner.

## 2. Aim and Scope

The aim of this article is to examine Southern identity in Faulkner's writing. The two raised questions are What shapes Southern identity in Faulkner's novels? and What could the way Faulkner represents and interprets his homeland's identity tell us about the writer himself – his cultural sensibility and ideology? By answering those questions, this paper also aims to propose a set of keywords which encapsulates Southern identities in Faulkner's writing.

The texts chosen for this study were the four following novels, which are considered the greatest ones in Faulkner's legacy - *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).

## 3. Theoretical Background

"Identity" came into use as a popular social-science term in the 1950s (Gleason, 1983) and "entered the anthropological lexicon in the 1960s and 1970s, in work associated with the Manchester School and influenced by the American sociological traditions of symbolic interactionism and social constructivism" (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, p. 368). Yet "the search for identity" can be traced back a few decades ago, in various terms namely "self" (Mead, 1934), "ethnicity" (Kardiner & Linton, 1939), "national character" (Fromm, 1941; Mead, 1942; Benedict, 1946). At first, "identity" was used in reference to personality or

individuality; then its usage expanded to community levels: identity of a race, an ethnic, a nation, a region or a group of people.

There are two major approaches to the essence of identity. Some scholars affirm that identity is the inner, immutable element of one's own being while others see identity as a cultural construct, which is shaped and modified by interaction between the individual and his culture. As Gleason (1983) clarified, "The two approaches differ most significantly on whether identity is to be understood as something internal that persists through change or as something ascribed from without that changes according to circumstances" (p. 918). These two opposing opinions might lead to different implementations of identity, especially when it comes to the culture of a community.

The former view, at the extreme level, could contribute to the over-devotion and abuse of identity. Identity politics, for example, built on identity prejudice, fosters the identification of communities based on racial, ethnic, class and gender differences. This delusion as well as prejudice acts as catalysts for exceptionalism. Sen (2007) warned, "the uniquely partitioned world is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse categories that shape the world in which we live" (p. 22). Its consequences, including xenophobia, racism, gender discrimination, are constantly (either intentionally or unintentionally) hurting subalterns (the indigenous, immigrants, women, people with disabilities...).

This paper, in the search for Southern identity in Faulkner's writing, is not intended to promote differentiation, and accordingly, is not seeking the isolated and immutable cultural traits. Identity is seen as a cultural construct in which the uniqueness, persistence does not exclude the uncertainty

and transformation through time and space. The path of seeking Southern identity, thus, requires considerations of the space-time relations of the community.

#### 4. Methods

Cultural identity in literature can be explored from the perspective of psychological anthropology – a subfield of anthropology where anthropology and psychology intersect. This field focuses on the close relationship between the individual and his culture, and also affirms the unity between psychology and culture. According to psychoanalyst Erikson (1950), identity is "a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities" (as cited in Gleason, 1983, p. 914). Devereux (1967), a psychiatrist, formulated a view of culture as a projection of the psyche and the psyche as the internalized culture. Individual psyche, accordingly, is the embodiment of community culture. The pioneer of the *Culture and Personality* school, Benedict (1934), holds the firm belief that a culture can be seen as a personality, and each phase of personality's maturity is governed by particular cultural characteristics. The psychological anthropological approach, in our opinion, is consistent with Faulkner, whose literature reflects a close relationship between personal tragedy and the spirit of community.

In anthropology practice, a commonly-used method is to generalize and identify a set of patterns, stereotypes, values that encapsulates the identity of a community. The canons of psychological anthropology worldwide, R. Benedict, M. Mead, E. Sapir, following that path, contributed greatly in building "national character" models. They believe that individuals express certain types and forms

of psyche and personality, which can be collected, interpreted and generalized into “patterns” of a nation/ ethnic culture. In Vietnam, ethno-psychological studies by Nguyen (1963), Phan (1994), Tu (1997), Dao (2000), Do (2005), Tran (2011), Nguyen (2014), Tran (2016), Huyen (2017)... joined that array of practice (as cited in Pham, 2018).

The task set out in this study, first of all, is to interpret Faulkner’s representation of American South. Faulkner describes the South in the context of cultural class and decline, with traumatic dilemmas on race, kinship and gender. Analyzing the Southern cultural aspects would parallel the intention to seek and name the core values, the deep roots of the whole community. The target of this paper, therefore, is also to propose a set of keywords, which encapsulates Southern identities in Faulkner’s writing.

The keyword set of Southern identity in Faulkner’s novels is built on the theoretical framework mentioned above. First, given the view of identity as a cultural construct, this study does not expect a collection of isolated, metaphysical, solid identities. The identity keywords, instead, consist of cultural traits that are both distinctive and popular, sustainable and flexible. Second, using the anthropological method, the keyword set aims to connect and explore cultural identities as a system. In the cultural mosaic, the seemingly discrete, even estranged, opposite features constantly interlock, interdependent, promote each other, flexibly and durably, all together shaping the very Faulknerian South.

## 5. Results

When exploring the identity of the South, Faulkner was interested in a historical milestone: the American Civil War 1861-1865. In this event, Southern culture exposed, and even clashed with the culture of the North, which can be called a “cultural interaction”.

According to Nguyen (2008), cultural interaction is shown in many types. In this case, the most prominent one is the intra-cultural interaction across subcultures - the interaction between the North and the South, two partners in the same nation, both penetrating American culture yet belonging to different subcultures. Besides, there is also an inter-cultural interaction between different ethnic groups and races. Finally, a trans-cultural interaction does exist when the Northerners attempt to dominate the cultural and economic space of the South. These interactions lead to conflicts. These conflicts become a test of communal identity. Through reactions such as resistance, self-defense, frustration, crisis, acceptance, forgetting..., cultural traits are bold, honed, or broken, fade, destroyed, which restructures communal identity. Given that contextual features, the search for Southern identity in Faulkner’s writing would start with examination of post-bellum Southern psychological reactions. Two aspects are investigated: the *burden of the past*, embodied in *collective memory*, and *dilemmas* in post-bellum context.

### 5.1. The South and the Collective Memory

Collective memory of the South in Faulkner’s novels are woven from the ancient heritage of the land and the post-bellum trauma. Faulkner does not write about the Civil War in the present tense; the war appears as a ghost, a shadow, a remnant of the past. The following seeks the answers to the questions: Does the past play an important role in the spiritual life of the South? If so, why is the past such a burden to the Southerners while the American are usually known as the people of present and future? And if the South is so deeply attached to the past, what does the past mean to them, what are the aesthetic and human notions associated with the past? Following that assumption, we examine Faulkner’s novels and conclude that his South is a land

*burdened with the past.* The past, to the Southerners, means the *lost beauty*; the South, therefore, is a *proud, nostalgic and melancholy land*. The past also means the *curse*, the *sins*; the South, thus, is still the *unvanquished defeated*, the one carrying the *victim – sinner complex*.

### 5.1.1. The Past as the Burden

In Faulkner's novels, the South is a land burdened with the past. Faulkner seems to choose an estranged vision, compared to the common picture of American national identity. As Woodward (2008) stated,

One of the simplest but most consequential generalizations ever made about national character was Tocqueville's that America was "born free". In many ways that is the basic distinction between the history of the United States and the history of other great nations. (pp. 21-22)

Shaking off the wretched evils of feudalism, the people in the New World enjoy their experience of success and victory, with a complacency implanted in their mind. As Schlesinger (1943) said, American character "is bottomed upon the profound conviction that nothing in the world is beyond its power to accomplish" (p. 244). Living for present, living towards future, therefore, are American national habits of mind.

Southern heritage is distinctive. Unlike American, the Southern history is written by such long decades of frustration, failure, and defeat. Being on the losing side of the civil war, the South is haunted by the past. The reality of defeat in economic, social and political life all brings them to the recollection of tragic legacy. The South's preoccupation is with loss, not with victory, with the curse and sins, not the dream for future. The past is an indispensable part of Southern heritage. More accurately, it is a burden for the South.

With his interest in the cultural past in the South, Faulkner has successfully exploited the community memory embodied in individual tragedy. In Faulkner literature, history and the destiny of the community sheds a shadow on each person's life. Each individual tragedy comes from a trapped state in community memory. Quentin, in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, is the epitome of those who cannot escape the haunting past. Born into a family of decrepit Southern patriarchs, the young man is reeling from his obsession with Dead South. "He would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now - the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts... and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South..." (Faulkner, 1990, p. 5). He desperately tried to hold on to the Old South values. These old Southern values are embodied in the image of a naïve and innocent sister in the past, or the glorious past of the family tree. Fearing that time would flow, Quentin angrily smashed the clock: "I tapped the crystal on the corner of the dresser and caught the fragments of glass in my hand and put them in the ashtray and twisted the hands off and put them in the tray" (Faulkner, 2000, pp. 67-68). For fear of seeing his sister who was no longer a virgin, Quentin committed suicide, in order to preserve her innocence and innocence. Remembering breeds suffering. Faulkner's novel hauntingly portrays a particular kind of mentality - one that exists in the past tense.

The memory burden is not only manifested in the mentality in the past tense, as in the case of Quentin mentioned above, but also in the impact of community history on the identity and destiny of individuals. Every person in Faulkner's world was born

carrying the legacies of the land with him: ideology, racial prejudice, caste. Joanna in *Light in August* is haunted by a curse of race. She saw “the children coming forever and ever in the world, white, with a black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath” (Faulkner, 1990, p. 253). Joe Christmas's fate, in the same work, is tied to the fact that his racial identity is ambiguous. With Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the first shock of his life was when he realized how being a poor white affects his destiny, and he designed his life according to a new class and race ideology.

It is no coincidence that a striking feature in Faulkner's narrative world are the families. Because the family line, with the generational succession, is an embodiment of the enduring community memory. In the Faulkner, the Compson family in *The Sound and the Fury*, the Sutpen family from *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Sartoris and the McCaslin from *Go Down, Moses* are all glorious of the past, now shabby with inability to adapt to the rapid changes of life outside. The legacy of generations is preserved in the hearts of descendants (Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Hightower, Joanna in *Light in August*, Darl from *As I Lay Dying*) or from the experience of witnesses, like Dilsey, Rosa...

The sense of past burdens in Southern culture has made Faulkner one of the landmarks of Southern Renaissance literature, something that “literature conscious of the past in the present” (Tate, 1935, as cited in Woodward, 2008, p. 32). Faulkner's major contribution was that he did not cast a romantic or delusional view of the South, but looked directly at its past burdens, exploiting its presence in personal tragedies. Hence, Faulkner's famous phrase, “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself”, was cited as the dominant spirit of Southern American Renaissance literature: “Disdaining the polemics of

defense and justification, they have turned instead to the somber realities of hardship and defeat and evil and “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself”. In so doing they have brought to realization for the first time the powerful literary potentials of the South's tragic experience and heritage” (Woodward, 2008, p. 24).

Given the fact that the past is a burden in the Southern United States, Faulkner had his own conception of the meaning of the past in the spirit of the Southerners. Because the remembering of the individual is a subjective act, selective, subject to the community nature. Anthropologists have paid attention especially to the kind of selective forgetting which they called ‘structural amnesia’. Thus Laura Bohannon (1952) demonstrated how, among the Tiv, only ancestors relevant to the present situation were evoked from the past, while others were forgotten. Subsequent writers working in this tradition have stressed how all narratives of the past have to be understood in terms of the nature of the society in which they are told and how such factors as the construction of the person and the nature of the kinship system affect such stories (Dakhliya, 1990; Bloch, 1992; Kilani, 1992) (Barnard & Spencer, 2010, pp. 460-461). In the Faulkner novels, the stories of the past have their own mark: first, the past is synonymous with lost beauty; second, the past means the curse and sin.

### 5.1.2. The Past as the Lost Beauty

*She does not smell like tree.*  
(*The Sound and the Fury*)

To begin with, in the Southerners' mindset, the past is equal to the lost beauty. In American history, the South is seen as one of the primitive cells of the United States.” It is an insider and a witness to the glorious past of a young, self-reliant, self-reliant nation from nature gifts, human intellect and bravery. It is a place to keep the charm of the

United States from the beginning: the promised land, the "American dream". However, the civil war occurred and left devastation and aftershocks. The beautiful, rich past of the vast cotton fields has been replaced by a poor and depleted land. Even that land is now being encroached upon by smoke, dust and bulldozer decks from northern industry. Deep South is now just Dead South, filled with pride, nostalgia, and melancholy.

The concept of lost beauty is reflected in the sense of the absence in Southern life. What is present in the inner life of the Southerners is the absence. The Compson Brothers' inner monologues in *The Sound and the Fury* are woven from memories of a lost girl - Caddy. In *As I Lay Dying*, the people in Addie's family, without saying it out, shared a hidden understanding of the family's past secrets. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the two students Quentin and Shreve, throughout their conversation, expressed a common concern about Thomas Sutpen's failed plans. In *Light in August*, the journey of Lena seeking the father for her child seems to be endless.

The sense of the lost beauty makes the South in Faulkner literature a proud yet nostalgic, melancholy land. Most characters are obsessed with melancholy. These are supersensitive characters (Quentin, Darl), mad characters (Benjy, Darl) and child characters (Vardaman, Compson children). (There are also characters that are somehow "mixed" between these types of characters). Sensitivity is common among these characters. They can sense the loss sensitively. For Benjy, that was when his sister "did not smell like tree"; for Quentin, when he constantly wanted to commit suicide in water, like an unconsciousness about washing his sister; for Vardaman, is when the boy believes his mother is a fish, and the fish has become dirty, sandy and muddy.

The Southerners knew the Old South was dead, but the Old South among them was a beauty, so they couldn't stop being proud. Melancholy is always associated with pride. The South, with a tradition of attaching importance to Puritan values, has now witnessed a decline in social morality. The loss of virginity by Caddy, Addie's illegitimate child, Anse's pairing with a new woman right after his wife's mourning... are all ugly and petty manifestations of present life. Whether facing the ugliness, or creating those ugly things, Faulkner's characters tend to hold their own pride. This pride is well-expressed in a sense of sustaining, whether successful or hopeless, a dignified, noble lifestyle. Mrs. Addie hid her adultery until she died, the frail Anse always argued that she had done her best, Joe Christmas's adoptive father imposed harsh principles on him...

Such a sense of nostalgia, melancholy and pride leads to a common behavior in the Faulkner world: encapsulate and freeze beauty so that it becomes an eternal, virgin, and impenetrable domain. In *The Sound and the Fury*, there exists an absent character. Caddy only appeared in the soft but painful memories of those who loved her. Pushing Caddy into an inaccessible space, Faulkner seemed to preserve and cherish the beauty of eternal virginity. In *Light in August*, Lena was looking for a father for the baby, but not a specific Lucas Burch, as she said. Lena's journey is iconic: the journey of desire to connect with species. In the midst of artificial civilization, where people tear, let go, and destroy each other, Lena walks calmly, serene, bringing in her life, birth, a yearning for connection and harmony with species. Therefore, the concept of beauty in Faulkner novels often evokes primitive senses of an old time when humanity did not know civilization. Benjy's foolishness, Vardaman's susceptibility, Lena's unmarried pregnancy... all evoke such a pre-civilized world.



### 5.1.3. The Past as the Curse and Sins

*Now I want you to tell me just one thing more: Do you hate the South?*

*(Absalom, Absalom!)*

The past, in the minds of the Southerners, is both a sin and a curse. The history of the South is also the history of slavery and racism. That history is tied with crimes, prejudices, aggressions and jealousies. Those impulses were constantly making a powerful impact on the postbellum era. This makes Old South exist as a ghost or a curse.

Faulkner's novels have many characters with the same name. Faulkner inherited the writing technique from Balzac, with characters reappearing in a variety of works. For example, the character Quentin Compson appeared in six works: *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Lion*, *The Mansion*, *A Justice*, *That Evening Sun*; *General Lee* appeared in *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Town*, *The Unvanquished*, *Intruder in the Dust*, *Go Down, Moses*, and *The Flags in the Dust*. At times, the name is repeated through generations in one lineage: in *The Sound and the Fury*, the uncle's name Quentin is given to his niece, Caddy's daughter. This makes it seem as though the world of Yoknapatawpha lives in the same fate, a common curse. Or sometimes, the character's name is reminiscent of other characters in literature or history. For example, looking at the genealogy of the character Joanna Burden, the name Calvin is reminiscent of John Calvin, with what he said about original sin and predestination: "Original sin, therefore, seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us to God's wrath" (as cited in Dimock, 2012). This predestined thought finds its resonance in what his father told Joanna, about the cause of his and her brother's death:

Your grandfather and brother are

lying there, murdered not by one white man, but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather and your brother or me or you were ever thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it. (Faulkner, 1990, p. 252)

"His doom and his curse". The doom and curse cast a shadow on the lives of people in the South, creating personal tragedies. Joe Christmas's destiny is a prime example of resistance to the curse of fate. As a black white person, Christmas has the complexities of both the stigmatist and the stigmatist of his own skin. His crimes stem from resentment not acknowledged by both communities - black and white. He killed the arrogant and arrogant stepfather, he was outraged when the white girl had left him, he took the black girl's name as a slut and cut off the throat of the white lover who had carried him, all out of guilt. almsgiving, injury. He had a crazed desire to become true black: he tries to blacken his inside, try to blacken his inner world – his sense of sight, his sense of tough, his sense of smell:

At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would

whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial". (Faulkner, 1990, pp. 225-226)

Though, his disdain for the color of his skin made him constantly question his lover, terrified to exaggerate all generosity and interference. And finally, those crazy self-deprecating obsessions pushed him into barbaric acts of destruction.

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is, thus, haunted land. They are victims. But, the curse falls on them because they were criminals in the past. Here, Faulkner expresses a clear view: man must atone for mistakes in the past. The pain is, the ones who suffer the retribution are children (too many children are killed, go mad), sensitive and loving souls (often mad, thrown in by their own families. madhouse). This payoff is often seen, predicted, concluded from the words of the bystanders - usually blacks serving in white families like Dilsey, Rosa... They are descendants, the direct heirs to the legacy of slavery. Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* says: "I seed de beginnin, en now I see de endin" (Faulkner, 2000, p. 257). Mr. Coldfield, in *Absalom, Absalom!* foresaw the "day when the South would realize that it was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (Faulkner, 1990, p. 135). The South, therefore, is a complex of victims - criminals.

"Now I want you to tell me just one thing more: Why do you hate the South?". 'I don't hate it,' Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately. 'I don't hate it,' he said. I don't hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" (Faulkner, 1990, p. 195). Quentin's words somehow echo Faulkner's heart. As a son in the South, he exploited the dark side of motherland

history with love and pain.

## 5.2. *The South and the Post-Bellum Dilemmas*

### 5.2.1. Agrarian versus Industrial

The nature of the South gives this land an outstanding advantage in agricultural production, especially cotton. This created the South's perceptible characteristic relative to other parts of the United States: rich arable agriculture (especially cotton) and black agricultural labor in cotton plantations. "Agrarianism and its values were the essence of the Southern tradition and the test of Southern loyalty" (Woodward, 2008, p. 8).

Faulkner's work is set in South America after the Civil War. At this time, before the colonization of the North industrial, the economic dependence on cotton which was the habit of the South people was removed. The cotton plantation economy went bankrupt completely along with the Great Depression. The South faced the irresistible invasion of an industrial civilization from the North, an industry that was unfamiliar and hostile to the mind of the South. Urban migration, the emergence of new livelihoods has become an inevitable consequence. The clash between the agricultural style and the industrial way of life has caused the South economic, social and ethical problems.

Agricultural identity in the life of the Southerners is shown discreetly in the relationship between people and land. *As I Lay Dying* is an illuminating example of this. The work exposes the human reality of poor whites who struggle with their livelihoods. Here are Tull's thoughts as he watches the mules - animals associated with their farming:

When I looked back at my mule, it was like he was one of these spy-glasses, and I could look at him standing there and see all the broad land and my house sweated out of it like it was the more the sweat, the

broader the land. The more the sweat, the tighter the house. (...) Because it is your milk, sour or not. Because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that won't, because you are a man. (Faulkner, 1990, p.139)

It is difficult to distinguish between Tull's point of view and that of the mule. In other words, Tull identifies himself with the mule, and this farmer sees himself like a mule: the more he plows, the more perspiring it is, the more stable the house becomes, and the more women love him. It is such a rustic and pragmatic way of thinking of poor laborers. Manhood in Faulkner is synonymous with hard work, worrying about making a living for the family.

The fact that the peasant is separated from the land, deprived of his livelihood is implied in the image of the mule separated from the ground. It is no coincidence that in the journey to bring Mrs. Addie's funeral, the first big obstacle is the flood season river. Mules, the creatures with feet of clay, can only be useful and survive when mounted on the ground. And here's the tragedy: "They roll up out of the water in succession, turning completely over, their legs stiffly extended, as when they had lost contact with the earth" (Faulkner, 1990, p. 149). As Dimock (2012) points out:

... when they [the poor white] left the customary setting and they are stuck trying to negotiate with a swollen river, we know that the mules will not survive in that kind of transformed setting. In many ways – a perfect analogy for the poor whites, that they can do relatively well when they're left to their own devices, when they're allowed simply to stick to their environment. But once they're taken out of their

environment, then we know that terrible things are going to happen to them.

Agricultural behavior was deeply embedded in the cultural life of the South people, becoming a community identity. Therefore, the clash with industrial civilization has brought about the fear of the loss of identity. As Woodward (2008) points out, "the threat of becoming "indistinguishable", of being submerged under a national steamroller, has haunted the mind of the South for a long time. Some have seen it as a menace to regional identity and the survival of a Southern heritage" (p. 8). In fact, also according to Woodward (2008), there has been "wavering" / displacement in the heart of the South since the 1930s.

three decades later the slight "wavering" in the Southern ranks that disturbed the agrarians in 1930 would seem to have become a pell-mell rout. (...). Whole regiments and armies deserted "to join up behind the common or American industrial ideal". In its pursuit of the American Way and the American Standard of Living the South was apparently doing all in its power to become what the agrarians had deplored as "only an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community. (Woodward, 2008, p. 9)

The agricultural lifestyle is not only manifested in livelihoods, in the consciousness of the land, but also in a close, familiar lifestyle in a "knowable community". Raymond William said: "A country community, most typically a village, is an epitome of direct relationships: of face-to-face contacts within which we can find and value the substance of personal relationships" (as cited in Dimock, 2012). The emergence of industrial civilization in the North, new livelihoods, new ways of

doing business created a dual state in society: the parallel existence of "knowable community" and "unknowable community".

In *Light in August*, the correspondence between the knowable community and the unknowable community is very clear. Revolving around Lena, the central figure, is a community of good people. The hope that echoes in Lena's journey are the words of strangers, unknown, and kind. Behind the four weeks, the evocation of *far* is the peaceful corridor paved with unflagging and tranquil faith and peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices.

Lucas Burch. I don't know. I don't know of anybody by that name around here. This road? It goes to Pocahontas. He might be there. It's possible. Here's a wagon that's going a piece of the way. It will take you that far. (Faulkner, 1990, p. 7)

At the end of the novel, it is no coincidence that a furniture repairer and dealer appears, continuing to add to the anonymous, kind faces, accompanying Lena and Byron. Meanwhile, the community around Joe Christmas, Gail Hightower is truly an unknowable community. Here is everyone's reaction to Joanna's death, expressionless, cruel: "My pappy says he can remember how 50 years ago, folks said it ought to be burned, with a little human fat meat to start it good'. 'Maybe your pappy slipped up there and set it afire', a third said. They all laughed" (Faulkner, 1990, p. 49). The strangeness of members is secretly implied in collective prejudices. The pastor's son, Joanna's death was immediately rumored to be due to Hightower and Christmas. The events in the work, especially when it comes to crime, are often narrated from the words of a stranger. The narrated story is not from an omniscient point of view, but the narration of a stranger, someone who has never met, only knows

others through social prejudices. Clearly, in this context, the essence of agriculture as a community identity is being challenged, shifted, and hybridized.

### 5.2.2. Fate and the Indomitable

As mentioned above, the South of America is a land of pride. Even though they are defeated, their fate is cursed, they are always "unvanquished". No matter how cruel fate may have been, Faulkner's character refused to give in. They will persistently endure quietly until the end, like a stubborn, insidious resistance.

Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* perhaps the most powerful impression on fate-defying will. Originally a poor white boy in the South, when he was a child, he was scorned, not allowed to enter a wealthy white family. That poor white boy, when growing up, decided to implement a "great design": creating a line of pure white Sutpen family is as perfect as any other contemporary aristocratic family! To insist on this great design, Sutpen had to trade it: divorce his first wife, discarded his son when he learned that his wife was black, asking Rosa to give birth to a son before marriage, rejecting Milly when she gives birth to a girl... Controlling the surrounding people like moving the pieces, willing to destroy all obstacles, sacrificing love, designing a future for an entire family intentionally, all reflect a reckless personal ambition, a daring challenge of fate. In Sutpen, on the one hand, we see the persistent, indomitable, spirit of "defying destiny", but on the other hand, to a certain extent, the perseverance, the conservative originating from the community culture. Because after all, Sutpen's great blueprint is built on racism and caste discrimination, a legacy of community. The "indomitable", indomitable to the point of being stubborn, conservative seems to have become an identity of the Southerners. In fact, history recorded the South's stubbornness on the issue of race and slavery.

Since the last World War old racial attitudes that appeared more venerable and immovable than any other have exhibited a flexibility that no one would have predicted. One by one, in astonishingly rapid succession, many landmarks of racial discrimination and segregation have disappeared, and old barriers have been breached. Many remain, of course – perhaps more than have been breached – and distinctively Southern racial attitudes will linger for a long time. Increasingly the South is aware of its isolation in these attitudes, however, and is in defense of the institutions that embody them. They have fallen rapidly into discredit and under condemnation from the rest of the country and the rest of the world” (Woodward, 2008, p. 11).

However, in another aspect, the stubbornness can be seen, on the positive side, close to the indomitable, steadfast and gritty personality. These traits are, in turn, the root of the South's longevity. While reading *As I Lay Dying*, readers must inevitably be haunted by the sense of existence. The attempt to arrange Mrs. Addie's funeral at another town may be an allegory of human struggle for survival. A poor white family, ordinary people, who also criticize, give up, resentment, and melancholy, are also full of secrets. In the midst of their livelihood, lowly attempts, for them death is no longer the only preoccupation. But the problem is, when going through tribulation, between flood water and fire, they are all steadfast, patient, and stubborn. Life must go on - it seemed like a tacit commitment among the people of the Bundren. Tribulation, resentment, and melancholy are burdens, but also an essential part of survival.

“The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years” (Faulkner, 1990, p. 194). That is what Shreve said to Quentin, after listening to ancient tales about the Southerners, both tragedy and timeless.

“Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it? It's better than the theater, isn't it? It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it? Now wonder you have to come away now and then, isn't it? ” (Faulkner, 1990, p. 115). Shreve's question, perhaps in part, will be interpreted from this identity in Southern culture - indomitable, courageous, no matter how much pain it tasted and carried so much sin. They endure. The mules tried to hold their feet on the ground until they were swept away by the flood. Hightower, Joanna, chased away by the community is still trying to cling to this land, building himself a small house, even on the edge of the city, even though it is a forgotten place. Lena is still determined to find a father for her child, although Lucas's name gradually fades and becomes unreal. Tough, courageous, indomitable, that is a quality of the Southern essence.

### 5.2.3. Autonomy and Integration

Pride and conservative personality pose a problem for the South in giving a consistent response to choices: traditional or future, autonomy or integration? The South inevitably cannot be out of the modernization trend of the US nation and the world. There are heritages of the past that must be abandoned. But the South is not easy to openly accept external interference, particularly the North. Self-determination or interference, separation or integration are still a problem in the spiritual life of the South after the civil war. This issue is interpreted discreetly and deeply by Faulkner in his novels.

It is a self-evident truth that *The Sound and the Fury* is like a nostalgia for the past. But we often forget that the concern about "tomorrow" is discreetly expressed from the very title of the work. “The sound and the fury” is adapted from the 5 episode 5 of Macbeth: “Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the

way to dusty death. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, 1606, as cited in Dimock, 2012). Jason is perhaps the character that represents the struggle between the present and the future of South America most clearly in the work. Unlike his two brothers, Quentin and Benjy, he has a clear sense of adaptation to the future. But that adaptation still gives him a psychological, emotional burden. The incompatibility between Jason and the modern world was manifested in the sensations. (Faulkner often transforms cognitive ideas into sensations, senses). Jason is very proud of owning a luxury car (car - a mark of modern industrial society, instead of a horse in the aristocratic society of the nineteenth century). But the smell of gasoline is always a burden to him.

And now I reckon I'll get home just in time to take a nice long drive after a basket of tomatoes or something and then have to go back to town smelling like a camphor factory so my head won't explode right on my shoulders. I keep telling her there's not a damn thing in that aspirin except flour and water for imaginary invalids. I says you don't know what a headache is. I say you think I'd fool with that dam car at all if it depended on me” (Faulkner, 2000, pp. 202-203)

Arrogant and presumptuous, the Southerners in Faulkner pour out all anger and resentment on those who intervene in their life, even when they are good performers. Joanna Burden in *Light in August* represents the victim of that anger. Influenced by her ancestors, the Northern abolitionists, Joanna, a white woman, devoted her life to fighting for equal rights of blacks. Yet this is the end of Joanna's life:

She was lying on the floor. Her head had been cut pretty near off; a lady

with the beginning of gray hair. (...). So he run back into the house and up the stairs again and into the room and jerked a cover off the bed and rolled her onto it and caught up the corners and swung it onto his back like a sack of meal and carried it out of the house and laid it down under a tree. And he said that what he was scared of happened. Because the cover fell open and she was laying on her side facing one way, and her head was turned clean around like she was looking behind her. (Faulkner, 1990, pp. 91-92)

The head almost left the neck, turned to the back, the woman's body exuded a dark sense of humor, a mixture of humor and horror. Dimock (2012) finds an interesting association of a back-facing head in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This is a description of punishment for those in hell:

As I inclined my head still more, I saw that each, amazingly, appeared contorted between the chin and where the chest begins. They had their faces twisted toward the haunches, and found it necessary to walk backwards because they could not see ahead of them. (Dante, 1320, as cited in Dimock, 2012)

In Dante's work, these people are subjected to this penalty of turning around because they were soothsayers while they were alive. Foreseeing the future is a sin, and must be punished. Dimock (2012) suggested that this was “a fit punishment for social reformers. Social reformers also claim to have some kind of privileged relation to the future, and they're reforming the present quite often because they have this vision about the future”.

Faulkner built his characters on his understanding of the real state of American

society during the reconstruction period. Many Northern reformers entered the South, considered themselves social reformers, reforming and educating former slaves, and adjusting the society of the South after the civil war. Due to some of that abuse and corruption, the reformers ironed by the locals in the South were carpetbaggers. Obviously, the will to intervene and impose it is not easy to succeed in a land that carries pride, pride and conservatism. Infringement on that land, whether with good intentions or evil intentions, if not skillful enough, inevitably suffers from anger and punishment.

Therefore, we will continue to consider the reaction of the South to the appearance of northern characters in Faulkner. Take the Reverend Shegog in *The Sound and the Fury* as an example. The pastor was not from the local; he moved from one city to another to a black church. And this is the pastor's appearance from the local people's eyes:

The visitor was undersized, in a shabby alpaca coat. He had a wizened black face like a small, aged monkey... When the visitor rose to speak he sounded like a white man. His voice was level and cold. It sounded too big to have come from him and they listened at first through curiosity, as they would have to a monkey talking. They began to watch him as they would a man on a tight rope. (Faulkner, 2000, 253)

One can imagine a bit of disappointment, a bit of curiosity, a bit of sarcasm, a bit of skepticism in the way locals observe the distant visitor. "Because he sounds like a white man", even a bit of racial prejudice, separates the guest from the community. Black sheep in the church only began to accept the Shegog as a member of their community when he raised his voice,

mixing in a voice honoring the epiphany of the resurrection:

And the congregation seemed to watch him with its own eyes while the voice consumed him, until he was nothing and they were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words, so that when he came to rest against the reading desk, his monkey face lifted and his whole attitude, that of a serene, tortured crucifix that transcended its shabbiness and insignificance and made it of no moment, a long moaning expulsion of breath rose from them, and a woman's single soprano – 'Yes, Jesus!'" (Faulkner, 2000, 254)

So, to become a part of the community in the South, one must live up to the depths of the cultural identity of the community.

## 6. Conclusion

"Tell [me] about the South. What's it like there? What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all" (Faulkner, 1990, p. 93). One winter night in Harvard, Shreve, a roommate, asked Quentin such questions, as they were both engulfed in deep old tales about the history of the South. "Why do they live there. Why do they live at all". The stories Quentin told in particular, those written in Faulkner's novels in general, are like the South's responses to himself. Faulkner's novel, seen from that point of view, is a journey of self-awareness, a journey of finding one's own cultural identity.

This article, through the exploration of 4 novels *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August* and *Absalom*,

*Absalom!* from the perspective of psychological anthropology, has made an attempt to envision the Southern identity in Faulkner literature. These identity characteristics are encapsulated in the keyword set with two main pillars, *burden of the past* and *agrarianism*. In the community memory, the past is synonymous with *lost beauty*, and also associated with *sins and curses*. The South, carrying the burden of the past, is a land full of *pride, nostalgic, melancholy, a victim-sinner complex*. That past burden, in turn, constantly hinders, collides, causes *dilemmas* when the South confronts reality. Therefore, the reality of the South is full of dualism, ambivalence. The pride and nostalgia of the past make this land *conservative, stubborn (conservative), sometimes pathetic*. But in another respect, the very way that long-standing aristocracy and pride give them inner strength, to *persevere, to indomitable*, they are *unvanquished*.

After all, what Faulkner wants to aim for, perhaps in human immortality, is indomitable. He does not avoid the past and the sin or the sorrow. Soberly exploring deeply into the history and culture layers of the community, he expected the people to take responsibility. But, after all, these layers of cultural sediments bring Faulkner, and our readers, the belief in the longevity of the South in particular, of the human in general. As Faulkner once said in his Nobel discourse: "I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man,

it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail"(Faulkner, 1950).

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## WILLIAM FAULKNER VÀ CUỘC THĂM DÒ CĂN TÍNH MIỀN NAM NƯỚC MỸ: MỘT HƯỚNG TIẾP CẬN NHÂN HỌC

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**Tóm tắt:** Miền Nam nước Mỹ là cội rễ văn hoá và là nguyên mẫu cho thế giới hư cấu của William Faulkner, một tên tuổi lớn của văn chương hiện đại. Chủ đề *Faulkner và miền Nam* đã được nghiên cứu một cách dày dặn và công phu, đặc biệt là dưới góc nhìn lịch sử và văn hoá. Tuy vậy, chủ đề căn tính miền Nam trong văn chương của ông vẫn còn những khoảng trống để ngó; nghiên cứu này là cuộc thăm dò vào mảnh đất ấy. Bài viết này là một tiếp cận nhân học về Faulkner, xoay quanh câu hỏi: Faulkner đã diễn giải căn tính miền Nam như thế nào? Liệu có thể xác lập một bộ từ khoá gói ghém căn tính miền Nam mang phong cách Faulkner hay không? Áp dụng lí thuyết nhân học về căn tính và phương pháp khái quát hoá, định danh các hình mẫu văn hoá, chúng tôi tập trung khảo sát bốn tiểu thuyết đỉnh cao trong di sản Faulkner. Những tiểu thuyết này mang lại hình dung về những nét nổi bật trong căn tính miền Nam nước Mỹ, gói trọn trong bộ từ khoá mà hai trụ cột chính là ám ảnh quá khứ và cốt cách nông nghiệp. Những nét cá tính khác - kiêu hãnh, u sầu, hoài nhớ, mặc cảm, bảo thủ, bất khuất, kiên cường... - cùng đan bện, thúc đẩy lẫn nhau, làm nên tấm căn cước miền Nam mang tên Faulkner.

*Từ khoá:* văn học Mỹ, William Faulkner, miền Nam nước Mỹ, căn tính, nhân học